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"I'm Not Your Ride or Die": A Qualitative Study of Black Women's Experiences in Intimate Marketplaces

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“I’M NOT YOUR RIDE OR DIE”: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES IN INTIMATE MARKETPLACES

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I've gone back and forth about how exactly to address this because I really didn't want to spend a lot of time or feelings here. Ultimately, I decided to keep it brief and nameless because pregnancy brain has really gotten the best of me, and I'd feel awful if I forgot someone.

To my committee, thank you for your patience. I know that we've been on this road a lot longer than I originally anticipated and I appreciate you all for being flexible, understanding, and encouraging throughout the journey. A particular thank you to my chair for making this the most pleasant and motivational dissertation writing experience I could have ever imagined. I am truly eternally grateful as I am sure that I could not have endured anything else under my current circumstances and to be able to see this through… I have no words. Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

Black women's marriage rates have consistently been on the decline since the 1960's and currently, Black women are the least likely to get married across all races and genders (Bureau 2020). Scholars have been using these statistics to tell monolithic narratives of Black womanhood, and even blame Black women for larger issues within the Black community (Collins 2000, Johnson and Loscocco 2015; Moynihan 1965). Prior scholars have also attempted to provide solutions to this problem, while never even approaching Black women, to suggest ways that they can increase their marriage rates and consequently uplift Black families and the Black community as a whole (Banks 2010). My dissertations steps in to address this phenomenon by going straight to Black women to directly capture their relationship experiences. Using focus groups, I conduct an exploratory research project seeking to understand how Black women describe their heterosexual experiences, if these experiences differ by educational attainment, how Black women feel they are being received within intimate marketplaces, and how their background impacts their perceptions. I find that the Black women within my dissertation display a hyperawareness of the impacts of mass incarceration on the Black community and are increasingly more open to men with criminal backgrounds as a means to expand their dating pools. I also find that most of my respondents reject romantic societal notions of marriage in favor of a more practical and mutually beneficial interpretation. Lastly, I find that in many cases, my respondents tend to favor prioritizing their own self-improvement in terms of degree attainment and career advancement rather than pursuing a relationship, in addition to practicing radical self-love. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings and ultimately urge that future scholars speak directly to Black people when discussing Black issues.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

"Well, do *you* plan on getting married? 'Cause if you do, you need to before you finish that big ole degree. Ain't no man gone wanna marry a woman with all them degrees."
--- A random Black woman from the author's church

Often, when I tell people that I study Black women and heterosexual marriage, I've found myself in various unsolicited conversations with people from all walks of life wanting to give me their opinions and experiences. Some of these conversations left a considerable sour taste in my mouth, like the quote above, while others have resulted in me making lifelong friends. While I find most to be insightful and have even jotted down an idea or two to take into later consideration, the conversations that I find to be most troubling have been those I've had with my father.

My father, and favorite person, has always held me to a high standard and has clearly communicated to me that he wants the best for me; however, our interpretation of what is best has never quite aligned. My dad, a very religious man, married my mother at the age of 41 and I am his only child. It has always been his intention that, on a bit sooner of a timeline, I eventually follow the example that he and my mother set as that is what he envisions as my happily ever after. I, on the other hand, don't necessarily see marriage as a requirement for myself. Whenever I've attempted to make this explicitly clear with my dad, he shuts down the conversation. I remember one time telling him laughingly that if I ever ended up engaged or married, assume that I was "tricked" into it. He immediately told me that wasn't funny and changed the topic.

My dad, who's been married to my mother for the past 27 years, once told me a story about a friend of his who he describes as having "given up" on love. When he asked her where her husband was, after remarking on her twin boys, she told him that she had got to a point in her life where she wanted children and she looked around at all of her married friends with children

and saw how their lives were and decided that was not how she wanted to do it. So instead, she found someone to have a baby with, had her boys, and that was that. My father expressed his disappointment in her choices, telling me that, "it's just a shame that she just gave up like that" and how he sees so many other Black women that do the same.

My interpretation of this story was a bit different from my father's. I thought, here is an empowered Black woman who made a decision about how she wanted to live her life, free of the burden of societal expectations and the opinions of others. This is a woman who is financially well off, highly educated, living a comfortable life in Southern California, and her boys are thriving—they take regular piano lessons from my father and are involved in various additional extracurricular and supplementary educational activities. She took charge of her life, did things her way, and is happy with her decisions, all things that I greatly admired.

Since becoming pregnant and choosing to remain unmarried myself, I've developed a more paralleled position to my father's friend. When announcing to him and my mother my own bundle of joy, their first question was if I would marry the father, to which I immediately answered no. I watched my father's disappointment and my mother's tears for what must have been one of their worst nightmares for me. I, on the other hand, was taking into account my life's accomplishments: I have 2 degrees and a third on the way, I own my home, I'm self-sufficient, and I both desire and am capable of motherhood—what's the big deal? After a long pause, my father asked me, "So have you given up on love and marriage? Are you just done with that?" I didn't want to outright say that I never wanted it in that moment as I felt that I had done enough for the day, but remembering how he spoke of his friend, and now of me, it did make me pause. Was my father right? Did *we* "give up" on marriage?

Since the 1960s, research has documented the steadily decreasing marriage rates of Black women (Bureau 2010). While this statistic is consistent for all Black women, it is important to remember that Black women represent a diverse group of people and cannot be deduced into one monolithic narrative (Collins 2002; Frazier 1958; Harris-Perry 2011; Patillo 2013; Wilson 1987). My father's friend is considerably well off financially and the way that she experiences singleness is different from the experiences of working-class and poor Black women (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

The scholarly debate surrounding the reasons for marriage decline for Black women have yet to reach a consensus. Many of the issues discussed in this debate include Black women's increasing degree attainment, the portrayal of Black women in media and urban cultural frames, the lack of marriageable Black men, and the stigmas associated with Black women dating outside of their race (Henry 2008). Even though several studies have documented that Black women are most interested in being with Black men, many scholars have taken more of a solution-based approach to what they see as a social problem by exploring the attitudes of Black women and men in interracial relationships, which have become increasingly more accepted over the years (Childs 2005; DePass 2006; Luke and Oser 2015; Porter and Bronzaft 1995). However, with this increase in acceptance, there is still a lingering stigma for Black women related to interracial relationships as well as an overwhelmingly shared perspective shared by Black women that non-Black men are uninterested in them, resulting in them not outright pursuing this as a viable outcome (Banks 2010). These sentiments are further supported by the various studies conducted by dating apps and sites showing a lack of interest and engagement with Black women by all men, and especially non-Black men (Lewis 2012).

Furthermore, addressing whether Black women such as my father's friend have "given up" on marriage requires that I examine another relevant line of research – the lived experiences of Black men, especially as it relates to them being considered "marriageable." William Julius Wilson defines the term marriageable as "the ratio of employed men to all women of the same age" (Sawhill and Venator 2015, pg 2). Being "marriageable" encompasses both a man's overall financial position as well as not having a criminal record (Sawhill and Venator 2015). It is estimated that up to one third of Black men will face imprisonment in their lifetime (SentencingProject 2015; Western and Wildeman 2009). Entanglement in the criminal justice system, at any level, comes with lingering consequences, including financial hardship and overall stigma, things that are not ideal for building a marriage or a family. Additionally, as Black women's educational attainment increases, it has consequently surpassed that of Black men given the already existing income gap between Black households and white households (Black Women's Roundtable 2019; Lyons and Pettit 2011; Pettit and Lyons 2009; Western and Wildeman 2009; Western 2002).

A Fresh Perspective

There is extensive statistical data on marriage rates, mass incarceration, degree attainment, and household income inequality. There are also various studies conducted looking at the various ways in which people pursue dating in the digital age and what the trends are in these spaces. Collectively, these figures have helped to paint a numerical picture of how these factors impact Black women in marriage markets as well as give some insight to the experiences of Black women in intimate marketplaces. There have also been various books written to offer suggestions to Black women on how to address their declining marriage rates, which have helped to provide additional perspectives on the matter. However, there is a dearth of scholarship that

explores Black women's narratives about their dating and relationship experiences as they navigate intimate marketplaces. I will close that gap by going directly to Black women to gain insight from the foundation of these discussions. My study is an exploration of the ways that cisgender, Black women who date men experience dating and intimate relationships.

The following research questions guide my project:

1. How do Black women describe their heterosexual experiences with dating and intimate relationships?
2. To what extent do these experiences differ by educational attainment?
3. How do Black women feel that they are being received within intimate marketplaces?
4. How does education level impact their perceptions?

Furthermore, this project uses four secondary questions to better understand the ways that Black women make meaning within their dating and relationship experiences:

1. How does educational attainment impact how Black women think about marriage?
2. How do Black women understand the concept of marrying down? (How do factors, such as education, income, and criminal background factor into this?)
3. What do Black women consider to be a marriageable man?
4. For Black women particularly invested in long term relationships, how do they negotiate considerations and possibilities of marrying down?

Against a cultural backdrop of sexualized racism and colorblind racism, this project uses focus groups to explore how Black women make meaning in their experiences with dating and intimate relationships. Since statistical evidence can only provide part of the picture, I go straight to the source of Black women themselves to help us all better understand what this phenomenon

actually looks like for those living in it. My project helps showcase how Black women experience declining marriage rates in their day to day lives.

What's to Come: A Chapter Review

" 'How can I as one person speak for such a large and complex group as African-American women?' I asked myself. The answer is that I cannot and should not because each of us must learn to speak for herself' "(Collins 2000, pg.xi). The purpose of my dissertation is to explore the relationship experiences of Black women, but to also to provide a platform to allow Black women to tell these stories themselves. Black women's relationship experiences continue to be the forefront of discussion as it relates to the Black experience, but seldom have scholars taken the time to speak directly to Black women to better understand their unique disposition. Primarily through the frame of Black feminist theory, my dissertation uses focus groups to create the space for Black women to narrate their experiences and highlight their processes as they move through romantic interpersonal relationships.

In my second chapter, I use the literature to provide detailed background upon which to build the foundation of Black women's relationship experiences. I start with a general picture of the Black experience and highlight the impact of systemic racism on the Black community as a whole. I cover mass incarceration, the wealth gap, housing discrimination and more. I also discuss the plight of Black men as I provide the basis that Black men are Black women's primary prospect within marriage markets (Banks 2010). I then move into discussing how these systems intertwine directly with the experiences of Black womanhood and shape the foundations of their relationships. I close this chapter with a chronological journey through all of the theories that I use to frame my dissertation.

My third chapter covers the data and methodology used for this project. I start by explaining where my research fits within the current landscape of what has been done. I then move into explaining and defending my use of focus groups as well as highlighting the scholars before me that describe this method as being ideal for providing a powerful and healing space for women of color to express while also being there to support each other (Carey-Webb 1996; Huber 2009; Reyes and Rodriguez 2012). Because of this method, I was able to capture rich data where my participants were able to be both vulnerable and empowered as they shared their intimate experiences with me. As this topic often became delicate at portions throughout the focus group, I was still able to both capture the individual stories as well as the nuance of the interactions between the women as they lifted each other up. I close this chapter by highlighting my own positionality and the impact that it had on my research. Being a Black woman that is all too familiar with this topic, I too was able to benefit from these discussions while still assuring that my participants felt both comfortable and confident in sharing with me.

In chapter four, I discuss my first finding of Black women negotiating their willingness to date down, especially as it related to their level of tolerance for criminal backgrounds in their dating prospects. I reexamine the burden of mass incarceration on the Black community as my respondents demonstrate a hyperawareness of the residual impact this phenomenon has on Black men and therefore their dating pool. I analyze my participants willingness to make allowances for criminal backgrounds and examine the extent to which they are inclined to do so. I closed with a theoretical analysis of these behaviors, framing it within the context of racial realism as the women take a realistic approach to broadening their marriage markets under less than favorable conditions due to systemic racism.

In chapter five, I address the ways that my respondents describe and understand the concept of marriage. I frame this chapter using Black feminist theory and the significance of Black women needing to define things for themselves when societal definitions of concepts directly contradict their entire experience. I find two main ways that my respondents approach marriage – one that is a direct rejection of the romanticized cultural norms of marriage but instead more practical in nature, and a second that is actually more in line with societal values and centered around the idea of being 'chosen.' I analyze the differences between these two opposing perspectives, the impacts of socialization, and the significance of breaking down the negative tropes that many associate with Black women in intimate relationships.

Chapter six looks at the ways that Black women prioritize themselves and their relationships. I find that in most cases, my respondents express a significant commitment to self-improvement in the form of educational and career advancement, as well as self-love and self-care. Some respondents do so from a perspective of making sure that their primary needs are met before pursuing a romantic relationship while others do so due to experiencing difficulty in their relationship experiences. Many of my respondents also expressed simultaneously being on a journey towards self-love and asserting that this is something that they find necessary for their potential mate's to be prioritizing as well. I frame these findings using Black feminist theory by addressing the tropes of the Black Lady, the concept of "smart-ugly," and the resurgence of radical self-love.

I conclude my dissertation with an overview of the literature, a recapturing of my findings, and a discussion of further directions. I take into the account the feedback of my respondents in ways that this project can be expanded to explicitly include sex and men. I discuss the theoretical implications to those inclusions as well as why they weren't incorporated into the

current study. I briefly address other major thematic trends that were prevalent within my data and the ways that these can become the foundation for larger future projects. Lastly, I analyze the impact of this dissertation simply by giving Black women the opportunity to speak for themselves and urge that more scholars, when addressing Black centered issues, highlight Black women's voices in future academic works.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The current state of Black women in America is rather bittersweet. While they have made strides in educational attainment, they also bear the brunt of various other factors such as an income wage gap shaped by their intersecting position in structures of gender and racial inequality. Black women's educational attainment surpasses Black men overall, by a ratio of 2:1 (Black Women's Roundtable 2019). In the 2018-19 academic year, compared with their Black male counterparts, Black women earned 67% of associates degrees, 64% of bachelor's degrees, 70% of masters degrees, 67% of all doctorates (NCES 2020). However, Black women still suffer from employment discrimination, income inequality, wealth disparities, housing inequality, and health disparities (Black Women's Roundtable 2019; Hill 2004; Patten 2016). Black women earn 61 cents to the dollar as compared with white men. When compared with white women, Black women are less likely to be in high wage earning positions and less likely to experience upward mobility in their positions (Black Women's Roundtable 2019). Black women also have a fraction of the wealth of their white counterparts, with this gap increasing over their life course. Where Black women are reported to have approximately 24% of the wealth of white women in their 40s, this number decreases to only 2% by the time they reach their 60s. Black women are also less likely to have employee benefits and more likely to be discredited when reporting harassment and other offenses within the workplace (Berdahl and Moore 2006, Black Women's Roundtable 2019, Ontiveros 1993). Compounding this is the fact that, 70% of Black women who are mothers are the sole breadwinner of their households (Black Women's Roundtable 2019).

The state of Black men in America is not much better than their female counterparts, and in many respects, Black men are also disenfranchised in a multitude of ways including Black men averaging only a third of all degrees at all levels achieved by Black people (Black Women's

Roundtable 2019). Even though Black men reportedly surpass Black women in terms of financial success (Black Women's Roundtable 2019; Crowder and Tolnay 2000), when we consider the impacts of the prison industrial complex, mass incarceration, and the school-to-prison pipeline, and its impact on Black men and particular, very few Black men are given the opportunity to actually achieve anything as they are targeted from their youth (Alexander 2010, Wald and Losen 2003, Western and Wildeman 2002). For the third of Black men who are able to evade the justice system and get an education, they are able to make more to the dollar than Black women, although Black women have been closing that gap over time. Almost half of all Black women have a Black male relative who is currently incarcerated (Wildeman and Wang 2017). It has been estimated that of all Black men born in 2001, one in three of them will face imprisonment in their lifetime- a figure that has steadily been increasing in the past few decades (Sentencing Project 2015; Western and Wildeman 2009; Wildeman and Wang 2017).

Following incarceration, regardless of age, formerly incarcerated people consistently have a difficult time finding employment (Western and Wildeman 2009, Pager 2003, Pettit and Lyons 2009). And the stigma of incarceration does not alleviate over time, in fact, research shows that it only worsens (Petit and Lyons 2009). Further, studies have found that the incarceration of Black men leads to lasting detrimental health impacts not only on the men incarcerated, but on their partners, their children, and their neighborhoods (Clear 2009, Wildeman and Wang 2017). Drawing on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Western (2002) looked at non-college, incarcerated Black males, and found that imprisonment increased wage inequality and contributed to slow wage growth. Similarly, Lyons and Pettit (2011) studied a cohort of men over a 14-year period and evaluated state administrative data. The authors found that for previously incarcerated Black males, their wages increased at a rate of 21% slower than

that of previously incarcerated White males. Other cases have even found that incarceration completely "sabatoges" employment for Black men (Apel and Ramakers 2018). Repeatedly, research has shown that once one has been incarcerated, both attaining a job and moving up the ranks in pay becomes very difficult, if not, impossible - an unfortunate reality faced by a significant portion of Black men (Apel and Ramakers 2018; Pettit and Lyons 2009, 2011; Sentencing Project 2015; Western 2002; Western and Wildeman 2009).

Black Women and Relationships

Amidst all of the systemic barriers being faced by Black men and the Black community at large, Black women are still attempting to find a partner. Relationships for Black women have always been an incredibly layered conversation as it involves significantly more than just talk of love, desire, and ultimately choosing a partner. Scholars have identified several trends in Black women's romantic relationships and their experiences in intimate marketplaces. Black women are least likely of all groups by both race and gender to be married (Bureau 2020). In the 2010 Census, only 35% of Black women over the age of 18 reported being married as compared to 57% of white women and 42% of Black men (Bureau 2010). Also, Black people increasingly marry outside their race. In 1980, 5% of Black newlyweds were in interracial marriages and in 2015, this number rose to 18% (Livingston and Brown 2017). Black men are twice as likely to intermarry than Black women. In 2015, 12% of all interracial newlyweds were Black women and 24% were Black men (Livingston and Brown 2017).

Race loyalty continues to be a theme that arises for Black women where their relationships are concerned. Many have gone as far to say that this very loyalty is what keeps many Black women single due to their unwillingness to consider non-Black men as suitable romantic partners (Banks 2010). Black women's choices, however, exist for a myriad of reasons,

most of which are spawn from the historical context of Black-white dynamics (Collins 2004). Black women express concern with fetishization from white men in particular, as well as the desire of wanting to have shared experiences and understandings with their romantic partners (Banks 2010, Childs 2005, Steinbugler 2012). Banks (2010) sees this as an overall hinderance to Black women's happiness as it relates to their love lives. While Banks (2010) takes into account the concerns expressed by Black women as it relates to their concerns with interracial partnering, he prefers to highlight the potential that exists outside of racially homogenous relationships. The sentiment of race loyalty is not shared by Black men, and even less so with affluent Black men (Banks 2010, Livingston and Brown 2017).

For Black women in marriages, race loyalty looks slightly different. Culturally, Black women are strongly encouraged to uplift Black men and let them lead in relationships, even if that means putting themselves down (Harvey 2009, Johnson and Loscoco 2015). As a means of fighting the negative tropes of being mammies and jezebels, Black women lean into respectability and more biblical narratives of submissive womanhood, often to men who have developed a false perception of superiority over them (Collins 2000, Johnson and Loscoco 2015, Painia 2018). In many cases, in an effort to preserve the image of the Black family, Black women take into account the societal burden that Black men are under and silently suffer in an effort to maintain their households and marriages. To outwardly struggle with this, or fail in regards to their household, would be a show of 'weakness,' something that would be entirely out of character for the ever present trope of the 'strong Black woman' (Harris-Perry 2012). Further, this would disgrace the image of the Black family, an image that married Black women work overtime to uphold (Johnson and Loscoco 2015).

Many scholars have argued for the benefits of marriage, toting marriage as a metaphorical cure-all for various health and socioeconomic factors (Hirschi 1969, Hirschl, Altobelli and Rank 2003, Litcher, Roempke and Brown 2003). Where this is problematic for a variety of reasons, some of the benefits scholars have found of marriage include a decrease in criminal behavior for men (Hirschi 1969), positive outcomes for children (Hirschl, Altobelli and Rank 2003), longer life expectancy for men (Hirschl, Altobelli and Rank 2003), and concentrated wealth (Hirschi 1969; Hirschl, Altobelli and Rank 2003; Litcher, Roempke and Brown 2003; South and Crowder 1997). However, these benefits do not translate to Black families, and specifically to Black women (Hirschl, Altobelli and Rank 2003; Litcher, Roempke and Brown 2003). The lack of inclusion of the societal barriers created by systemic racism allows scholarship to paint incomplete pictures.

Arguably, marriage, as we know it, is a racially gendered institution socially constructed to exacerbate white privilege and further disparage Black women (Collins 2000). "[White men's] understandings of family depend heavily on who controls the definitions. And the definitions advanced by elite groups in the United States uniformly work to the detriment of African-American women" (Collins 2000, p. 47). This considered, it is important to examine the potentially detrimental impacts of marriage and relationships on Black women when centering it around these exclusive definitions. The 'Weathering' hypothesis developed by Geronimus and colleagues argues that the "effects of living in a race-conscious society may be greatest among those Blacks most likely to engage in high-effort coping" (Geronimus et. Al 2006) an argument that speaks specifically to the negative health outcomes experienced by Black women. This is representative by the increased presence of stress related physical ailments in Black women, the decreased life expectancy, and the disparate maternal health rates faced by Black women

(Geronimus 2004). Some example of these stress induced physical ailments would be high blood pressure, heart disease, circulatory disease, and more (Geronimus et. Al 1999). Additionally, Black women who do get married report being significantly less satisfied with marriage than do white women (Addo and Litcher 2013; Broman 1993; Cheng 2016; Raley, Sweeny, and Wondra 2015). Where married white women and men report being less depressed and happier in their marriages, affluent Black women and men are found to be more depressed (Roxburgh 2017). Comparatively, Black women also have higher divorce rates at almost every age range as compared to white women, further supporting the case of low levels of marriage satisfaction (Raley, Sweeny, and Wondra 2015). When it comes to receiving the benefit of wealth accumulation in marriage, that is moreso privy to those who stay in their marriages, rather than those who divorce or experience instability (Addo and Litcher 2013).

When marrying, Black women are less likely to marry into wealth, more likely to marry someone who earns less than them, and more likely to marry someone that is less educated than them (Black Womens Roundable 2019; Collins 1997; Porter and Bronzaft 1995). Marriage for Black women results in less financial accumulation than their white counterparts and can even result in an overall negative financial impact (Addo and Litcher 2013; Broman 1993; Cheng 2016). As compared to married white women, being both married and educated bears very little benefit for Black women's wealth standing. In 2013, married, non-college educated White women had a median wealth of $117,200, compared to married, college educated Black women's median wealth of $45,000. Married white women's median wealth more than doubled when college educated, jumping to $260,000. Unmarried college educated Black women's median wealth stood at a mere $5,000 (Zaw et. Al 2017). With the trends in marriage having switched from non-educated women marrying more to college educated women marrying more,

we continue to see these wealth gaps increase between Black and white women (Goldstein and Kenny 2001).

The Black church plays a large role in Black women's understanding of relationships and marriage (Johnson and Loscocco 2015, Painia 2018). Historically speaking, the Black church fervently upholds the sanctity of marriage as the moral standard of relationships as a part of their overall commitment to racial uplift (Moultrie 2018). Specifically in the case of single mothers, the church acts as a major social pressure for them to marry and to avoid the stigmas of their unwed and illegitimate status (Johnson and Loscocco 2015, Moultrie 2018). The Black church is deeply steeped in patriarchal rhetoric that encourages women to adhere to the politics of respectability and stay in their place as it relates to men. A major religious conversation specific to marriage is that of submission, which often comes up in relationship dynamics, irrespective of the man's ability to serve as a provider (Painia 2018). Similar to the race loyalty argument, Black women are often encouraged to essentially diminish themselves to maintain both their households and relationships (Johnson and Loscocco 2015).

In a study featuring conversations with Black men, several ways that the Black church serves as a moral pillar to the foundation to healthy Black marriages and families were brought up (Collins and Perry 2015). The men spoke of the church as being a positive example to promote family stability while societal structures sought to break apart Black families. For example, respondents mentioned policies resulting in female headed households receiving housing and welfare benefits but prohibiting living with the fathers. They felt that the presence and prevalence of the church introduced an additional moral plea to getting married that is not otherwise encouraged in larger society, which is supported by scholarship showing that church

attending urban families are more likely to get married than those who don't (Collins and Perry 2015, Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007).

There also exists a resounding shared societal understanding that the Black church holds the required information for the Black community that would help to improve their marriage rates. The men in the previous study spoke heavily of the idea that their partners needed to be "equally yolked" and said that church provided the necessary teachings in order to prepare both men and women for these biblically balanced unions (Collins and Perry 2015). The men did refer lightly to some of the patriarchal themes brought up by prior scholars. When considering the role of a man in marriage as taught by the church, scholars stated, "This guidance espoused men's obligation to be husbands and fathers who are trustworthy and faithful leaders who are also benevolent and reflective" (Collins and Perry 2015, pg. 437). Further, in a plea to Black churches to help improve marriage rates for Black women, a mental health professional reasons that a major issues why Black people aren't getting married is because they lack positive and stable examples from their upbringing, but that could in turn be provided by the Black church (Young 2004). Additionally, politicians, both democratic and republican, when presented with finding ways to try and increase marriage rates in the Black community, have introduced legislation that would fund churches to promote healthy marriages, and have made public statements regarding Black people's need to implore churches in order to improve marriages (Young 2004).

Marriage Deferment

Even though Black women have lower marriage rates than other groups, this does not mean that they have totally given up on marriage. Where some Black women do defer marriage, many still experience meaningful and lasting romantic relationships—some with Black men,

women, or those who opt to date and/or marry interracially (Barros-Gomez and Baptist 2014; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Kinnon 2003; Mouzan 2013).

Barros-Gomez and Baptist (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with five Black women to explore their experiences of singleness. All of the women in the sample had achieved graduate degrees, some were mothers, and all were unmarried. When Black women in their sample were asked about how they make sense of the concept of marriage, the women ultimately had mixed feelings about marriage. They recognized the significance of gender roles and some even spoke of seeing marriage as losing a bit of freedom to the expected gender dynamic of marriage. The authors argued that many of these Black women were raised with a religious emphasis on 'togetherness,' that stressed the centrality of the family. The authors sought to understand how the women reconciled their unmarried statuses with their familial and religious upbringing (Barros-Gomez and Baptist 2014). Content with their decisions to be unmarried mothers, many made sure to maintain strong associations with family in other ways. Respondents cited the sense of responsibility that they felt to their families and communities, especially as it related to their roles of being single mothers. All also expressed the positivity of marriage and maintained hope for marriage in the future, even going as far as saying that they felt confident in their ability to find a suitable mate whenever time permitted. (Barros-Gomez and Baptist 2014).

Other factors also influence Black women's choice to defer marriage. Edin and Kefalas (2005) uncovered some of the reasons behind deferring marriage, particularly in the case of low-income Black women. The major factors Black women identified against marrying were affordability, control and respectability (Edin and Kefalas 2005). By affordability, the women were referring to the lack of potential marriage partners who were able to financially support a family. Here, men's employment played a significant role in whether or not the woman would

even consider marrying him. For example, since keeping the man around impacts welfare benefits (housing, food stamps, etc.), it was important that he be able to contribute financially if he insisted on marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005). In terms of control, women were concerned with how marriage might change how they were able to maintain power over their housing situations. Since housing leases were most often put in the woman's name, they maintained the power to unofficially evict their male counterparts if they were not holding up their end of the household contributions or putting undue stress on the household (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Finally, respectability was interpreted in two ways: the status of the man that would be the potential candidate for marriage, and the legitimacy that it would bring upon their household. While the women perceived respectability in these two ways, it is important to note that the two were not mutually exclusive, because just as much as the man could add to her respectability, he could also diminish it if, for example, he engaged in criminal behavior (Edin and Kefalas 2005). The paradox is that because Black women held marriage to an exceptionally high esteem, this is precisely why they chose to forego it. These women did not want to involve themselves in undeserving unions because it would diminish and cheapen their view of the sanctity of marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Examining all these trends alongside one another, various experts have come to the conclusion that many college-educated Black women will never marry (Kinnon 2003). Across all class levels, Black women report holding marriage to an extremely high esteem. As a result, college educated Black women would rather not marry than marry a Black man that is not up to her overall standards (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Porter and Bronzaft 1995). As such, Mouzan (2013) asserts that in order to raise marriage rates for Black women, society must increase economic opportunities for Black men.

In a study that interviewed 52 married Black men, scholars set out to get their perspectives on Black women's declining marriage statistic (Hurt, McElroy. Sheats, Landor, ad Bryant 2014). When asked why they thought that Black women were single, the married Black men that were interviewed saw Black women as trying to come off too strong, projecting the impression that they don't need them (Hurt et al 2014). They continued in saying that Black women had too many standards, had poor attitudes, and would ultimately pass up a man in favor of a woman. The researchers explained that when these men tried to engage with highly accomplished and self-sustaining Black women, they reported feeling that these women held unrealistic standards for potential mates, that women acted as if they did not need to marry, and that Black women would not submit to them [from a biblical standpoint] (Hurt et. Al 2014; Johnson and Loroco 2015). However, in the same breath, when these men were asked about the state of Black men when it comes to incarceration, education, and employment, they did mention that marriage prospects for Black women were grim. They also noted that many Black men weren't ready to get married, enjoyed playing the field, and commented on the phenomenon of men being on the down-low as a potential problem for Black women (Hurt et. Al 2014).

Black Women and Interracial Relationships

In continuing to navigate their declining marriage rates, marriage deferment is not the only route taken by Black women. While race loyalty is common among Black women, especially when it comes to choosing a mate (Banks 2010), there are some who have opted to broaden their marriage market horizons in the form of interracial dating. There is a significant body of literature on Black women and interracial relationships. For example, Crowder and Tolnay (2000) sought to decipher the impact of racial intermarriage on the marital prospects of Black women by examining individual level marriage data, focusing specifically on the

socioeconomic background of unmarried Black men, Black men married to Black women, and Black men married to non-Black women (Crowder and Tolnay 2000). Crowder looked at intermarriage on local levels as well as the overall local marriage market conditions and found that Black men married to non-Black women earn on average $1400 more than Black men married to Black women and $9000 more than unmarried Black men (Crowder and Tolnay 2000). The difference in SES between the three groups was also significant ($p < .001$). Crowder and Tolnay (2000) also found that Black male intermarriage also plays a role in Black women's marital status by decreasing the economically attractive prospects within the dating pool.

Childs (2005) explored how Black women viewed interracial relationships (Childs 2005). To do so, she combined focus group interviews on three college campuses with in-depth interviews with Black women married to white men. Childs found that for the college women, interracial relationships were problematic (Childs 2005). For example, some of these women explained how they did not feel as though white people understood them, a factor that limited the depth of long-term romantic interactions, and others expressed how interracial relationships caused opposition and tension in their families and communities. Many also challenged the motives of those who chose to date interracially, attributing these motives to negative self-perceptions fueled by a manifestation of the negative social narratives surrounding Blackness perpetrated by the media and the residual impact of America's checkered past (Childs 2014; Collins 2002; Collins 2004; Harris-Perry 2011). However, Childs (2005) found that other Black people view Black women who date interracially more favorably than Black men who date interracially because it is assumed that she is less likely to desert her community irrespective of her relationship. Most of the female participants detested and degraded Black men-white women relationships; They regarded them as meaningless, sex-based, and experimentation as an effort to

reap some sort of benefits (Childs 2005, Wilkins 2012). The women in this study expressed how it was hurtful for Black women to see Black men in interracial relationships because to them, it represented Black men telling them they are not good enough (Childs 2005).

Although not specifically on the experiences of Black women per se, Wilkins (2012) sought to better understand the experience of Black college men about their interracial relationships (Wilkins 2012). She found that Black men's interracial relationships caused a residual tension between the Black men and Black women on campus. Important for my research is that these men saw Black women as regressive, basic, and bitter for how they viewed Black men's interracial relationships (Wilkins 2012). Even as these were not even relationships that Black women were physically in, the reaction that they had to it furthered the tension between the Black women on this campus and their Black male peers.

It is important to note that there is a great deal of pressure that encourages Black women to date interracially in order to resolve their marriage deficit. Some of this public attention blames Black women for their low marriage rates since many prefer to date Black men and do not want to look outside of their race for potential marriage partners (Romano 2018). In 2012, Ralph Richard Banks a legal scholar, argued that in response to the declining marriage rates for Black people, Black women should consider marrying outside of their race. However, Leong (2012), another legal scholar, critiqued Banks' argument, stating that all races suffer from a shortage of men in the middle class and encouraging Black women to date outside their race complicates the marriage markets for all women. She argued that Black women should marry down, instead of out, since refusing to do so intensifies already existing income inequality, as well as increasing the stigmas associated with low wage earners. Leong (2012) maintained that

marrying down is just as much of a solution to the declining marriage rates as marrying 'out' and should both be considered an equally viable solution (Leong 2012).

Consistent with Leong's argument, research shows that Black women—especially those who are college educated—are mostly interested in dating Black men (DePass 2006; Lewis 2012). Most Black women understand that the plight of Black men is not of their own making, and as Black women are most interested in marrying them, they take this into account (Abrams, Maxwell, and Belgrave 2018; Hurt et. Al 2014). Thus, for Black women, especially those who have attained graduate degrees, they often contend with the reality of marrying men who are either less educated, less accomplished, or both (Venator and Sawhill 2015).

Thus, there is a great deal of research that has detailed how social structural inequalities, including economic and educational inequality and mass incarceration of Black men contribute to Black women's declining marriage rates. Where scholars and journalists have interviewed Black men about their perceptions on declining marriage rates, and Black men have also written bestselling self-help books with suggestions on how Black women could resolve these issues for themselves, few scholars have actually spoken to Black women about how the aforementioned factors impact how they experience their intimate relationships. My project will fill this gap by speaking with Black women across class and educational backgrounds to better understand their experiences. My project will therefore address the issue of Black women's declining marriage rates from a diverse perspective of Black women.

Theoretical Perspective

I integrate symbolic interactionism, standpoint feminism, Black feminist thought, intersectionality, and components of critical race theory to guide my analysis of Black women's experiences navigating intimate marketplaces. Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is a sociological

theoretical perspective developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. The three major premises of SI are that (1) people act towards objects based on the meanings; (2) The meanings that people give to things emerges from interactions that they have with others; and (3) the meanings of these things are "handled in and modified through" the process of interpretation and interaction with the things themselves (Blumer 1969). Simply put, the SI perspective focuses on how people make sense of and interpret the world. This is considered a micro sociological perspective, since it focuses on analyzing the interactions between individuals and groups, as opposed to the workings of broader social structures. Symbols are considered the central focus of social life and are representative of larger ideas- this can include images, gestures, signs, and even the language that we use (Blumer 1969; 1986). Blumer (1986) suggests that to adopt an SI methodological approach, one must understand people not as simply responding to objects, but more precisely, as acting on them. Such actions are a result of the interpretation and assessment of the circumstances that they are presented. Employing an SI perspective will allow me to focus on the ways that Black women interpret their reality as they navigate intimate marketplaces (Blumer 1986).

I also integrate Standpoint Feminism as a way to ensure that I take seriously women's standpoints and the social, structural, and historical processes that shape this standpoint. Scholars associated with Standpoint Feminism argue that our standpoint, or our positionality, directly effects how we see and interpret the world (Smith 1987; Collins 2002). Sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987), a white woman, problematized the ways scholars created a universal or mainstream experience - a white man's experience - that discounted all other lived experiences. Smith argued that when we are able to evaluate institutions from the standpoint of women, people of color, or other marginalized and ignored groups, we are better able to understand how

institutions, such as work and family, uniquely affect different individuals placed within them (Smith 1987).

Patricia Hill Collins extended the fundamental premise of Standpoint Theory to the experiences of Black women in her book, *Black Feminist Thought* (BFT). Collins showed that BFT as a framework has existed as long as Black women themselves, but because Black women have long been silenced, it has also been suppressed. It is a line of activism that has been viewed as irrelevant because of the existence of civil rights Black progress narratives and the advances of first and second wave feminism. Upon understanding that neither feminism nor the civil rights movement explicitly pushed the needs and issues of Black women forward, Black women decided to take matters into their own hands and create their own space to organize for themselves. In short, it is a response to the observation that "All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, but Some of Us are Brave" (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1993). An activist ideology and scholarly theory, BFT centers around legitimizing the experiences of Black women and illuminates the poor treatment that Black women receive in all social arenas. Collins (2002) shows how Black women are agentic and knowledgeable beings and should be treated as such. For example, Black women come from very long lines of oral histories and generationally passed down truths that should be included when discerning between what is knowledge and what is not (Collins 2002). In addition, BFT challenges the oppressive imagery of Black women, such as the "Mammy, Matriarch, Sapphire, whore, and bulldagger" (Taylor 2017; Collins 2002). BFT was the guiding theoretical framework of the Combahee River Collective, who first named the concept of identity politics and accentuated the ways that existing as a Black woman is a cultural and a political experience because we are forced to confront our identity by recognizing the co-existence of race, class, and gender (Taylor 2017).

Patricia Hill Collins's groundbreaking work *Black Feminist Thought*, originally published in 1991, instantly became a seminal text in Black feminist and sociological theory (Collins 2002). In this text, Collins introduced the matrix of domination, which was the reframing of the idea of identity politics brought about by the Combahee River Collective and many others (Collins 2002; Taylor 2017) and a way of conceptualizing the intersecting systems of oppression and privilege that we all occupy. For example, a poor Black woman experiences the world such that she confronts racism, sexism, and classism simultaneously.

In the same year as the release of Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Feminist Thought*, Kimberlé Crenshaw published her work "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989) where she coined the term intersectionality, a concept similar to the matrix of domination. Like Collins, Crenshaw (2002) explains that rather than focusing on a single part of our identities, such as gender, race, and social class, we should instead consider the extent to which these intersections are compounded within the individual. Crenshaw also is one of the founders of Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework created by legal scholars that calls attention to and challenges the structural and systemic manifestations of racism that are written into our legal system. CRT initially started to bring awareness to the structural barriers faced by Black academic faculty when trying to achieve tenure and breaks down the many ways that Black people are barred from trying to simply exist by criticizing legislation. The major components of CRT that will be useful for my project are intersectionality, criticisms of liberalism, and colorblind racism. Together, these provide a foundation to further evaluate the experiences of Black women while scrutinizing the prison industrial complex and the effects of mass incarceration on Black men.

I will frame this project using a lens that brings together Symbolic Interactionism, Standpoint Feminism, Black Feminist Thought, Intersectionality, and components of Critical Race Theory. Integrating these perspectives is useful because it allows me to situate Black women's meaning making within a structural backdrop of inequality. Symbolic Interactionism provides a micro theoretical backdrop that allows me to focus on the individualistic experiences of Black women and the ways that they interpret their social worlds. Standpoint Feminism and Black Feminist Thought create an epistemological foundation for my project by centering Black women's experiences in ways that refute a universal narrative and account for structural power dynamics. Intersectionality and Critical Race Theory provide me a lens through which to understand how all of this is occurring within a system of structural racism that shapes how Black women interpret and experience their intimate relationships.

CHAPTER 3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Most work examining unmarried Black women's experiences is either quantitative or authors choose not to involve Black women. Most studies use secondary survey data analysis to quantitatively compare the experiences of Black and white women, to examine how socioeconomic status impacts marriage markets, and to explore how the state of Black men related to that of Black women. While these studies have been incredibly useful in creating a backdrop for Black women's relationship experiences, they fall short of actually capturing their lived realities. In research, Black women are often either ignored or spoken for, rather than spoken to. I aim to change that by holistically centering my entire process around Black women: I use frameworks developed by Black female scholars, centering much of my framework within Black feminist theory and theorists; I utilize a method specific to capturing the experiences of marginalized populations; I analyze the stories of Black women; and ultimately, I employ grounded theory to assure that the knowledge gained from these women continues to inform my work cyclically.

As a Black woman, taking this project on has been very personal to me as I knew that I wanted to do it *right*. So much that had previously been done, especially projects directed towards Black women, perceived the experiences of Black single womanhood as a position of lacking something and/or a problem that needed to be solved. While I wholeheartedly disagree with anything regarding Black women being even mildly associated with lack, I wanted to empirically build a project that gave Black women the opportunity to shape, label, and theorize their experiences on their own without the intervention of anyone unlike themselves. While being a member of this community easily allowed me the physiological access to be the one to facilitate this process, I still had to actively work to check other portions of my intersecting status

positions to assure that I would not become my own barrier. I had to pay close attention to other aspects of my social status, such as my upbringing as a middle-class Black person and my educational attainment as I worked with as inclusive a group of Black women as possible. All in all, while my own experiences with dating and relationships acted as the catalyst for this project, it was my participants and my desire to share what I have been honored to capture from them that drove this work to completion. Data collected for this project is not meant to be generalizable, as that kind of research is best left to larger studies with random statistical samples. Instead, data from this project adds much needed narrative depth to the already existing statistical data. This project offers rich perspectives from Black women on their processes when engaging in marriage markets. It allows scholars to better understand the mechanisms employed by Black women when navigating intimate relationships. This project also gives insight to how Black women across education levels define their intimate journeys and how their relationship experiences play into larger social narratives cast on them.

Rationale for Research Methodology

I used focus groups to collect data on the experiences of Black women in intimate relationships. Being that relationships and intimacy are inherently personal and potentially sensitive topics, I made sure to use a methodology that allowed space for that sensitivity while also creating community. The testimonio methodology, a method most commonly used in Latin American research that focuses on revealing injustices and creating a space for resolution, served as a major inspiration for the direction I intended to take with this project.

> Unlike the more common training of researchers to produce unbiased knowledge, *testimonio* challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance. These approaches have resulted in new understandings about how marginalized communities build solidarity and respond to and resist dominant culture, laws, and policies that perpetuate inequity (Bernal, Burciaga and Carmona 2012).

The testimonio methodology employs storytelling, performative narration, and critical analysis of one's own experiences. It is described as both a method and a process utilized through the trajectory of one's research (Bernal, Burciaga and Carmona 2012). However, in honoring that this method is one reserved for the Latin American experience (Bernal, Burciaga and Carmona 2012: Reyes and Rodriguez 2012), I instead allowed myself to be inspired by the activist tenants of the testimonio methodology, while using focus groups as the main method for collecting my data. My work drew on the testimonio methodology by emphasizing solidarity and empowerment between the women who participated in the focus groups, juxtaposed against the larger social narratives cast on them by society.

I also shifted the focus from the objectivity of prior quantitative work to highlight the variation in experiences of the women. Feminist scholars have shown that small focus groups can act as therapeutic and empowering spaces that allow women to support each other in the retelling of their experiences while also giving them the opportunity to build off of one another (Madriz 2000, Roche and Goldberg Wood 2005). Similar to the testimonio methodology, focus groups have been found to create a space where women can engage in narrative storytelling that can shed a light on their experiences as a marginalized population (Carey-Webb 1996; Huber 2009; Reyes and Rodriguez 2012). I found this approach to be effective in creating a safe space for my respondents as they shared their experiences. During portions where respondents passionately expressed their feelings while narrating their past relationships, I was able to witness powerful displays of support from the other women as they rallied behind and championed each other. There were also times where the storytelling from one woman would segue into the storytelling of another as they built off of each other.

Recruitment and Sampling

For this project, I utilized non-probability multistage sampling with purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. My sampling was non-probability due to me not utilizing an overall list of my population, but rather found participants that were convenient to me. I engaged in multistage sampling by having a two-tiered sampling process where I employed both purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is choosing participants contingent upon them meeting certain criteria (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016). I engaged in convenient purposive sampling throughout my project, meaning that not only did I choose participants who fit my criteria, I gained my participants through means that were most easily accessible to me (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016). My participants all fit the following criterion: They all were single, cisgender, Black women who date men. Participants were also marked for the following education level groupings: High school graduate, associate degree/ trade school graduate, bachelor's degree graduate, and graduate/ professional school graduate. As I highlighted earlier, Black experiences are far from monolithic and I wanted to make sure that I was able to identify some of these experiential differences and identify trends based on education level (Collins 2002; Frazier 1958; Harris-Perry 2011; Patillo 2013; Wilson 1987). Additionally, education level is often used as a socioeconomic status indicator (Galobardes, Shaw, Lawlor, Lynch, and Smith 2006). While I never explicitly asked respondents about their income level, as that question is notorious for being skipped in survey research, I am able to infer some class differences based on trends by education level as well. Lastly, all participants were at least 18 years of age, unmarried, and had some experience dating.

Using convenient purposive sampling, participants were recruited through my social networks (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016). I reached out to friends, family, and acquaintances

who fit within the various educational attainment level groupings and asked that they share my recruitment flyer within their social media networks. Using Adobe Draw to create my illustration followed by Adobe Creative Express, formerly known as Adobe Spark, I crafted my flyer to attract participants to my study (see Appendix A). I personally circulated my flyer on both Instagram and Facebook, but primarily on Instagram. However, I was informed that my flyer was also circulated on Twitter. Additionally, my flyer was circulated by email through two different Black sorority organizations. As a result, 60 women in total responded to my fliers, although they did not all end up being participants in my research. I provided them a digital copy of the recruitment flyer, with a link to a preliminary survey that I used to collect demographic information as well as checked for eligibility to participate in the focus groups. I then used snowball sampling and asked all who participated in the preliminary survey to invite their peers to participate. And, at the conclusion of the survey, they were all provided with a link to share on their social media feeds. Following the initial response, eligible participants were added to an email list where an online scheduling poll was distributed. I then scheduled focus groups of 2-5 participants based on availability.

The focus groups had a total of 31 participants with mixed education levels. In terms of highest level education attained at the time of the study, five were high school graduates, two were trade school/ associate graduates, 17 completed bachelors degrees, six completed masters degrees, and one completed a PhD/ Professional Doctorate. Further, 11 participants were currently in school during the time of the study. Participant ages ranged from 22-40 years old. The majority of the participants were located in Louisiana (17), followed by California (5), New York (3), Texas (2), Washington DC (1), Missouri (1), Tennessee (1), and Alabama (1). The vast

majority of participants identified as single (26), with a few in relationships (3), one as widowed, and the last as "complicated."

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (N=31)

Name	Age	Relationship Status	Location	Highest Level of Education Completed	Sexual Orientation
Leslie	31	Single	Los Angeles County, CA	High School Diploma	Straight
Birdie	25	Single	Los Angeles County, CA	High School Diploma	Straight
Shanade	26	Single	Los Angeles County, CA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Sienna	24	Single	Los Angeles County, CA	Bachelors Degree	Bisexual
Delia	25	Single	Los Angeles County, CA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Klarissa	25	Single	New Orleans, LA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Grace	23	In a Relationship	New Orleans, LA	Bachelors Degree	Bisexual
Winnie	25	Single	New Orleans, LA	High School Diploma	Straight
Belle	22	Widowed	New Orleans, LA	Bachelors Degree	Bisexual
Tess	23	Single	New Orleans, LA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Trell	23	Single	New Orleans, LA	Associates Degree	Bisexual
Tyona	22	"complicated"	New Orleans, LA	Trade School Graduate	Straight
Candace	26	In a Relationship	Houston, TX*	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Tiff	27	Single	New Orleans, LA	Master's Degree	Straight
Deziree	28	Single	New Orleans, LA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Tya	26	Single	New Orleans, LA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Tilly	22	Single	New Orleans, LA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Crystionna	25	In a Relationship	Baton Rouge, LA	PhD/Professional Degree	Straight
Brightly	26	Single	Garland, Texas	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Nessa	26	Single	Columbia, MO	Master's Degree	Straight
Gwen	40	Single	New Orleans, LA	High School Diploma	Straight
Isis	25	Single	Memphis, TN	Bachelors Degree	Bisexual
Theryis	26	Single	Washington,DC	Master's Degree	Straight
Mel	24	Single	Baton Rouge, LA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Courtney	29	Single	New York, NY*	Master's Degree	Bisexual
Siobahn	25	Single	New York, NY*	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Sunset	27	Single	Poughkeepsie, NY	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Amber	26	Single	Tallassee, Alabama	Master's Degree	Straight
Ebony	30	Single	New Orleans, LA	Bachelors Degree	Straight
Irene	38	Single	New Orleans, LA	Master's Degree	Straight
Kelleigh	23	Single	Baton Rouge, LA	High School Diploma	N/A*

*Respondent wrote in "I'm into everyone and I don't like labels"

Focus Groups

Focus groups conducted in person were conducted in a private enclosed space. Privacy varied during Zoom focus groups based on what the respondents were able to facilitate. The focus groups did not exceed 120 minutes. I informed all participants that this is an IRB approved

study and provided them with a written and verbal consent statement. Once I obtained their consent, I audio (and in some cases video) recorded all focus groups. This varied due to changes from Covid; earlier focus groups held in person were only audio recorded while zoom groups were both audio and video recorded.

Focus groups were semi-structured and followed an interview guide. I began each focus group with a non-essential ice-breaker question to stimulate the conversation. The ice breaker allowed respondents to get used to talking with a lightweight and fun question before my research questions came up.

I asked the following questions in each focus group:

1. Data from the 2010 Census reports reveal that Black women are the least likely across all race and gender categories to get married. How do you feel about this statistic? How does it resonate with your own experiences?
2. Now, let's talk about your experiences with dating.
    a. How do you usually meet the guys you date?
    b. Do you ever date outside of your race? Can you tell me about some of these experiences?
3. Now, let's talk about marriage.
    a. To what extent do you want to get married?
    b. What does marriage mean to you?
    c. Have you ever felt pressure to get married? From what sources?
4. Several scholars speculate that one of the potential causes of the decline in Black women's marriage rates is that so many Black men are financially unstable, unemployed,

or have criminal records. Some talk about this pattern by using the language of "unmarriageable" or "marriageable" men for Black women.

   a. To what extent do you think about these things when you are dating or in a relationship?
   b. What specific characteristics would make you consider a man to be marriageable?
   c. Have you ever dated or married what would consider down?

5. There is not a lot of research that actually asks Black women about their experiences with dating and relationships, so I want to ask if you think I am missing anything?
6. Do you have any questions for me about this project or myself?

Based on the direction of the conversation, I added additional questions or probed for more information. I concluded each focus group by asking the participants if there is anything I missed that they feel is important for my research and if there anything they would like to ask me.

My first focus group was conducted live in December of 2019 in Pasadena, CA. I was able to utilize a private art studio space for the group where I provided light refreshments. I audio recorded this group on two separate devices to make sure I wouldn't lose any information due to technical difficulties. This group consisted of five women, three of whom I knew and two I didn't. The two women I didn't know were snowball recruited by one of the other participants that I did know. Three of the women had earned their bachelor's degree, while the remaining two were high school graduates. None of the women were currently in school. Prominent themes that arose within this particular group were respectability, religious influence, and colorism. In my post interview memo of this group experience, it occurred to me that the context through which I

knew these women may have impacted the first two themes as two out of the three I knew through church, and the third I knew from my undergraduate college experience, which was a Catholic university. The women who were snowball sampled by one of the women I knew from church also indicated a heavy church influence in their life and that being a major part of their connection as well.

My second focus group was conducted live in January of 2020 in New Orleans, LA. Since this group consisted of women who I would consider all to be close friends of mine, while most did not know each other, I felt comfortable conducting this particular group in my home. I also recorded this group on two separate devices. I served light refreshments and then we got started. This group ended up being my longest group probably because of how comfortable each individual was with me in particular. Prominent themes within this discussion were self improvement, an exodus from church, and polyamorous households. I did notice this group mirroring a lot of my current stances as many of these people I met during a more recent and transitional stage in life. I also participated and engaged consistently in this group because of my level of familiarity with the women and my own genuine interest in the conversation.

Following the first two groups, the COVID 19 Pandemic started and we were put on lockdown until further notice. I then moved all of my focus groups to a virtual platform which allowed that I both audio and video record my participants. The remaining six focus groups were conducted in 2 waves--- one in May of 2020 and the second in October of 2020. In both cases, I recruited heavily for about a week, and in the following week hosted three focus groups back-to-back. I used the gap between these two waves to decompress, prepare for the second wave, and to write analytical memos about my experiences with the women.

The first group in the first wave of this series consisted of four women – three of whom I knew and one who I didn't. Two of those I knew from my undergraduate schooling and the third was a local business owner and service provider that I was familiar with. The fourth organically came across my study through twitter (the one social media platform that I did not post my flyer on myself). This particular group was unique due to having a lot of tension as the women repeatedly found themselves in a debate regarding the fault of Black men as it related to the relationship status and experiences of Black women. This continued throughout the entirety of the focus group.

The second group in the first wave only included two women and was my smallest focus group. I knew one of the participants from my undergrad schooling and did not know the other, but they knew each other. This was also my shortest focus group but I'd attribute this to the number of participants. Prominent themes that arose within this group were desirability and self-improvement, specifically as it relates to the pursuit of education. I also found this group to be a bit more sterile than the others with the women providing relatively short answers throughout the discussion. I did find that they shared more in the end once I opened the floor for them to ask me questions. Once I shared my experiences in answering their questions, I found that this pair immediately felt more comfortable and began freely sharing more of their experiences in an unguided context at the very end of the focus group. It also seemed that they felt that their experience was lacking due to their small group size as they asked to participate in a larger focus group in the future if it was something that I would allow.

The third group in the first wave consisted of three women – two that I knew and one that I did not. One of the two I knew from undergrad and the second was a friend of a friend. None of these participants knew each other at all. However, this discussion was very fruitful. A

prominent theme that arose from this group was self-defining. The women talked a lot about not relying on what society wanted for them but making sense of their desires for themselves.

The first group of the second wave of focus groups in October consisted of five women, three of which I knew – one from grad school, the second from undergrad, and the third from my social circles. The remaining respondents were close friends to the respondent from my social circles. This group stood out to me because of the vast experiences of the women in the group and their very high levels of self-awareness. They constantly analyzed themselves as they responded to the questions and were very socially aware. This may have been due to one of the respondents also being in a sociology graduate program with me, and two others who work in the social and behavioral sciences. Prominent themes from this group were self-improvement and knowing their worth. This group also suffered heavily from technical difficulties as my wifi cut out at least twice during the conversation. Luckily, it continued recording and no conversation was lost. Also, near the end of the discussion, one participant had to leave early and texted the remainder of her answers to me.

The second group of the third wave consisted of four respondents which I knew and who did not know each other. Two of the women I knew through school, one from my social circles and the last being a hair client of mine. This group was one of my most educated as 3 of the four women had attained master's degrees with two of those three currently in school for their doctorates. This group had a large age gap as well which contributed to the drastic array of experiences that were presented here. This group stood out as seemingly having a strong desire to want to be married but similar to the previous group, spoke a lot about self-improvement and knowing their worth, in addition to in-depth discussion on what they would be willing to tolerate in a romantic relationship.

The last group of the third wave consisted of three women, two that I knew and one that I did not – one being a friend of a friend and another I knew through family. The third was referred to me by a colleague. This group also had a large age gap in addition to a wide span of education levels with two having attained high school diplomas and the third a juris doctorate. Still, these women meshed incredibly well despite not knowing each other and were easily able to make light of tougher portions of the conversation. Age differences were taken into account and discussed within the findings. Prominent themes in this group were desirability and familial impact on their perspectives and experiences.

Analysis

Data analysis consisted of a multi-step coding process adopted from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). After transcribing the focus groups verbatim, I imported all transcriptions into ATLAS.ti, a digital software used to assist in qualitative data analysis. I began the coding process using open coding, where I coded all focus groups line by line to identify common themes and patterns and generate as many codes as possible. Within this stage, I used a lot of organizational coding webs centering around the following themes: meaning of marriage, pressure to marry, constructing marriageable man, meeting men, extra conversations, and suggestions. Each of these codes had various sub-categories that I used to organize respondent responses. I used a lot of respondent's own language to form codes that I later condensed as I began to notice pattens. Next, I used focused coding to narrow down the coding scheme once themes became apparent within the initial open coding process. I achieved this both through recoding original codes as well as thematically tailoring the directions of my codes based on my participants responses (Charmaz 2014).

Some of these condensed patterns that I found later became the codes that ultimately captured the themes that shaped my findings. These codes were desirability, self-improvement, being impacted by parents/family, religious language, defining marriage, negotiating ideas of dating down, negotiating criminal background, and constructing the ideal marriageable man. Desirability was a theme that appeared throughout the focus group conversations as the respondents constantly evaluated what they thought men thought of them. Self-improvement often came up following discussion surrounding pressures to marry and dating down where respondents would outline the ways that they were prioritizing themselves in their lives. Being impacted by parents/family came up often as respondents pretty regularly drew significant portions of their understanding from examples from their families. Religious language was coded throughout as I noticed participants leaning on biblical jargon to explain their relationship experiences or requirements. Defining marriage, negotiating ideas of dating down and constructing the ideal marriageable man were all themes that were directly associated with explicit questions asked on those particular topics. Negotiating criminal background, however, was both linked to the question regarding dating down, but it also came up frequently whenever statistics on Black women's dating came up, or when the participants were explaining and attempting to justify their decisions in past relationships.

Consistent with the tenets of constructivist grounded theory, my coding process was informed by sensitizing concepts derived from the existing literature rather than hypotheses. Primary code groups during analysis were family, pressures, dating experiences, interracial relationships, marriageable man, and meaning of marriage. I allowed the themes that arose from my participants to shape my coding and analysis process. Additionally, I accounted for the demographics of my participants to differentiate between the themes that may present themselves

across the different groups. I did this through collecting demographic information through preliminary surveys and connecting the respondents' identifiers to the groups that they participated in.

Reflexivity and Positionality

Writing this project has been a very personal experience to me as I was wholly inspired to embark on this journey due to my own experiences and conversations that I've had with others. As a fellow Black woman who dates men, and one who has dedicated a significant portion of my graduate academic career to studying dating, I have constantly found myself hyper analyzing my own experiences whenever things didn't pan out. I was in the constant search for the reason why or wondering if I was alone in these particular exchanges with men. I immersed myself in literature validating the experiences of Black women, and often found myself falling into rabbit holes of Black feminist theory and particularly the work of Patricia Hill Collins. I read about the concept of "Smart Ugly" from the Combahee River Collective (Taylor 2017) and Collin's (2000) interpretation of the Black Lady trope and instantly resonated with these less than favorable iterations of Black womanhood.

In a preliminary focus group that I held with a group of Black women going over their experiences on dating apps, I remember one of my participants, and very close friends, stating, "Telling a guy I'm about to graduate with my law degree is just as bad as like if I were telling them I had a child… everything changes" – and I knew exactly what she was talking about. I felt that change when I got my master's degree, when I purchased my house, and the closer I got to my doctorate. I was regularly discouraged and frustrated by the poor outcomes of my attempts at relationships, but the researcher in me was incredibly intrigued. Statements like hers played a huge role in helping to validate me along this journey in trying to shed a light on what it actually

was like for Black women as we attempted to pursue partnership. While I had accrued a significant amount of anecdotes from Black female scholars intellectualizing these trends, I wanted to try my hand at creating a platform for these stories and experiences to be told by Black women in an impactful way.

However, my closeness to this project has been somewhat of a double-edged sword for me as I have had to maintain a high sense of awareness of the imprint that I leave on my research. I was concerned by the extent to which my networks would impact my recruitment due to my class background and education level. I have often prioritized telling the stories of the Black middle class due to their misrepresentation in the literature because of their assumed success and societal graduation from poverty and the barriers of systemic racism (Collins 1983). However, in this project, I wanted to include women across the spectrum of class and educational backgrounds to capture the experiences of Black women more holistically. However, I realized that I have very limited access to working class Black women and struggled to gain access within those communities simply because of who I am, and what I had and hadn't been exposed to over the course of my life (Collins 1983, Wilson 1987). Still, I was committed to overcoming this positional shortcoming of mine to have as inclusive a group of Black women as I could achieve.

While I am aware of the overrepresentation of middle-class Black women in my project, I am proud of the representation that I was able to achieve of women without degrees, not simultaneously working to attain a degree. I also am proud of my recruitment of women who weren't just young adults. Collins (2000) often speaks of empowering all Black women as sources of knowledge and I didn't want my project to claim to have a commitment to dismantling the perceived monolithic existence of Blackness but only capture one iteration of the

Black female experience because I didn't go outside of my own networks and comforts to prioritize representation. It is my belief that these inclusions added a certain amount of depth to my research that had I remained in an echo chamber of myself and my peers, I would not have been able to achieve. With my goal number of participants being 30 which led me to stop data collection at my 31st participant, I was able to collect rich data that demonstrated clear signs of saturation and that showcased several trends across the various experiences of Black womanhood (Fusch and Ness 2015).

CHAPTER 4. LOVE AFTER LOCKUP

> In the 1980s, the number of Black female college graduates will far excel the number of comparable males. Yet, most of these women will accept nothing less than a mate of similar educational level. This is a function of their acceptance of Euro-Americans' emphasis on status homogeneity as the basis for marriage.
> -- Staples, 1979, p. 156

Themes of respectability have consistently been the paradigm through which Black women's actions have been viewed. When originally discussed by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the politics of respectability are discussed as a strategy employed by Black women to propel themselves through impression management with the ultimate goal of improving the perspective of the race both socially and politically (Higgenbotham 1994). By more recent scholarship, respectability politics is discussed strategically more as a means of survival and class elevation (Cooper 2018). While this is not significantly off base from its original use, the current context is less nuanced and more absolute than the original work of Higgenbotham (Higgenbotham 1994, Cooper 2018).

Staples (1979) discusses the trends in singleness for Black people and middle class Black women in particular. He, along with other scholars, covers various reasons why we're seeing increasing numbers of Black women intentionally deciding against marriage (Porter and Bronzaft 1995, Staples 1979). Staples (1979) states that many Black women "are willing to settle for a troublesome life of singleness than accept a conflict-ridden marriage" (pg. 152), while later citing men who do not meet their standard of marriageability as a conflict for these women. This represents an overall obligation to respectability when Black women are considering the significance of mate selection. Oftentimes, women with these astringent standards are informed by dominant White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture and an intentional rejection of the negative tropes often applied to Black women, such as the 'Welfare Queen' or the 'Jezebel'

(Collins 2000, Harris Perry 2011, Staples 1979). While Staples (1979) focuses on middle class Black women, this notion is also reiterated within the context of working-class women, who specifically decide against men with criminal records for the sake of upholding the sanctity of marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Much of this was also heavily reinforced by middle class Black culture which also prides itself in the guise of respectability for the sake of acculturation at the very least, and assimilation at large (Bell 1991, Collins 2000, Frazier 1997).

However, my findings show an overall dissent from these trends as my respondents move away from a reliance on respectability within marriage markets to seriously considering men with criminal backgrounds as viable partners. Racial realism (Bell 1991) is a useful framework for understanding this pattern. The concept of racial realism basically embodies the idea that racism is engrained into American society and will never be going anywhere (Bell 1991, Martin 2022). Therefore, when addressing it, rather than taking a respectable approach with the hopes of assimilation, Bell encourages agitation of the system (Bell 1991). Within this context, that agitation could take the form of a rejection of respectability in dating. This doesn't necessarily mean a lowering of standards but taking a more inclusive approach that doesn't discount potential mates on the basis of partnering to reach a systemically impossible societal standard or one that was never meant to include Black women in the first place. Mass incarceration is one of many systems upholding racism operating within American society and unfortunately, significant portions of Black men find themselves intertwined within its grips at some capacity or another (Alexander 2010, Western and Wildeman 2009). Bell (1991: pgs 373-374) states:

> Black people will never gain full equality in this country… We must acknowledge it and move on to adopt policies based on what I call: 'Racial Realism.' This mindset or philosophy requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph.

Consequently, some scholars argue that racial realism has opened the gateway to current theories of Afro-pessimism in arguing the permanence of racism (Ray et. Al. 2017), a concept that remains debated although Bell stands firm in his position (Bell 1993). In taking a fresh look at my data through the lens of Racial Realism, seeing my respondents hold space for the impacts of mass incarceration is arguably an implementation of a 'racial strategy' that both frees Black women from the grips of respectability while potentially offering 'fulfillment' and 'triumph' to their love lives through broadening their prospects by including a significant proportion of Black men who might otherwise be discounted.

Alternatively, Leong (2012) previously offered Black women the solution of dating down in her rebuttal to Banks' (2010) work suggesting that Black women should date interracially to solve their marriage crisis. Leong (2012) urges scholars to destigmatize the conversation of dating down with Black women as dating interracially or dating out would create a snowball effect that would then detrimentally impact dating pools for all women. It is important to note that this is a phenomenon that supersedes race as scholars have also found patterns supporting that highly educated women would rather forego marriage than marry down (Litcher, Anderson, and Haywood 1995). However, still, scholars consistently find that when Black women do marry, as compared to their white counterparts, they are significantly more likely to find themselves in unions with someone both less educated, in a non-professional job, and of a lower overall class status (Banks 2010, Litcher et.al 1995). Assuming that marriage is the goal, ultimately, Leong (2012) argues that in making dating down less of a negative, it reduces the barriers that exist towards lower class individuals.

Mass Incarceration and Black Women's Dating Experiences

There are many ways that lower class can be interpreted beyond income and education. Criminal involvement is often also considered a measure of social class, as it directly impacts ones class and overall access in greater society (Western and Wildeman 2009; Pettit and Lyons 2009). Ultimately, this aligns with the rhetoric of dating down, because many women take this into consideration alongside the aforementioned attributes when determining the marriageability of a man (Wilson 1987). Unfortunately, this is an issue that disproportionately impacts Black men (Western 2002; Western and Wildeman 2002; Wildeman and Wang 2017), which just so happen to be Black women's primary focus and preference when seeking a romantic partner (Banks 2010).

The 13th amendment, mass incarceration, and the prison industrial complex are all phenomena that have plagued the Black community essentially since the end of slavery. The 13th amendment states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (US Constitution). This created a loophole in the perceived "end" of slavery that it could indeed continue to exist if the person has been convicted of a crime (Alexander 2010). This incentivized over policing, arresting, and convicting people, disproportionately Black people, for the sake of continuing the free labor this country had grown so accustomed to (Alexander 2010). This phenomenon was first referred to as convict leasing but later became known as mass incarceration. With its progression from loitering laws (Alexander 2010), drug crimes (Alexander 2010), sentencing discrepancies (Sentencing Project 2015), and more, today a lofty percentage of Black men are projected to and unfortunately face some sort of entanglement with the penal system at some point in their lives (Western 2002; Western and

Wildeman 2002; Wildeman and Wang 2017). Mass incarceration impacts various facets of homelife, and drastically impacts the financial circumstances of men who exit the system with any kind of record (Western and Wildeman 2009; Pettit and Lyons 2009).

Mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex (PIC) come hand in hand with the War on Drugs, especially with the help of politics and the media. The term War on Drugs was first made famous by Richard Nixon in his presidential campaign and signaled a snowball effect in the world of criminal justice (Alexander 2010, US Sentencing Commission 2007). While drug crimes do not equate to the entirety of inmates within prisons, the War on Drugs played a major role in the increases in arrests made during the time that the term was popularized. During Ronald Reagan's presidency, directly following Nixon, he and his wife started the "Just Say No" campaign and passed a slew of laws that contributed to the exponential increase in incarceration (US Sentencing Commission 2007). The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 started the phenomena of mandatory minimums that took sentencing power away from judges (Alexander 2010, Davis and Shaylor 2001, US Sentencing Commission 2007). It created a mandatory minimum sentence for cocaine charges with a "five-year mandatory minimum penalty for first-time trafficking offense involving five grams or more of crack cocaine, or 500 grams or more of powder cocaine" in the federal system (US Sentencing Commission 2007). Ten-year mandatory sentences were given for ten times those amounts if a person was tried federally. The ratio between powder cocaine and crack cocaine notoriously became known as the "100-to-1 drug quantity ratio" and some states adopted these approaches as well (US Sentencing Commission 2007). The Anti-Drug Act of 1988 declared that simple possession would also qualify for these minimum sentences (US Sentencing Commission 2007). These sentencing minimums disproportionately impacted Black men over any other group (Davis and Shaylor 2001).

Harsh crime laws and policies continued with the next presidency with Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill. This particular bill increased federal funding for prisons, encouraged trying youth as adults, called for even more federal mandatory sentencing laws, encouraged more 'tough-on-crime' tactics to be adopted by the states, encouraged longer sentences once convicted, and countless other measures that exacerbated our already existing mass incarceration problem (Ofer 2019). Ultimately, all of these policies have resulted in their being more Black men incarcerated today than there were during slavery in the 1850's as well as more Black men being denied their right to vote through felon disenfranchisement than back in 1870, when laws were passed prohibiting voter disenfranchisement on the basis of race (Alexander 2010). Systemically, the 13th amendment, and all the laws passed since have had grave impacts on the already existing plight of the Black experience which has had a snowball effect in other facets of Black life, including romantic relationships (Alexander 2010; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Lepoo and Western 2005; Massoglia, Remster and King 2011).

Data in this chapter address how mass incarceration emerged in my respondents' narratives about their dating experiences. Mass incarceration and lack of finances were the primary concerns the women in my focus groups brought up when discussing men's marriageability and negotiating their idea of dating down. This discussion occurred after providing respondents with the following brief context of the concept of marriageability: *Several scholars speculate that one of the potential causes of the decline in Black Women's marriage rates is that so many Black men are financially unstable, unemployed, or have criminal records. Some talk about this pattern by using the language of "unmarriageable" or "marriageable" men for Black women.* This context is primarily based off of William Julius Wilson's (1987) Male Marriageable Pool Index and work done by Edin and Kefalas (2005) in their conversations

with low-income women on their decision whether or not to marry. In most cases, respondents were open minded to both the idea of a partner being less financially established than them and them having a criminal background. They did, however, take careful consideration with respect to crime in particular and spent more time breaking down the nuance of criminality as it relates to their willingness to date them or not. when addressing the love lives of Black women, a group known for wanting to date and marry intraracially (Banks 2010; Childs 2005), the prevalence of mass incarceration presents an especially difficult problem when considering the marriageability of a man. Within my project, the vast majority of the women spoke to making specific concessions when it came to a man's criminal record, be it the type of crime he committed, the time since he's committed a crime, the number of crimes committed, and more.

Love After Lockup

Responses gathered within this section primarily arose when respondents were answering the following question, "Have you ever dated or married down?" This comes after having already prompted the women regarding marriageability, as previously outlined, referencing the work of scholars who attempted to define the term. While women were explicitly prompted with criminal backgrounds in terms of marriageability, they never explicitly brought it up when outlining their ideal marriage partner. It only came up when the women were asked about dating down. Many of the responses were a result of prior relationship experiences of the women where they would attempt to defend their prior romantic choices and then would expand into what they would be willing to consider moving forward.

In most cases, one respondent would explicitly bring up a potential partner having a criminal record, detailing how they would navigate that possibility, and the remaining respondents would usually follow suit, giving their own qualifications in relation to criminality,

often agreeing with or affirming what the previous speaker outlined. This suggests that some respondents felt more comfortable to reveal their considerations for criminal behavior once they realized that they were not alone. This also suggests that there were some levels of social desirability at play as respondents attempted to manage their impressions within their respective groups, but as they witnessed each other displaying more and more transparency and vulnerability, the more reserved of them also felt safe enough to reveal information that they may have otherwise kept to themselves. These occurrences were consistent with the assertions of prior feminist scholars that usage of focus groups encouraged safe and supportive spaces for women, and women of color in particular, to comfortably share (Madriz 2000, Roche and Goldberg Wood 2005).

Codes for this section were primarily Negotiating Criminal Background, as well as Negotiating Idea of Dating Down, and Financial Expectations. Additionally, for each of my focus group transcriptions, I did a keyword search on ATLAS.ti for the words "criminal", "crime," "record" and "prison" to make sure that I captured every instance where respondents spoke on criminal backgrounds. Overall, I found that while this did come up in every focus group when discussing dating down, about half of the women focused specifically on the educational and financial aspects of dating down, while the other half made sure to touch on criminal behavior. Of all that discussed criminal behavior, only one stated that it was something that they absolutely would not accept.

"My Soulmate is in Jail"

Respondents within this project were hyperaware of the circumstances the Black community is structurally situated in. While many did not have exact figures, and I did not provide them at any point throughout any of the focus groups, they continuously referenced well

known statistics in regards to mass incarceration during this portion of the focus group. Belle, a 23 year old, widowed woman with a Bachelors degree, alludes to these grim statistics, "[The system] is not meant for us to succeed. Incarceration is pretty likely, like we see too many things like slavery by different names, etc. And it hasn't happened to you or maybe it hasn't happened to [your] dad… But it's happened to a lot of people in my family." As Belle explicitly references, legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2010) references the book by Douglas Blackmon by referring to mass incarceration as *Slavery by Another Name,* considering how it changed slavery from being entirely legal to it only being legal for those deemed criminals. In making this connection, Belle highlights her own awareness of the systemic racism that is targeting Black bodies and calling attention to the lack of control that Black men have within these circumstances (Alexander 2010).

In another example, Nessa, a 26 year old woman with a Masters degree, states, "The '94 Crime Bill that put like, a lot of Black men in prison for a long period of time. Which then made… small amounts of Black men available to date Black women." As is stated in the introduction to this chapter, Clinton's crime bill notoriously had grave impacts on the relationship between Black men and the criminal justice system (Ofer 2019). Nessa both points out a significant statistic, but takes it further by framing the plight of Black women's dating pool as being a direct result of these systemic realities.

After listening to her fellow participants list statistics about mass incarceration, Tess, a 23 year old woman with a Bachelors degree, exclaimed in frustration, "My soulmate is in jail," which we all took to mean literally. Trell, a 23 year old with her associates degree even repeated Tess's sentiments verbatim, considering the reality that as things currently stand, statistically, their soulmates very well may be incarcerated. Tess went on to say, "You know, honestly,

there's, there's so many black men who are incarcerated, that it's a declining chances of you finding someone who you're actually really interested in." There were also several other quotes reiterating Tess's sentiments within several other groups. Delia, a 25 year old woman with a Bachelors degree said, for example, "[F[or starters, I'd like to point out that I think we're at a disadvantage because a lot of black men are locked up. So, there's not a lot of black men out here from the get-go. So, that already makes it harder for us." Respondents repeatedly made a direct connection to the number of men they understood to be locked up and the viable prospects that were left available to them. They argued that the systemic discrimination and the incarceration of so many men made the likelihood of them finding someone they liked who was not incarcerated or didn't have some sort of record unlikely. It was as if they felt that the only logical way for them to alleviate this strain on their dating pool was to open up the consideration to men impacted by mass incarceration.

Belle, the 23 year old widowed woman, spoke on her deceased spouse later within the focus group and spoke about him also having a criminal history. She made a point to declare that his criminal history had absolutely no bearing on the man he was. She instead attributed his criminal background to the larger societal problem of mass incarceration, the prison industrial complex, and mandatory minimum sentencing that disproportionately impacts Black men. She explained her argument and viewpoints like this:

> I don't know, I guess I'm a different perspective and I'm a real liberal bitch. I work with incarcerated youth and I know just how fucked up our justice system is. And so I'm really open to dating someone who's incarcerated. That's really not an issue for me. I'm not looking for to like have a prison lover. In terms of like A person who has experienced incarceration, I am open to seeing you. My conviction to who I would see is not based off society standard for a good person because most of its pretty anti black. like, Yes, college is not set up for most n*ggas just period.

Belle repeatedly spoke on her political stance and how that might also impact her perspective, but constantly backed up her perspective with the various facets of systemic racism within American society. Additionally in referencing college not being "set up" for Black people, she alludes to the many systemic barriers faced by Black people which essentially materializes as a snowball effect that ultimately impacts romantic relationships and intimate marketplaces for Black women. Lastly, Belle asserting that she is uninterested in adhering to societal standards and accused them of being "anti Black" directly ties back to the theories of racial realism juxtaposed against the Politics of Respectability. Belle is calling out these standards of discounting men with criminal histories as something that is regressive to Black progress. When we know that dating standards are not developed with systemic issues that impact Black men and women disproportionately in ways that are largely outside of our control, they can be seen as regressive to Black resilience.

Some women hinted at structural inequities figuring into their decision-making without explicitly referencing mass incarceration or societal statistics. For example, in another group, Tiff, a 27 year old woman with her Master's degree states:

> So I've come across men who have a criminal past. I base the decision of whether I invest based on the way that they have responded to the trajectory that their decisions have made for their life. If they take it as, "I'm just defeated, and I'll take what I can get," then I know to move on. But if it's someone who's like, 'you know what, I made a mistake. But I'm working and I'm trying to find the loopholes where it's like, this isn't something that defines me," than that says something about their character. So, it's not necessarily writing them off for this thing that like, for the obstacle that they're not necessarily responsible for being their obstacles. But it's more so like, "ok well, this is something that I have to deal with. I'm aware that I have to deal with it. What can I do about it? How can I move around it? How can I overcome it?" Like, there's a mindset that I pay attention to. So I don't necessarily write someone off because of something that happened off of pattern.

While Tiff is making clear where she draws the line in her consideration of men with criminal records, as did many other respondents within the following section, she points out at the end of

her statement that she isn't going to not include someone because of a structural pattern. While Tiff doesn't outright list stats or figures in regards to mass incarceration, she does note that criminal history isn't just an issue of the individual but that of a larger patterns that exists beyond the person themselves. Overall, it is clear that Black women are not blind to what is occurring on a sociopolitical level within America and their views about dating reflect that. Both Belle and Tiff acknowledge the bigger picture of what is occurring outside of the interpersonal relationships that they could potentially foster with Black men. This continues to showcase Black women's level of awareness when pursuing Black men and tackling their slighted dating pools in the face of a society that both criticizes them if they do decide to partner or if they don't.

"I mean, you shouldn't be an active criminal"

Beyond directly citing statistics, respondents also frequently had well developed narratives characterizing what crimes would be acceptable for dating and potentially marrying, and which would not. Since for many, it seemed pretty much unavoidable to have Black men with criminal pasts in the dating pool, it was then necessary to weed out the good from the bad within that context. When asked about her willingness to date down, Nessa began her response lightly by stating, "I mean, you shouldn't be an active criminal." Nessa, a 26 year old woman with a Masters degree continues on to say:

> If you had a rough, you know, a rough childhood and you know, you was playin' follow the leader when you were a teenager, and you found yourself caught up, and you've paid your debts to society, and you're on the right track, and you are actively like, uhhh you know, doing what you need to do to make a legal living… umm, I think that then that's something that we can discuss. But for me it's not just because you have a record, but we would need to sit down and talk about what's on that record. Like, is it a sex crime? Is it a drug crime? Like, you know, what is that?

Nessa points out a few different crimes in particular that would negatively catch her attention and ultimately result in her walking away. However, she still left room in the discussion for there to be crimes that wouldn't garner that response. Nessa points out that a conversation would be required to gain transparency and clarity on what the crimes at hand were for her to then make the final decision, but noting that much of this decision is based on the current trajectory of the man's life.

Irene, a 38 year old woman with a Masters degree stated something similar, "As far as the criminal record, they can have a criminal record… I work in the criminal system. I mean, the majority of our Black men that are back there, they are very smart. They just are a product of their environment." This correlates with Belle's sentiments earlier of criminal records having no bearing on the character of a man. Additionally, Irene's jobs close proximity to the criminal justice system, similar to Belle working with incarcerated youth also played a role in their acceptance of dating prospects with criminal records.

In the same vein, other respondents referenced their jobs or lifestyles having an impact on their level of leniency towards criminality. Brightly, a 26 year old woman with a Bachelors degree states:

> I definitely think that depending on what you did in the past and how that's going to affect your future… it's a big deal. Because were you a murderer? Were you, you know, molesting children? Like, what was it? And then… I'm a teacher! So, a lot of my life is under a microscope including who I decide to get married to because it's like, public knowledge. And that unfortunately goes into my ability to teach. So, it's a lot of political stuff I think in there with the criminal part of it. So umm, I definitely am not looking for somebody that has done something bad. But again, I am an understanding person. So if it's something that happened when you were seventeen/eighteen/nineteen you know, because you were following the leader and you did something stupid, then ok, like, depending on what it was we could work through that.

Within this statement, Brightly gets a bit more specific with the types of crime that she would consider unacceptable. While they could also be considered exaggerations, she makes the

specific argument that even though she is understanding, some things would directly impact her life and ability to provide for herself and therefore would be a dealbreaker.

Trell, a 23 year old woman with an Associates degree attributed her decision making regarding one's criminal past to whether or not there were certain stipulations on his freedom that would also inhibit her freedom. For example, she pointed to their being certain convictions that might make it that the man is not able to freely move if she wanted to travel with him or buy a home out of state. This demonstrates another case of it having less to do with the crime, but more to do with how it would impact their lives. For Brightly, there does appear to be some level of respectability playing a role in her processing because of the public nature of her job and how that could impact her work. However, with Trell, it is more of an issue of personal convenience. Nevertheless, both women use the type of lifestyle they intend to upkeep as a measure of the type of crime that they are willing to tolerate in a significant other. With Black women often being the sole earners, or the breadwinners, within their households, their love lives not interfering with their earning potential and lifestyle is arguably a worthwhile consideration as it is directly related to meeting their basic needs (Black Women's Roundtable 2019).

Several other women made quick remarks in regards to weeding out their preferred criminal records from those less savory. Theryis, a 26 year old woman with a Master's degree asserts, "You're talking about a drug charge, I don't really think that count. Unless you talkin' bout like, some like… you moving heroin, that's something like- I don't think that that's something that I can deal with." Amber, another 26 year old woman with a masters degree made a similar assertion, specifically detailing weed charges as being insignificant and something that she could "deal with". Drug charges came up repeatedly across all the focus groups with an overall acceptance of them with varying caveats on the type of drug, like Theryis' caveat for

heroine or Amber's specificity of mentioning weed. Two other participants specifically mentioned weed charges. Even as marijuana has been decriminalized in most states, there are countless Black men who have records solely because of it, or other non-violent drug related crimes- crimes that had they been white, they very likely may have never found themselves with a record in the first place (Alexander 2010). Many of the women recognize this, with the hyper awareness previously referenced, and as a result, the women leave allowances within their dating requirements to accommodate that.

Conclusion

In many ways, previously argued positions maintaining that Black women valued their respectability over partnering was not supported within these conversations, especially when it came to criminal background. Edin and Kefalas (2005) spoke of low-income women foregoing marriage because of how highly the women held the sanctity of marriage. This was represented through their idealization of the institution of marriage, but also their awareness of their living situation and how the introduction and presence of a serious partner could jeopardize that. While this is saying nothing in particular to how these women view marriage, it's important to note that at no real point did the women care to stop and think how their concessions of criminal backgrounds would weigh on them by outside perspectives. Brightly did speak of the public nature of her employment but that is only because of the risk it would have on her life as a whole. On a topic so deeply intertwined with social status and inherently respectability, in a community where respectability politics has often had a stronghold, it was completely absent from the conversation.

Revisiting the perspective of destigmatization of lower class as it relates to dating down (Leong 2012), that is something that was present in the ways that the women approached

criminality. However, it was far more than just leveling the marriage market in terms of class. The women exhibited an extreme level of awareness as it related to structural barriers in the form of mass incarceration and the impact that had on their particular markets. To deduce this to simply a destigmatization of class disregards the depth of the processes employed by my respondents as they broaden their marriage prospects through the inclusion of men with criminal backgrounds.

All in all, the theory of racial realism seems best fit in attempting to understand the direction taken by the women in my study as they take a more inclusive approach to dating. Especially in processing the potential that their literal 'soulmate' could be incarcerated due to the systems in place that disproportionately target Black men resulting in their varied levels of involvement with the criminal justice system, my respondents choose to take a non-conventional but rather pragmatic approach to the issue at hand and begin to negotiate the degree at which they are able to realistically accept those who have fallen to the grips of mass incarceration.

CHAPTER 5. "A CERTAIN KIND OF PARTNERSHIP"

When I think of marriage, the first true thing that comes to mind is the example of my parents. My parents have been married just over a year longer than I've been alive and have been the most beautiful example of marriage that I have ever seen. They got married older—when my mother was 35 and my father was 41. My mother always talked about when she was considering what she wanted in a husband, she wrote out a list of 22 things, expecting for a man to hopefully fulfill about half of them. My father met a whopping 18 of her qualifications and spending her life with him was a no brainer for her. I can honestly say, in my experience, I have never known two other people who love each other as much as my parents do. Their example of marriage shaped a lot of what I understood of marriage, beginning with it being a union centered around God and love. While there were plenty of ups and downs in their marriage, so much of my parent's story sounds like something out of a rom-com fairytale. Further, to me, my mother has always represented the pinnacle of respectability politics, and she has always been adamant in her desire to make sure that she always does things "right" and "by the book," even if it takes her a little longer. While I have always respected and admired her for her persistence in doing so, and have loved every bit of the life she facilitated for me, I never felt as strong of a desire to adhere to the same set of standards that she held herself to.

In discussing families, scholar Patricia Hill Collins' analysis can help explain the gap between my mother's experiences and sensibilities and my own. My mother's (and parent's) story is uncommon (Collins 2000). Broadly speaking, the way that marriage is defined in society (which aligns with her experience) is a model unfit for Black women and Black households (Collins 2000). Stories like my parents', however, are held up in mainstream rhetoric as the ideal. As Collins puts it when speaking of family being seen as a married couple with biological

children, “Idealizing the traditional family as a private haven from a public world, family is seen as being held together through primary emotional bonds of love and caring” (Collins 2000, pg. 47). In less formal accounts, too, we can see this idealization. For example, one widely ready marriage blog defines marriage as a liaison that “has come a long way with time to be recognized as a union of people in love who promise to spend a lifetime together” (Smith 2022). Popular wedding magazine, *Brides*, offers their take on marriage as well, seeing it as a union with a legal, emotional, and economic bond that legitimizes sex and has “a key role in the preservation of morals and civilization” (Stritof 2021). Collins powerfully notes, however, that “the definitions advanced by elite groups in the United States uniformly work to the detriment of African-American women” (pg. 47). This pattern is arguably prevalent in ideologies that frame marriage as a key in upholding societal morals when we know that Black women are the least likely across all groups to marry.

Collins and various Black feminist theorists also often emphasize the importance of Black women being able to define things for themselves rather than restricting themselves to the societal definitions or limitations of what they are told their experiences should be (Collins 2000; Lorde 1980; Walker 1983). In knowing that many definitions of marriage were never made to include Black women, or purposefully excluded Black women, constructing their own shared understanding only makes sense. Collins states that “[i]n this process Black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (Collins 2000, pg. 114). Society has built a construction of marriage that does not encompass the Black experience, yet people continue to judge Black people, and Black women especially, for their disengagement in the practice (Banks 2010; Collins 2000; Moynihan 1965). Therefore, it only makes sense that Black

women, and particularly single Black women as they bare the brunt of these criticisms, are allowed the opportunity to shape their own understanding of the concept or marriage and their alignment, or lack thereof, with it.

A Certain Kind Of Partnership

Data in this chapter focus on how participants understand and define the concept of marriage. All responses were collected from the segment of the focus group where I stated that we would be talking about marriage and asked the following three questions: 1) To what extent do you want to get married? 2) What does marriage mean to you? and 3) Have you ever felt pressure to get married? The majority of responses were collected from their answers to the first two questions. In revealing the sources of their pressures to marry, however, some respondents went into more depth about the source of their understandings of marriage and relationships.

I did not provide any prior context to the word or concept of marriage. Instead, I allowed participants to shape their meanings in whatever way best suited them. I did sometimes find that whoever answered first did somewhat shape how the following respondents approached the question. For example, if the first person to answer gave a listing of characteristics, many times the remaining respondents would follow suit, listing characteristics of their own. However, if the first respondent told some sort of anecdote that shaped their understanding of the meaning of marriage, I found that diversified the structure of the remaining respondents' answers. As a result, rather than simply listing out the qualities of marriage, they, too, might immediately associate marriage to examples in their lives or they would begin explaining their ideal marriage. Respondents would also often try to expand upon their initial answers after gaining more context from their fellow respondents, sort of building and creating a shared collective view of marriage within each group.

Within focus group discussions, I recurringly found my respondents centering their explanations regarding how they understood marriage as either something that is to be regarded more practically or more emotionally, on balance. The primary overarching codes for data in this section are commitment, constructing ideal marriage, equally yolked/ equal partner, meaning of marriage, and negotiating ideas of marriage. “Meaning of marriage” broke downs into 12 subgroupings which consisted of the dual trends of practicality or emotionality: communication, complimentary, financial support, friendship, God and vows, harmony, individuality, love, partnership, spending time, struggle, and unique personal meaning. Of the subgroups, partnership far outnumbered all of the other codes, being coded more than three times more frequently than the next most popular codes (a tie between love, God and vows, and friendship). After even further evaluating the data from these code groups, my findings center around themes of women taking a pragmatic, non-fantastical approach to marriage with an emphasis on foundation building juxtaposed against those who centered their understanding around the idea of love and being chosen. I also cross analyze the examples they provide of marriage, their definition of marriage, and their desire to be married to see if there is any sort of correlations or trends between the three.

“I'm looking just for marriage in a practical kind of way”

More than anything, I found that my respondents took a very practical and pragmatic approach to marriage. They would often begin their definitions of marriage by heavily criticizing what they believed to be the social definitions of marriage. For example, Belle, the 22 year old widow, states, “I'm not looking for love in marriage. And I know that that's like a very uncommon position but like, I am... amongst a lot of women I find like they're like, ‘I'm trying to find my soulmate’.” Belle approaches her statement on marriage with the assumption that most

women are pursuing marriage for the purposes of emotional fulfillment, or “find(ing) (a) soulmate.” While this is not widely supported in scholarship, these perspectives have been shared through less formal and more culturally accessible forms of media such as blogs, magazines, movies, and television (Makenzie and Dales 2017, Smith 2022, Stritof 2021, Wilding 2003).

Belle, potentially having had more exposure to the latter, attacks that notion that this should be what marriage is about, and exclaims that this is explicitly not what she is looking for. Belle continues:

> I'm interested in having a certain kind of partnership. Like I'm very career driven. And so I would like to find someone who can help me do that. And not in a way that's parasitic like I want to be like very, like mutually beneficial and how we do the thing. What I like stability, and I would look for a partner who is able to be fulfill that role, but also be my friend. Like I'd love for my partner- my partner definitely has to be a person that like, I have a great time with and we can- we enjoy each other's company, but I'm looking just for marriage in a practical kind of way.

Following attaching popular culture’s narratives regarding love and marriage, she then introduces a framework of marriage with which she is more comfortable. This interpretation does not include love but rather takes a more financially stable and career based approach to the union. Belle does make sure to note that she does not intend to be parasitic, arguably in an effort to not have her explanation perceived as ‘golddigging’, a derogatorily stigmatized and racialized trope of Black women who seek out men for their own financial advancement (Harris-Perry 2011, Stephens and Phillips 2003). Instead, she does attempt to highlight the positives of this structure by saying that this is someone whose company that she would still enjoy.

Shortly after Belle’s assertion, Winnie, a 25 year old woman finishing up her bachelor’s degree, gives a very similar sentiment with saying, “I'm saying I'm not looking for anything traditional either like, you know, everybody be like, Oh, yeah, we're married under God and da

da da da da and like all that but come on. Are you serious? Like that's it?" Winnie rejects pursuing what she terms the "traditional" relationship, and immediately discounts religion as a viable basis of marriage as well. This directly goes against ideas widely held in the Black community as far as the Black church being a major pillar of family and stable unions (Johnson and Loscocco 2015, Moultrie 2018, Painia 2018). In continuing to detail her understanding of marriage, Winnie also asks the following set of hypothetical questions: "[A]re you are you career driven? Do you have goals? Are you trying? Is there something in life that you are trying to go after or trying to get? Can we help each other grow if we haven't fucking grown up yet?... Can we be friends?" In line with Belle's comments, Winnies questions show that she prefers a union that prioritizes career advancement and is mutually beneficial. Similarly, she also buffers her practical desires with the concept of their being 'friendship' as well.

Both Winnie and Belle regard marriage as a practical means to an end. They both reference their careers and how in marriage, they are seeking someone who would help them achieve further success in that regard. However, in the same breath, they make sure to add some sort of humility by suggesting that everything within these unions is not entirely business, as there is a negative trope that exists within the Black communities that demonizes women that only pursue men for the sole purpose of financial advancement and stability (Harris-Perry 2011, Stephens and Phillips 2003). In addition to Belle specifically rejecting the idea of love as a means for marriage, they both also denounce the spiritual or religious aspects that others may associate with marriage, looking at those things as insignificant to what they understand to be the true purpose to engaging in that particular type of union.

Trell, in the same conversation, adds her grandmother's perspective with, "[M]y grandma is like, the number one person to be like, marriage is not about love, like fuck that shit. You need

to make sure that this person can take care of your house." Trell goes on to express full agreement with her grandmother, referencing how she thinks people have gotten away from the true meaning of marriage. In alignment with Belle, Trell disregards the social and popular culture's interpretation of love being supreme or a significant factor in determining marriage (Makenzie and Dales 2017), but instead offers things that should really matter, like the household's financial stability. When asked if she wants to get married again, Belle and Trell's response was that it's not a priority for them while Winnie did express that it is something that she desired but only after she continued to work on herself – another theme that continuously arose within the focus groups. Both Winnie and Belle also often referenced their mothers throughout the conversations, both of whom were unmarried and not pressuring either of their respective daughters into marriage, but rather to continue in pursing their desires and improving themselves.

Several women also furthered the notion regarding the practicality of marriage, specifically defining it as a system which requires building a foundation. When asked about marriage, Irene, the 38 year old woman with her Master's degree, begins with critiquing unions that she's seen in saying:

> [T]hey're not building a foundation. They're not starting where they should. So that causes a lot of the divorces. Because when they get to be together after so many years they realize that they don't connect. The women has been doin-maybe carrying the relationship, and now she's tired of doing that. And the man, it can be the opposite way as well, he's been carrying the relationship and now he's tired of doing it. So now they disconnect, they split up, so now moving forward, he doesn't know, or she doesn't know how to build a foundation. Some people get it, but some don't. How to build a foundation if you get with another person, you know, to where did you mess up at before and where are you gonna go? What are you gonna do different the next time around? So now we all just out here trying to figure it out. I'ma do me, I'ma do, you know, you do you, but we still not the oneness coming together.

Further into her definition, Irene goes on to say, "You can only go up if you're working together. So I think definitely having someone that you can create- that you build a friendship with. So y'all can go through those different seasons together. And y'all can know how y'all give relief to one another." Building is primary characteristic of marriage from Irene's standpoint. She references this in conjunction to oneness, similar to the religious idea of 'two becoming one' in marriage. However, even in using religious jargon in explaining marriage, this perspective challenges some of the previous scholarship highlighting the strength in having a foundation in marriage from a biblical standpoint, as it usually suggests that in order for this foundation to be viable, the woman's role in a relationship is to take a backseat (Collins and Perry 2015, Johnson and Loscocco 2015). Instead Irene argues for more equal and active engagement between both the man and the woman to create this foundation. As she sees it, if you are not building, by her more equitable standard, you will divorce, but if you are, she describes the process as something that can be beautiful in a union.

In additional conversation, the notion of building came up again but from a different perspective. Courtney, a 29 year old single woman with her Master's degree states:

> [T]here's definitely like this kind of like, 'build a n***a' type of like, thing that happens when you meet a guy and he's not doing that well, but you are doing well so you just kind of stay and help him get to the type of situation that he wants to be in. So you're building this n***a up. And I have a friend who is married and has been married for a long time. And she met a guy who was unemployed, and now he's in the army. And you know, she built that n***a up. It was- she did what she had to do. But I feel like there's always this space between- Black women have to pick between finding a n***a that they're gonna build up, or having a guy who does have it all together. And allowing him to like, treat her like shit.

Courtney, unlike Irene, doesn't take as positive a disposition or high regard towards building in marriage, but rather sees it as some sort of necessity that Black women have to take on to avoid being treated poorly. To Courtney, as she continues, Black women can either build

and get a husband, or not and be cheated on, which she explicitly stated in the focus group. This narrative of building coincides with literature suggesting that Black women diminish themselves for the sake of keeping and maintaining a relationship (Collins 2000, Johnson and Loscocco 2015). Courtney derogatorily sees building as a necessity 'or else' women will have to tolerate even worse marital circumstances. Courtney also speaks on her parents relationship, describing them as "dysfunctional" but "teammates" and essentially partners who have built together, furthering her understanding of the necessity of building for Black women. When asked if they wanted to get married, Amber adamantly expressed wanting to do so while Courtney said that she did but it was something that she struggled with after witnessing her parents dysfunction.

Taking things a bit further in terms of pragmatism, several women also defined marriage in terms of it explicitly being a "fight" or a struggle. Shanade, a 26 year old single woman with a Bachelors degree explained, "marriage is like putting on combat boots and fighting. It's not all glitz and glam and once the wedding gifts are gone, it's literally just you and that person." Even as Shanade repeatedly describes herself as an incredibly religious person and the youth leader in her church, when it came to her definition and understanding of marriage, the first thing that she referenced was that it would be some sort of battle. She then follows this up by asking that God help to prepare her to be a wife, seemingly asking that she be prepared by Him to enter this battlefield.

Even with this less than glamorous interpretation of marriage, Shanade is very clear in her strong desire to be married and references how with her mom being unmarried, that she specifically wants to pursue everything that her mother never had. Several other respondents had similar narratives of marriage, while not using as extreme of language, but still referencing it as "hard work" or something that forced you to confront the most difficult pieces of yourself.

Amber, a 26 year old woman with her Master's degree also defined marriage in terms of struggle. She states, "[F]or me, definitely like, I'm in the ring fighting forever, and people are like, 'you know what this is too hard. I can't do this.' So I need somebody who is like, "ok, you know what, plan A-Z aren't working, let's try AA. Let's try B-B." You know what I mean? Like, we're gonna keep trying 'til we can't try anymore. That's really important for me." Similar to Shanade, Amber views marriage as some sort of extended difficulty between herself and her spouse. They describe it as something that has to be endured, rather than enjoyed, with the only success being staying in it. Within prior scholarship speaking to elders on what contributed to the longevity of their marriages, while they did specifically reference the significance of love, they spoke in depth of the necessity of hard work and the continued commitment to each other in order to get through difficult times (Stanford and Stearns 2019), similar to the interpretations of marriage outlined by Amber and Shanade. However, unlike Shanade, when explicitly asked if she wanted to get married, Amber explained that while she desired a "life partner", she wasn't exactly interested in marriage.

In essentially every case of women who decided to take a more logical and pragmatic approach to marriage, they either explicitly denounced the necessity of love, or never even brought it up. They may have made other positive remarks, such as Irene remarking on building a foundation having the potential to be beautiful, but in most of these situations, respondents were significantly more focused on practicality in marriage rather than anything that might be interpreted as fantastical in any way. This practical interpretation is supported both within scholastic and legal interpretations of marriage (Bell 1997), but not necessarily as it relates to the media narratives and social interpretations that respondents are more likely to be exposed to on a

regular basis (Wilding 2003). Some women even took it as far to regard marriage as an outright fight and ordeal, rather than a more positive circumstance.

In most cases, respondents were heavily influenced by their families, expressing that their perspective was a direct result of what they witnessed, regardless of if it led them to follow in their parent's marital footsteps or not. Respondents constant reference of building, specifically as it related back to fiscal or career motivations, ties back into Collins (2000) work regarding definitions of marriage and the public and private sphere narrative of traditional marital households not aligning with the reality of your average Black family. Breadwinner/homemaker family model frameworks have never been a regularity for Black households as Black women have always worked and been actively engaged in the public sphere of society (Collins 2001). This is clear as the majority of the women continued to relate their definitions of marriage back to some sort of base layer of financial practicality due to that being an unspoken, but shared understanding of all their experiences.

"Somebody chose me! So the least I can do is choose them back"

While the majority of the women did emphasize a logistical definition of marriage, there still remained an undercurrent of women that held on to a more romanticized view of the marital union. In these more idealized definitions, love was something that the women viewed as a significant part of the understanding of marriage, which they still somehow either distanced themselves from the possibility of attaining in somewhat of an attempt to remain grounded in their interpretations. For example, Tya, a 26 year old woman with her bachelors degree states:

> I can describe it in a few words like unity, building your legacy, just finding someone that you can relate to. I feel like marriage is like finding your male best friend, if that's your preference. You have a female best friend and you have your male best friend. But basically, that's it. I don't know, just something that you vow to God, vow to commit to this person and love the person or whatever. That's it.

Tya includes both the elements of practicality and romance, but then adds “or whatever” seemingly knocking down the latter portion of her definition including the bit on God and love. However, she still took the time to mention both God and love, when most of the women did not, leading one to believe that it does hold some level of significance for her.

In another example, Tilly, a 22 year old woman with her Bachelor’s degree, iterates:

> If I do, I do, if I don't, I don't, because I feel like it would have to take, for me to really be in love with that person and vice versa, rather than, like you said, them telling you to marry for like he'll take care of you, he has money, that will be a solid person. Even in the media, watching television shows, they always got the black woman that say, oh well, I married him because he was going to take care of us or because he had money. Then they end up saying they regret doing so because they didn't really love the guy and stuff.

In this scenario, Tilly does see love as a necessity within her understanding of marriage, and as something that can make or break the union. She also sees financial stability and the ‘provider’ archetype as unimportant as compared to love. However, she sees her own chances at attaining this type of situation as grim and does not rank it as a priority in her life. Tya on the other hand was excited for the possibility of getting married. Neither women explicitly spoke of the marital statuses of their parents. Delia, a 25 year old woman with a Bachelor’s degree adds to this theme in stating, “I do want to get married. And no, I don't want it to be a business deal, I want to get married for love, for real. And I hope that one day, God lets it happen, but if He doesn't I'll be okay with that too.” Again, both God and love present themselves along with the doubt in finding a prospect for marriage. Delia, like Tilly does not consider marriage to be a priority for her and says that she will be fine whether it happens or not.

Several respondents also spoke to this notion of marriage meaning that they had been “chosen” and as marriage being some sort of absolute prize. In some of these cases, the women were battling with renegotiating what it meant to be chosen from a standpoint that would be more empowering to them. For example, Crystionna, a 25 year old woman with her JD states:

> Umm, I used to associate marriage with being chosen. Umm, 'cause being chosen was a lot of what my dating life looked like. Umm, before I- like I'm in a relationship now and this is the first relationship where I feel like I allowed myself to have a say in the partner that I chose too. Umm, my past relationships were like, "somebody chose me! So the least I can do is choose them back!" Or, "they're interested in me, I can't believe they're interested. So they least I can do is show effort too." Umm, and I can say the difference in the two is like I'm able to speak up for myself more. I'm able to communicate better. So like, marriage for me- it reflects all of that. And being as much of the chooser as I am chosen.

In this full circle depiction, Cristionna talks about how she used to associate marriage with the joy of simply being chosen, which resonates with prior literature also recognizing this trend in women desiring that a man 'chooses' them (Lamont 2013). However, as she reclaims her power throughout her processing of her definition, she arrives at the same point, that being chosen is still a necessity but that her having also actively participated in the process of choosing her partner as well. As long as both have engaged, all is well for her. Similarly, Klarissa, another 25 year old woman but with her Bachelor's degree comments, "I want to share my life with someone who chooses me constantly. And I choose them constantly as well. And that, that is something worth saying yes to." This essentially mirrors the final perspective of Cristionna of marriage representing a mutual choosing.

When being asked about her pressures to marry, Gwen, a 40 year old woman with her high school diploma stated:

> My pressure for marriage comes from society… [it's] about umm feeling chosen. So like, I'm a big music fan, so like all the songs He Loves Me, and Put a Ring on It and all the stuff like that. Like that's where the pressure for me to get married comes from. But umm, like my family there aren't many marriages in our family. So, I never got personal pressure, but I feel societal pressure at times. 'Cause that's how you win as a Black woman. That's what makes you unique and valuable.

Although Gwen is speaking in terms of pressures, she is building upon this notion of being chosen, and even making the bigger claim that this being chosen is how you 'win' and what contributes to your societal value (Lamont 2013). When asked whether or not they want to get

married, Cristionna and Klarissa both state that they do, with Cristionna adding that her having never seen a successful marriage is one of her motivations to have one for herself. Gwen on the other hand is no longer interested in marriage at all and mainly attributes that to her age.

Conclusion

While some women did consider marriage to be more romantic, referencing ideas of love, religion, and the feeling of being chosen, they still did their best to maintain some sense of grounding in their notions of these concepts. Regardless of their definitions of marriage seemingly being in more alignment with idealized western and popular concepts of marriage, they were still their own personal definitions and informed by their experiences and motivated by the examples within their lives. Some of the women also did maintain a portion of practicality, like Tya's iteration of marriage being something that includes "building a foundation". While the prioritization of marriage fluctuated in both the women who took a logistical approach as compared to a romantical one, one woman, Gwen, did actually say that she had no desire to be married, after stating that being chosen for marriage was a staple measure for Black women's societal value. While she was the oldest of my respondents and contributed this answer to her age, Irene, only 2 years younger than her, expressed being very interested in marriage and stated that it didn't have a set timeline.

All in all, women from both subsets were able to take the concept of marriage within a safe space and dissect it both individually and collectively (Collins 2001). Many of the ideas brough up by the women who took a practical approach strongly challenged religious interpretations of marriage and also came incredibly close to the gold digger trope cast towards Black women, that they simultaneously were actively attempting to negate by citing the presence of friendship or stating that these relationships would be mutually beneficial. Although there was

no set agreement between the women who either referenced pragmatism or romanticism being the predominant narrative, being able to be in charge of their own defining processes in an uninterrupted fashion was valuable and necessary within itself (Collins 2000; Lorde 1980; Walker 1983).

CHAPTER 6. "I WANNA GET MARRIED… I JUST WANNA FINISH THIS DEGREE FIRST."

> No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were "smart," had also been considered "ugly," i.e., "smart-ugly." "Smart-ugly" crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives.
>
> -- Combahee River Collective Statement

Every time I turn around, I'm celebrating one of my friends for something. They won an award, earned a degree, got approved for a grant, started a business, bought some property, started a non-profit, got accepted into a new program, and more. Sometimes, I think to myself, "Where do we find the time?" I also think of times when I was talking to my mother about her friends, she'll often give some random tid-bit about them, and it is usually always something about having some additional degree or accomplishment that I never knew about. They own multiple homes and properties, have several degrees, multiple passive streams of income- you name it. I used to wonder how on earth did they do these things, and then I would redirect my attention directly back to myself and my friends and see us following in their same footsteps.

Black women have long been focused on self-improvement, especially in the context of educational attainment (Collins 2000). *Knowledge is power* and especially coming from a history where we were once not allowed to read or write, prioritizing formal education to the utmost has become a norm for us (Collins 2000, Taylor 2017). This has been demonstrated so much so that even when compared to our own male peers, we far outnumber in attendance and out earn them at all degree levels (NCES 2020). While the wage gap may still not be on our side, Black women on average are earning degrees at a ratio of 2:1 of Black men, which is the largest gender gap in degree attainment across all races (Black Women's Round Table 2019). Collins (2000, pg 210)

states, “Education has long served as a powerful symbol for the important connections among self, change, and empowerment in African-American communities.” Black women have been on the forefront of change within their communities and attaining their education has been one of the many ways that they have been able to maintain that stronghold.

However, this pursuit of education has come at a cost. Several scholars and theorists often discuss how Black women struggle in terms of being both socially and romantically as a result of their academic pursuits (Collins 2000, Taylor 2017). In the Combahee River Collective Statement, they brought the concept of “smart-ugly” to light (Taylor 2017). This term was meant to draw attention to how Black men in particular condemned Black women who prioritized their education (Taylor 2017). Even outside the Black community, there are many tropes that Black women have had to somehow fight, address, or challenge in their everyday lives. Similar to “smart-ugly,” there exists another trope that is equally problematic, yet seems to fly underneath the radar due to being perceived as “benign”: the archetype of the “Black Lady” (Collins 2000, Taylor 2017). In detailing the Black Lady, Collins (2000, pgs 80-81) states:

> These are the women who stayed in school, worked hard, and have achieved much… Because they so routinely compete with men and are successful at it, they become less feminine. Highly educated Black ladies are deemed to be too assertive—that’s why they cannot get men to marry them.

The trope of the Black Lady has managed to combine the mammy, a desexualized hardworking servant, and the matriarch, an emasculating and domineering mother, into a respectable, success obsessed professional woman while simultaneously diverting attention from Black women’s achievements and activism for their communities (Collins 2000). Seemingly every facet of Black womanhood, regardless of how positive or negative it may be, has been reduced to a trope regardless of the actual influence that these archetypes hold within the Black community.

Even still, Black women haven't seemed to stray from the course of academic achievement and overall self-improvement. More recently, with the hyper exposure we now have to social media constantly reinforcing aesthetic culture and beauty norms, the majority of which appropriate Black features but do not include Black women (Hobson 2018), we are beginning to see counter narratives emerge promoting radical self-love, and other activist tenants heavily promoted throughout Black feminist theory (Hester and Squires 2018, hooks 2001). Black women overall are seeing the value in putting themselves first in the face of adversity (Mason 2022), even if it may be at the cost of their romantic pursuits (Collins 2000, Taylor 2017).

"I wanna get married… I just wanna finish this degree first."

In this chapter, I explore how women in my study talked about prioritizing their romantic relationships in relation to their self and the goals they've set for themselves. Responses were collected from throughout the focus groups and did not surface in response to any one particular question. Many of the responses came from the portions of the interview regarding whether or not the women felt pressured to marry, the question regarding dating down, and a few from the question asking whether or not they desired to get married at all. Due to the sporadic and yet frequent nature of how this theme presented itself, it represents how prevalent this notion of self-improvement was for the women across my study.

In discussion, my respondents began by answering whatever the question was at hand, but in elaborating, their conversation often merged into something regarding how they were putting themselves first. In my analysis, I initially coded these instances for self-improvement, negotiating their own success, and accepting superiority. In looking more specifically at the way that my respondents spoke of how they were prioritizing themselves, I found that their discussion centered around either healing, focusing on school, focusing on career, focusing on self, or

specifically pursuing school over marriage. Respondents also provided explanations and justifications for these decisions that included familial encouragement, their response to a prior relationship experience, and more.

In further analysis, all statements that were initially collected as a part of this overall theme of self-improvement were then transferred to a spreadsheet and thematically color coded. Thematic codes were self-love, negotiating success and growth in comparison to men, pursuit of education, finances and stability, self-motivation, "relationships are difficult/not my priority, so I'd rather do X", and mental health. Much of the statements made by my respondents were not mutually exclusive as they often intertwined themes of self-love and negotiating their success in comparison to men with a combination of other varying themes. This demonstrated the layered nature of self-improvement as my respondents connected their internalized singleness with the betterment of themselves. That considered, negotiating success and growth in comparison to men was the most frequently coded theme, as they repeatedly spoke of their pursuits in conjunction with the lack that they experienced in their relationship experiences.

"I don't have a priority to be married"

When considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it's difficult to address needs stated higher in the chart when your basic and fundamental needs aren't met (McLeod 2007). This theme surfaced for many respondents, who were more focused on addressing their primary needs in terms of securing consistent employment rather than concerning themselves with love. For example, when responding to how she felt about the statistics of Black women not getting married, Tya, a 26 year old woman, stated:

> Okay, so being a 26-year-old, young, African-American female, I don't have any children and I'm not currently in a relationship. I'm single. I feel like it's true, because first of all, I'm more focused on my career, establishing... I'm in school for my master's degree. Just for me, I'm more focused on establishing my financial stability before I can focus on

> having a relationship and having a family, building a family and all that. So I feel like it's true. I don't think it's a negative statistic. I think it's true for me, at least.

Tya demonstrated how her love life simply wasn't something she could consider until she felt more overall comfortable in life, and her basic needs were met (McLeod 2007). She also pointed to the extra step of personally destigmatizing the idea of singlehood and reframing the conversation by explicitly stating that saying Black women not getting married was not "a negative statistic". In alignment with the work of Collins (2000), Tya both engaged in self defining this circumstance for herself as in addition to recentering the conversation to what she recognized as actually important, which was that establishing herself came before building a family.

Later in the same conversation, Tilly, a 22 year old woman, reiterated similar sentiments when speaking to the statistics of Black women's marriage rates. Tilly comments:

> I'm 22 and I kind of feel the same way. I feel like a relationship would be nice right now, but I guess because of how everything has been going on when it comes down to relationships it's like, okay, let's get ourselves together as women first and then we could really worry about a relationship, because the stigma about a woman depending on a man. So I would rather do it myself first, get established and then have a relationship. I feel like if I have one, then it would just be based on is that person willing to match my drive when it comes down to career aspirations?

Tilly acknowledges the dominant culture's narrative of the breadwinner/homemaker household model and immediately shoots down the practicality of it for herself, while offering the alternative of what she sees to be more practical: financially establishing herself before seeking a mate. Consistent with Tilly's perspective, literature also shows there being an overall a decline in support for this particular marriage model (Cunningham 2008). Alternatively, in characterizing women's financial dependence as a stigma, it is also arguable that she is attempting to distance herself from the gold digger trope of Black womanhood while doing the necessary work to establish herself so that she doesn't fall into that archetype (Harris-Perry 2011, Stephens and

Phillips 2003). While both Tya and Tilly do aspire to one day see themselves partnered, and specifically with a Black man, they intend on doing so on their terms, which is once they are in a stable financial position. One might also draw the connection that this is a reality that Black women may more so have to consider since they are more likely to be the breadwinners within their households (Black Women's Roundtable 2019, Collins 2000), but this is neither something that neither woman mentioned, although Tilly did allude to her inability to rely on a man to provide for her.

For many of the women, there also seemed to be a lot of emotion wrapped up in their deprioritizing relationship pursuit. Some women expressed it as experiencing a change in their perspective(s) over time or having failed relationship experiences that resulted in them deciding to focus on their own growth instead. For example, Theryis, a 26 year old woman with her Master's degree, stated:

> I wanna get married. It's definitely there. I want to finish this degree first. Umm, and I think it's just not as big of a priority. Umm, once I reached that age or threshold or once I crossed that line or whatever in my original timeline and realized it wasn't coming, I was like, 'ok. So we're just gonna go ahead and set that to the side real quick on the back burner'… it does make me sad though, you know… Because I really did expect that to be something as easy as getting a degree. Everything else seemed so easy, you know. Umm, especially when you're used to just like things coming so easily but relationships generally aren't like that for me. So umm, it's still there. I wanna get married, it's just not on the forefront of my mind.

In a previous group, Tya states, "I feel like the dudes I meet, they really be on some BS. Me being the type of person I am, I don't like BS, so I'm not going to take you seriously. So if I'm not taking you seriously, it means no serious relationship. I focus on my education… My time will come."

Both Tya and Theryis haven't had the best relationship experiences and see pursuing their education as a more fruitful alternative, but that doesn't come without an emotional

response. Theryis, a woman who has already successfully attained two degrees, and is now in the middle of a doctoral program mentions her failed timeline and how she is disappointed in her relationship pursuits not being as successful as her educational pursuits. She copes by continuing to do something that she knows that she has had had success at while avoiding potential future failure. Tya seemingly is doing the same by commenting that rather than tolerate BS, she'll just focus on her education, as she currently pursues her Master's degree.

In another example, Christionna, a 25 year old woman with her JD stated the following:

> I also think a part of it is, umm, in my mind dating someone who is like me or in my profession - and this goes to date with me going to law school with Black men, umm, or the Black men that I saw in my profession and that I have met so far, or who make more money than me - it normally comes at a higher price from the woman. I would have to surrender so much of myself in order to be desirable to that man. Umm, I would have to, uhh, I'm very assertive and I'm very domineering… Men of that stature typically don't like that because I challenge everything. Umm, so I would if that was- if that fit into my nature, but based on experience like, that's just not- it hasn't- I haven't been desirable to them.

Christionna, having recently completed her professional degree, details her dating experiences with men at her educational level as her having to diminish herself in order to be desirable to them. This directly coincides with the work of Johnson and Loscocco (2015) where they spoke of Black women having been counseled to uplift Black men, even if that resulted in putting themselves down. This notion is also reinforced in advice books specifically marketed to Black women in an effort to helping them find a man (Harvey 2009). Christionna's comments having strongly resonated with me in the focus group, I even echoed support from having had similar experiences with highly educated men. In a brief discourse, we both expressed our frustrations due to this kind of man being who we wanted "on paper", and them seeming to also want us "on paper", but it never truly working out without us having to substantially subdue our characters for the sake of their egos. This falls in line with the professional women Collins (2000)

discusses, where they "report increasing difficulty in finding middle-class Black men interested in marrying them " (pg.66). Oftentimes, in these cases of being faced with these difficulties, whether or not it be by choice, many of these women end up alone (Collins 2000). Tya and Theryis hold on to hope at the end of their statements, but they also continually acknowledge throughout their respective groups that prospects are grim.

"Where are you in your journey towards being your best self?"

Even though there are women who do choose to fall into more submissive and biblical depictions of womanhood as it relates to their relationship pursuits, such as one of my participants Shanade, referenced in the prior chapter, asking that God prepare her to be a wife, more of my respondents wanted to make sure that their romantic prospects were taking their personal growth as seriously as they were. The majority of the women I spoke to in one way or another expressed their commitment to constant self-improvement and goal setting, and would find themselves comparing their accomplishments to their potential mates as a measure of compatibility. Some women made these comparisons explicitly on the basis of age.

For example, Belle, a 22 year old woman with a bachelors degree states:

> Because I found a lot of success in my life very early, that I am very disinterested in people who are in my age range, especially if it's a man that I'm dating, you have to be, you've got to have at least a decade on me… But like, Where are you in your journey towards being your best self and the thing that you want to be the, like bomb in like, when I'm talking to them, like I just find that like, you don't know what the thing is that you want to do, let alone like, be able to know how to do it like, and so I've been like really frustrated with, like, dating or trying to date guys who are in my age. range because it appears that you are financially unstable or going towards, like pathways that are not aligned with where I see myself in my life.

Due to the success that Belle has achieved in life, she has found it easier to just raise the age range that she dates in an effort to find men that she regards as closer to where she is and what

she has accomplished. She has found that dating men closer to her in age doesn't yield the same results in terms of both ambition and accomplishment.

In another example, when discussing dating down, Trell, a 24 year old woman with her Associates degree, also mentions age in her response with the following:

> I taught myself to be like, Alright bitch you did some shit you wasn't supposed to and now you in a fucked up spot. How do we do this? How do we get out of this? Like last year, I did a bunch of dumb shit like spending money on a bunch of shit where I was supposed to like, I knew better and still did it wrong. But now I'm like, Okay, enough of that. We cutting that out now - it's time to act like a fucking adult, like you about to be 25 - you need to be an adult. And I'm Like, you can't just dwell on it and I think a lot of men I don't know what it is, like a lot of black men and black men my age that I run into. Like they get told no once and then they're just like, Oh, well fuck it, let me just sit the fuck down like do you know where I would be if I was told no a million times?

While Trell never explicitly states preferring to date older men, she repeatedly talks about how the men her age have various character flaws that results in them being stagnant in one way or another. She acknowledges the work that she has put into herself both professionally and character wise and expresses disappointment that men her own age haven't done the same.

Trell also often addressed her financial expectations of men and the example that her dad set with her mother as far as being a provider, and the less than favorable outlook that she has with prospects of her own age while discussing the expectations that they have of her. Although not of the same age bracket, but still within the frame of relative age, this mirrors the work of Salisu (2021) in a study that interviewed older Black women regarding their dating habits. They too found that there was a financial expectation that was often not met by men of their own age which was discouraging to them as they specifically sought someone that either matched them in terms of wealth or was doing even better (Salisu 2021). Both Belle and Trell have established themselves in their careers and in an earlier chapter, held very practical expectations for a relationship, but when it comes to looking at the ways that they have accomplished their

financial and career goals, like many women, they struggle to find men who have done the same (Black Women's Roundtable 2019).

Beyond a specific struggle with age, many of my respondents found there to be an overall difficulty with finding likeminded men at all when it came to their ambition in life. Various women outright spoke to the experience being 'tough' or 'hard', and being frustrated when they were seriously attempting to find a partner. Delia, a 25 year old woman with her Bachelors degree states:

> I know I grew up in the Hood, so… nine times out of 10, it's sad to say, they don't go off to college, they don't go get an education, they fall into this cycle of the streets… I went to college. I got to do it. And I don't want to say that I don't want to date a man without a college degree because I'm not that type of person, but I'm not going to take care of you… But at the same time I think that we need to consider that. That's why it's hard because it's, I don't know. I think that causes friction too, you're educated and the partner is not, it's, you're probably making more money than him.

While Delia does her best to hold space for men who she describes as "not on her level," she also recognizes the long-term difficulty of their potential union with it creating a dynamic where she could end up being the breadwinner, while still having other gender based expectations, as it is in many Black households (Black Women's Roundtable 2019, Collins 2000, Johnson and Loscoco 2015).

In another example, Tilly explains:

> It's hard dating guys my age because I'm 22. I'll be like, okay, what are you doing? Are you in school? I'll get the same old "oh school is not for me school, school is not for everybody." And I'm like, okay well, what are you doing?…And it's like, guys my age, I feel like they are not mature. I'm not going to say they are all like that, but even the ones in school it's like what's next? What do you plan on doing? It's tough. It's tough.

While continuing to make the age argument, Tilly also expresses the sheer difficulty of dating when she has accomplished her bachelor's degree at 22 and is met with men with no education who express minimal direction in their lives. In another group, Ebony, a 30 year old woman with

her Bachelor's degree comments, "[S]o when you start writing down all these things, like the pros and cons, and you start making a list and checking it twice of all the specifications of the perfect partner, umm, the chances of you meeting these people, especially where I am [in life], I know it makes it even harder."

In attempting to actively seek and vet a partner that would hopefully result in a positive relationship, Delia, Tilly, and Ebony seem to consistently hit roadblocks when it comes to finding men that meet the baseline of just meeting them where they are. This is not a foreign concept as Black women are less likely to marry into wealth as compared to white women and are more likely to be partnered with someone who earns less than them (Black Womens Roundtable 2019; Collins 1997; Porter and Bronzaft 1995). While the odds remain stacked against them, and them feeling the strain of that reality, Delia, Tilly, and Ebony still maintain hope that they will be able to achieve a different outcome than their statistical predecessors as they all made mention to the notion that they don't intend to give up.

Some of the women also spoke to being on a self-improvement journey specifically towards self-love and mental wellness. Some of them credited it to heartbreak, but most saw this as just a necessary part of becoming their best selves. In this journey, they also were looking for their potential partners to also prioritize self-love and mental wellness as well, while unfortunately continuing to be met with lack luster suitors. Tiff, a 27 year old with a Master's degree states:

> I'm very much so focused on like, just what an ideal partner is. And not necessarily just so I know what I want if it comes along like, just… I look at people like mirrors. So, whether an ideal partner comes at me now like, I just want to be like a healthy person period… But when I do think about it, I just think about it in terms of, "ok well, if I do get married, even if I don't actually marry this conducive partner and shit, how do I want to be as a partner? And what do I hope to get in return? Because I can't just expect to get what I give. So, let me just be the best and the most healthy that I can be, and I'll think about what hopefully I do receive in return.

In speaking about what she desired in a partnership, Tiff immediately began speaking on her journey with overall wellness and mental health. Tiff sees her journey in working on herself as her way to improve her prospects because of her “mirror” theory which she brings up various times throughout the discussion. Essentially, Tiff believes that whatever she brings into the relationship within herself, she will have to face in some sort of way, which is what she means by looking at relationships like a mirror. In order to mitigate that for herself, she wants to bring her best self but is also hoping that her partner would do the same, although she has some doubt in her level of expectation.

In another example, Winnie, a 25 year old woman finishing up her bachelors degree states, “I am on a self-love journey. And I do feel like that's important right now to be prepared for something like that…I'm working on my demons and I would hope by the time we then reached each other, I would hope that you didn't BS and did the same thing.” Winnie spoke throughout the group of healing, therapy, and self-love. This coincides with various scholars that have been following recent trends of the resurgence of Black women practicing radical self-love (Hester and Squires 2018, Mason 2022). Within this statement, Winnie also expresses that she is looking for someone who has prioritized those same things. This was specifically in reference to what she was looking for in a marriage and a marriageable man- someone who is making strides to work on themselves, as she has been doing the same.

Grace, a 23 year old woman with her Bachelor’s degree makes the following statement:

> I feel like single women, like are always like spend this time like being a bridesmaids and not being a bride, or like spending time on like self-love and like, I feel like we really do take singleness and like take time to work on ourselves. I feel like when we are ready to be married, we know what we want. But then like dudes are just sitting around like, at this age, just like doing shit. Are they working on themselves? And the age for men to get married, is growing is like, is being higher and higher because like they're not doing that shit. So then like when they come to, like what were they doing? Well, you weren’t

> slaying your demons… And they aren't ready for that, and then by the time like they're ready, you've been married for five years. So I feel like that's a big disconnect because self-care and self-love and self-journey is becoming more and more and more and more of a thing in society. I don't think it's being appreciated for both sexes. genders, whatever.

Grace really breaks down the self-journey from a gendered perspective saying how society grooms women to become wives through this language of taking a 'self-love' journey, while never encouraging men to do the same. As a result, women come to the marriage prepared for marriage at a certain age, while men don't really to have it all together within the time frame, but instead until much later, which seems to be a pretty classic storyline. However, as these traditional socialization patterns persist, there are still new currents that are moving these women away from the necessitating of marriage (England 2010; Zaidni and Morgan 2017). Tiff, Winnie, and Grace all see the strength in internal self-work, and also urge that significance to their male counterparts and potential partners, but realize that the value that they hold in it is seldom shared by men. Also, considering Black men's distrust of the medical industrial complex as a whole (Wiltshire, Pearson, and Allison 2011, Washington 2020, and Torres 2018), as well as the influence of the Black church juxtaposed against mental health treatment within the Black community (Campbell and Long 2014), these women are fighting an uphill battle in hoping to find men that share their mentality.

Conclusion

While the Black Lady is meant as a derogatory trope for educated, career oriented Black women consistently on the journey to progress (Collins 2000), coinciding with the narrative of "Smart-ugly" as discussed by the women of the Combahee River Collective (Taylor 2017), the descriptions of both easily captured the archetype of my respondents, although they consistently redefined and reimagined the depth and nuance of what a Black lady truly is. Yes, many of them attest to struggling to find an ideal partner, and attributed much of that to their educational,

financial, and career success, many still found ways to reframe their perspectives and remain hopeful while still holding fast to the expectations that they had for their relationships and partners.

This did not come without having to also engage in their own feelings work as many outwardly expressed the difficulty and even feeling sad regarding the circumstances. Similar to various other literature capturing Black women's frustrations in regards to having difficulty finding a suitable partner (Collins 2000, Salisu 2021), my participants were candid as they spoke to their difficulties in trying to pursue romantic relationships. However, they repurposed that energy into things that they could more positively associate with such as educational attainment or career advancement. Even in their disappointment with their attempts at partnership, they still held on to their power and even reclaimed it as they also prioritized their own physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

This is yet another example of how Black women continue to take an activist approach to their own life's pursuits as well as their relationships, from their education to mental health, in their continuous advocacy for Black people (Collins 2000). In recent decades, Black women have prioritized their own wellness, and mental health while simultaneously advocating that men do the same. Through social media, as well as other media forms, we are seeing large calls to Black women to practice unapologetic, radical self love, a concept that had long been hailed within the Black feminist community, but is now becoming widespread as more become aware of it (Hester and Squires 2018, hooks 2001, Kashef 2000, Mason 2022, Roberts-Grey 2016). In listening to my participants work through their own self love journeys as it corresponds to their romantic pursuits, I see how they speak to power that this journey has had for them in preparing them for more in life, as they encourage others, men included to do the same.

CHAPTER 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Black women's romantic experiences have long been a part of national conversation, but rarely does that conversation center on Black women telling the stories themselves (Banks 2010, Leong 2012, Moynihan 1965). In addition to the continuous societal shame and degradation placed upon Black women in regards to their singleness, society has found countless ways to then use this fraction of their lived experience to blame Black women for the shortcomings of the overall Black community (Collins 2000, Johnson and Loscocco 2015; Moynihan 1965). Society has essentially turned statistics of Black women's declining marriage rates into a phenomenon that has had a moral snowball effect negatively impacting the Black community as a whole.

In a half-hearted attempt to alleviate the perceived 'damage,' scholars continually debate and offer their interpretations of solutions that typically only exacerbate the already immensely laborious experience of Black womanhood (Banks 2010; Leong 2012). By critically examining dominant culture's narratives surrounding marriage and utilizing a Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory framework to empower and validate the intersectional experience of Black women in their own storytelling, I shed light on Black women's experiences in intimate marketplaces using their own voices. Using guided focus groups, my dissertation engages with single Black women on their experiences with dating men, their perspectives and experiences with interracial dating, their feelings regarding marriage, the pressures that they may face to marry, how they define marriageability in a man, and their experiences with dating down.

Informed by the literature of various scholars citing the prevalence of dating down for Black women, especially as they prioritize their desire for Black men, this project provides insight to what that actually looks like for women within their relationship experiences (Addo and Litcher 2013, Banks 2010, Black Women's Roundtable 2019). Possessing an acute

awareness of systemic racism and the impact it has on the Black community, many of my respondents couched their expectations of dating down within the frame of mass incarceration and the impact that it has had on Black men. Respondents often explicitly quoted statistics and made statements to the overrepresentation of Black men within the criminal justice system and directly connected these figures to their lack of romantic prospects.

Expressing their frustrations with the impact of mass incarceration and the policies put in place to further exacerbate the issue, the women in my project repeatedly expressed that they felt they had no other choice but to open up their romantic considerations to men who have been impacted by these systems. In considering men who have somehow gone through the penal system, the women then began to set their boundaries by outlining what they would and would not accept as far as criminal background. In most cases, with the women's communicated understanding of the War on Drugs and how it impacted Black communities, drug crimes were seemingly the most acceptable according to the concessions they explained being willing to make. Respondents also mentioned dismissing crimes of their distant past as long as they were not currently engaging in criminal behavior as well.

These allowances made by my respondents went against previous literature suggesting that respectability politics would remain supreme for Black women especially as it related to choosing suitable partners for marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Instead, participants responses were better suited within a racial realism framework (Bell 1991) where the women accepted the realities of systemic racism and rather than clinging to respectability for the purposes of assimilation, the women would rather accept reality and expand their options by taking the less respectable route of accepting men with criminal backgrounds.

My study also looks at how women shaped the concept of marriage for themselves in a way that did not always consistently align with larger societal narratives. Understanding the significance of Black women engaging in self-defining (Collins 2000, Lorde 1980, Walker 2983), with no pretext, I asked respondents to explain to me what marriage meant to them and was met with two prevailing themes. There were some that possessed a more romanticized interpretation of marriage, even iterating their desire to be "chosen" by men, and seeing this achievement of marriage within this narrative as a societal win and mark of value for Black women. In providing this interpretation of marriage, which is heavily influenced by dominant culture (Smith 2022, Stritof 2021), participants were often discouraged in their ability to achieve this form of marriage. On the other hand, a majority of my participants took a significantly more pragmatic approach to marriage and saw it as a means of career and financial support, foundation building, and a constant source of self-improvement and work. The women who described marriage in this way also denounced concepts like love as being baseless and frivolous to the true purpose of marriage (Goldman 1914, hooks 2001). They also offered various unique interpretations to the day to day of marriage, with some going as far as characterizing it as being a constant fight.

Lastly, many of the women within my project spoke to prioritizing their own selves and their goals in lieu of relationships altogether. However, this didn't come without heavy considerations or emotions. Some participants simply saw it as an issue of meeting their basic needs and potentially pursuing their romantic pursuits after that has been accomplished, which aligns with research done regarding the hierarchy of needs (McLeod 2007). In these cases, women wanted to make sure that they themselves were established both financially and in their own careers before they would consider finding a partner and starting a family, which is

something that they desired to do in the future. In other scenarios, the women made the decision to deprioritize pursuing romantic relationships with a heavy heart. They expressed immense sadness regarding their current failed relationships and frustration in their ability to find a partner moving forward. They also would simultaneously quote their success in their educational pursuits and saw continuing in that direction and attaining more degrees as a more fruitful endeavor than looking for a male companion. This aligns with the Black Lady trope where successful Black women are more focused on their education and careers while having trouble with their relationships (Collins 2000). Respondents also spoke to the significance of prioritizing their own self-love and mental health and desiring a partner that does the same aligning with recent trends of Black women pursuing self-care, therapy, and mental health services (Kashef 2000, Roberts-Grey 2016). Further, this idea of self-love and being on a self-love journey coincides with counter-narratives arising in social media and among popular artists and influencers confronting societal beauty narratives and challenging women who don't fit them to adopt a perspective of radical self-love (Hester and Squires 2018, Mason 2022).

Future Directions

The findings within my dissertation only cover a fraction of the topics that were discussed throughout the focus groups. While I chose to focus on how my respondents spoke of dating down specifically in terms of criminality, self-defining marriage, and their commitment to self-improvement, there was significantly more rich conversation to glean from. The focus group question guide included sections on women's pressures to marry, where they most often found their romantic partners, their participation, and perspectives towards interracial dating, how they would characterize their ideal marriageable man, and more. While some of this information bled into the topics that I did cover, they all easily could stand alone in their own individual projects.

Various other topics such as the influence of the Black church, the use of religious jargon, and the debate of who was to 'blame' for Black women's low marriage rates between Black women and Black men were also prominent recurring discussions throughout several focus groups, although they were not explicitly covered within the question guide. I was quite surprised to see how recurring certain topics were, especially when I never even brought them up, which definitely intrigues me to do future research on the prevalence of these themes themselves.

Further, in the suggestions that I received from my participants when I asked if they felt that I missed anything, common proposals that I received from my respondents was to explicitly include the topic of sex as well as expanding the conversation to men. I was actually very intentional in not doing both of these things, especially not talking to men, so I was surprised that this is something that they wanted to see. I do see the value in continuing this work and having these conversations with men, but I question my ability to do them myself. Due to my embodied status as a Black woman, I doubt my ability to as easily gain access within that population and not have my data suffer severely from impression management. I may seek a research partner to accomplish that particular expansion of this research. In regards to my decision to not include sex, in prior research that I conducted on dating apps across race, I found that Black women were most reluctant to discuss hookup culture, consistent with Black women's alignment with the politics of respectability (Harris 2003; Higginbotham 1994). As a result, I decided against discussing sex in an effort to not create any unintentional barriers between myself and my participants again for the sake of impression management. However, considering the feedback I received, I would be very interested in seeing what happens in discussing Black women's experiences with sex and hookup culture and how that impacts their overall experiences with relationships.

All in all, my dissertation research opens the door to considerably more future research on Black women's relationship experiences. Additionally, this work provides a framework for future scholars to continue to keep an open dialogue with Black women as we continue to discuss them on a national stage. Using primarily Black feminist theory and critical race theory as a lens through which to capture these narratives, my research employed focus groups heavily informed by the testimonio methodology to create powerful safe spaces for respondents to engage in in-depth storytelling while simultaneously empowering each other within the sharing space. My respondents spoke candidly as they addressed their declining marriage rates through their own individualized experiences and together, they allowed me to capture thematic trends occurring throughout their various explanations. My research was able to detail how the women sought to expand their prospects through the rejection of respectability. I was also able to capture the women freely reframing the concept of marriage for themselves. Finally, my dissertation research was able to show how my respondents chose to prioritize romance in their lives alongside their own self-advancement. It is my hope that my project has made it overwhelmingly clear the depth of knowledge and awareness possessed by Black women as they navigate their romantic pursuits and other facets of their lives and that this work is just the beginning to seeing more of Black women's voices highlighted within the world of academia.

APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT FLYER

APPENDIX B. IRB FORM

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
130 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
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irb@lsu.edu
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TO: Dana Berkowitz
Sociology

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: December 9, 2019

RE: **IRB#** E12037

TITLE: A Qualitative Study of Black Women's Experiences in Intimate Marketplaces

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review Date: 12/9/2019

Approved X **Disapproved**

Approval Date: 12/9/2019 **Approval Expiration Date:** 12/8/2022

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2c

Signed Consent Waived?: No

Re-review frequency: Three years

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman DLandin

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

* *All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb*

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VITA

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