

Racialized Beauty:

Lived Experiences of Beauty and Race, The Impact on Black Women's Self-Esteem, and The
Development of Resilience and Empowerment

by

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Abstract

For a long time in American society, blonde straight hair, blue eyes, a slim figure and milky white skin were uplifted as the standard of beauty. “The use of standards that characterize the ideal beauty as ‘young women with milky White skin, long blonde hair, and slim figures’ (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003:194) meant that black women, by default, could never be beautiful because they can never be white (Jones & Shorter-Gooden 2003)” (Gardner 2008:2). This racialized beauty ideal that preferred Eurocentric features over that of Afrocentric features (kinky hair, wide nose, big lips, curvy body, dark skin) stemmed from “centuries of colonialism and slavery that distinctly categorized lighter-skinned Europeans as superior to darker-skinned Africans” (Frevort and Walker 2014). But, nowadays, the issue of racialized beauty standards moves beyond the internalization of a “white is attractive and blackness is undesirable” dichotomy. In comparison to 60 years ago, several black women and people of color have now graced the covers of magazines. These women such as Beyonce Knowles Carter, Halle Berry, and Lupita Nyong'o have skin tones ranging from light to dark and have been labeled by media as the most beautiful women in the world (Esha Saxena 2018). The desirable body type which was once skinny has shifted towards admiration of curvy body types often associated with black women and other women of color. While black features seem to be gaining more recognition as “beautiful” in media, this study examining black women’s lived experiences on beauty and race reveal that beauty as conceptualized in the United States is still largely informed by America’s racial history. The interviews reveal how through the concept of beauty, a society with a racist history, creates a facade of progressiveness while actually upholding racist ideologies. With this thesis, I propose that beauty is a site constantly being negotiated and renegotiated. My research sought to give accounts of African American women’s understanding of their value and self-worth while existing in a society whose conception of beauty is informed by a racist history. The first section of this study examines the impacts of racialized messages of beauty on black women's self-esteem. Majority of the interviewees report feeling invisible and inferior. Thus, the second section of this study examines the methods black women have used to develop resilient strategies against adverse effects of racialized beauty standards.

Keywords: beauty standards, racialized beauty, black women, self-esteem, empowerment, resilience, colorism, skin-tone

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INTRODUCTION

For years, pictures of heterosexual white women who were able bodied, tall, skinny, with perfect skin glossed the covers of magazines and media as representations of the beauty ideal. To a large extent, white, thin and straight blonde hair was admired, both consciously and subconsciously recognized as the legitimate ideal characteristics. This ideal reflected white cultural values and America's colonial past (Collins 2000, Swain 2012, Agiliga 2013). In the United States, beauty as a racialized concept is informed by the history of slavery and colonialism where white was labeled as the superior race and people of color occupied different subordinate status in the racial hierarchy. But, regardless of ability, sexual orientation, racial, social and economic status, all women--including white women--are judged by this barometer of beauty. In speaking with black women about beauty and race, women note a variety of reactions to their knowledge or experiences of these biases. Some women choose to ignore racialized messages of beauty. Some are negatively affected while others are only affected at specific times. Regardless of how women react, on a macro level, society constantly informs us that appearance is important. From these observations, I developed two initial research questions to further explore through this thesis: 1) How are dark-skinned African-American women who are nowhere near this ideal beauty standard respond to white beauty standards? Or 2) How does #blackgirlmagic, a movement which celebrates the beauty (and achievements) of black women, help them overcome negative messages of beauty in media that tell them they are not beautiful?

I approached my topic with an incomplete perception of beauty as even #blackgirlmagic had complexities that did not fit into an incomplete definition of what beauty is in the United States. With these questions, my initial assumptions were guided by an incomplete definition of

beauty. White was the ideal and everything else was not ideal. Thus, I saw the #blackgirlmagic movement as working to combat the stereotype of white as beautiful and black as undesirable through creating an appreciation for Afro-centric features and uplifting black women as beautiful. By having a movement like #blackgirlmagic where black women acknowledged themselves as beautiful, other black women who had been negatively affected by this white beauty standard had an avenue that they could look up to and empower themselves. However, despite this mission to uplift all black women, the #blackgirlmagic movement began to create a new standard of beauty for black women. Within this movement, most times, black women with big butts and thighs, flat stomachs, loose curly hair and smooth shiny skin were held up as the ideal black beauty, particularly on social media sites like Tumblr, Twitter and Facebook (cite). These dominant characteristics resultantly influenced society's perceptions of what a black woman had to look like in order to be considered beautiful. Importantly, a nuanced analysis of the movement demonstrates that the issue of racialized beauty standards moves beyond the internalization of a "white is attractive and blackness is undesirable" dichotomy. The assumption that the beauty standards negatively affecting black women are only white beauty standards is therefore inadequate. After conducting my initial research, speaking with 14 black women and in speaking with my Professors and advisors, I realized that while one thesis cannot possibly discuss all complexities under the umbrella of beauty in relation to race, it is vital to acknowledge and discuss how nuanced and complicated racialized beauty as a concept is in the United States. As a result, while my line of questioning did not change dramatically, the way I framed my thesis changed. Now, I am working with an acknowledgement that beauty is not static--this finding grounds my theoretical contributions with respect to conceptualizing beauty

and race as concepts. With this thesis, I propose that beauty is a site constantly being negotiated and renegotiated by black women. I decided to reframe my research around black women's lived experiences with a concept of beauty that is constantly in flux. The research question I will be answering is; How are black women's lived experiences informed by this constant negotiation of beauty and what do they do to empower themselves?

CURRENT CLIMATE OF BEAUTY IN THE UNITED STATES

How exactly is beauty then defined today in the United States? While it is true that during slavery and colonial times, white colonial society promoted a shared social understanding that external characteristics, such as Afrocentric features, (dark skin, thick lips, nappy hair) were undesirable, impure, overtly sexual and corrupt (Swain 2012), beauty in relation to race in the United States is constantly being negotiated. Nowadays, several black women and people of color have graced the covers of magazines. These women have skin tones ranging from dark to light and have being labeled by media as the most beautiful women in the world , ranging from Beyonce Knowles-Carter, Sofia Vergara, Rihanna, Halle Berry to Lupita Nyong'o (Esha Saxena 2018). The concept of beauty is undergoing a constant flux, constantly being shaped and reshaped by media. The desirable body type which was once skinny has shifted towards admiration of curvy body types often associated with black women and other women of color, moving away from the previous white beauty ideal toward Afrocentric features. Currently in American society, tanned, golden brown skin is considered as more desirable. But it is more complicated than a simple shift from Eurocentric features being the "ideal" to Afrocentric features being the "ideal". While it seems as though the beauty standard is shifting towards an

admiration of Afrocentric features, it a mix and match that simultaneously negotiates Afrocentric and Eurocentric features as ideal and sometimes not. For example, at times, Afrocentric features are held up as the ideal but only when they appear on a white person. For example, Kim Kardashian or Iggy Azalea being praised and admired by media outlets when celebrating their hourglass figure with big bottoms, thick lips and tan skin. But, a black woman like Nicki Minaj is labeled as inappropriate and overly sexual when also celebrating her body (Reese 2014). Sometimes, Eurocentric features are held up as ideal when they appear on black women. For example, lighter skinned black women are represented more in media than darker skinned black women (Mathews 2013). Other times, black women are objectified as sexually desirable while simultaneously being desexualized and seen as undesirable (Collins 2000). For example, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, K. Michelle being hyper sexualized in media while Whoopi Goldberg, Viola Davis , as darker skinned black women, are desexualized (Reese 2014; Butler 2018; Berry 2009; Robinson 2010; Juergen 2013). Through interviewing the 14 black women in this research, I noted these contradictions frequently in dialogue with participants about what *kind* of black is beautiful, when black features are appreciated versus when they are not and when black features are fetishized but simultaneously desexualized. What became apparent is that the history of slavery and colonialism continues to inform the concept of beauty in the United States.

While in media, black features seem to be gaining recognition as “beautiful” and there are more representations of black women in the media than there was 60 years ago, the lived experiences of black women in this thesis reveal that beauty is still very much informed by the United States’ racial history. While black features being acknowledged in media does uplift black women, if you do not look past the surface level, it gives the illusion that on the topic of

beauty and race, black features are now being considered beautiful. It gives the illusion that as long as “appreciation” for black beauty progresses the way it is, a few decades down the line, the idea that Afrocentric features were once considered inferior to Eurocentric features may become “a thing of the past”. It gives the illusion that there is not much work left to be done. This is far from the truth and this is what makes this work urgent. According to the everyday experiences of 90% of the women I interviewed, black women living in a society in which the concept of beauty is informed by a racist history has caused some form of trauma where their self-esteem has been negatively impacted. The women at different points reported feeling inferior, insignificant and invisible. They have performed years of work of self-care to minimize becoming a victim to America’s racialized concept of beauty. For those who have been negatively affected emotionally, they have found ways to rebuild their self-esteem and re-affirm their self-worth to either recover from the trauma, or prevent any negative messages of beauty from emotionally affecting them. While some other black women do not let it affect them emotionally, they recognize how racialized ideas of beauty play out in different aspects of their lives such as in their place of work or school. Amongst the black women I interviewed, there is a disconnect between their everyday experiences and media now acknowledging blackness as beautiful. With this being the reality of the black women I interviewed, media giving society the illusion that there is not much work left to be done in terms of race and beauty is unnerving. The interviews reveal how through the concept of beauty, a society with a racist history, can have a facade of progressiveness while actually upholding racist ideologies. Thus, this work is important because it examines the complex ways in which a society rooted in racial, prejudice and oppressive ideology aims to break the spirit of black women by trying to make them feel inferior,

insignificant and invisible. This thesis explores the remarkable ways in which black women are performing acts of self care and empowerment to disrupt although complex and constantly changing, a beauty standard that is always informed by a racist history.

WHY BEAUTY AND RACE?

I was inspired to explore the topic of beauty because of my experience as a Nigerian-American woman who moved to the United States at 11 years old and my subsequent experiences of race and beauty living in the United States. Because Nigeria is a majority black country, racism plays out very differently. In Nigeria, I was not attuned to the concept of beauty but I was aware that light skinned women are seen as beautiful and bleaching creams could be found in any store you walked into. I believe that my life experience in Nigeria, combined with living in a majority black country where racism played out differently, are the main reasons I was not as attuned as I am now to the concept of beauty. Thus, the concept of beauty and how intertwined with race it was, was not something I was fascinated by or realized until I came to the United States.

For a long time I found it hard to articulate why I was drawn to the concept of beauty and race. When I arrived in America, I was now black. I did not understand this new identity that was ascribed to me. The concept of blackness in American society was something new that I had to figure out how to navigate. It was like being thrown into a whirlwind. I do not remember my initial reaction being an identity crisis, I just remembered my initial reaction was a fascination for what all this meant: I was now a Nigerian that just came to America who was automatically seen as black before she opened her mouth and a thick accent rolled off her tongue, a Nigerian

who grew up with a very different culture but was automatically given a new cultural and racial identity, fast forward years later, a Nigerian woman who is also black woman . The longer I lived in the United States, I came to understand what it meant to be black. The realization and experience of the very real harmful ways racism played out differently in the United States shocked me. I was hyper aware of how black people were discriminated against in social interactions, in watching the news, and hearing about how discrimination in the work played out was shocking to me. The drama of it made me curious. It was interesting, confusing, painful at times to watch, observe and experience. Painful when seeing black people being discriminated against, painful when experiencing discrimination for being black in society but also experiencing discrimination for being African by other people in the black community. However, these experiences were also nuanced and changed over time: Nowadays, African-Americans embrace and want to learn more about their African heritage. I was equally interested to observe how American society had a fascination with black people and culture.

The fascination with beauty came because, in the United States, now I was considered “pretty” but also “pretty for a dark-skinned girl”. While I took being told that I was pretty for a black skin girl as insulting, I also felt an uncomfortability with the idea of being called pretty. I had grown up in a home and school where academic abilities were important and seen as the end all be all, with negative consequences when you slipped below what was considered acceptable in your academic work. While people did point to my physical characteristics, people mentioned my academic abilities far more than they pointed to my physical characteristics. This consciously and subconsciously made me aware of what was valued. Growing up, my academic career was also important to me because it served as a lifeline. Therefore, when I came to the United States

and people pointed more to physical features, I felt uncomfortable because even though it was not the case, it made it seem as though looks were all that mattered. But, upon reflection, I remember the first time I was made aware that beauty was highly valued was my last year living in Nigeria. When I left the United States, lighter skin was starting to be uplifted as the ideal beauty in Nigeria. During my last year in Nigeria, I had been convinced to enter my school pageant. My friend who was lighter skinned and skinny was crowned the winner. I remember the judge saying she was skinny like Agbani Darego (Nigerian Miss Universe who was admired for her straight skinny figure) and light skin therefore, she was the obvious winner. Young and naive at the time and academics being everything, I kept thinking along the lines of “okayyyy, yes, she’s skinny and has light skin, but what does that have to do with anything? The person who wins is going to be the face and representative of the school but you didn’t look at academic abilities...” A few days later, in speaking with the headmistress, I discovered that the whole event was a set up. I was not meant to win, my school at the time which judged students based on academic success also wanted people in the pageant with a good academic track record so the headmistress who I looked up to put a couple of us in the pageant there last minute. In hindsight, this experience shows biased perception and stereotypes about smartness in relation to beauty. It was as though everyone, even my other friends in the pageant, had known that she was the *obvious* winner. The moment was like an epiphany--it made me realize that people valued specific forms of beauty. But, it was not until I moved to the United States that I began to truly understand just how much value people ascribed to beauty. During my first years in the United States, people’s perception of whether I was beautiful or not seemed to be valued which quickly became a frustrating experience. As I grew up, I experienced being hypersexualized and

objectified because of my Afrocentric features, while in some situations I was also simultaneously undesirable to some people because of my dark skin tone. I believe this initial frustration I experienced my first years in America with the value ascribed to beauty combined with the initial fascination with race as a concept is why I am so drawn to deconstructing beauty in relation to race. My academic pursuit of sociology in college has allowed me to explore and understand race in society but, beauty as a site to explore was always present in me because while not as potent anymore, I still get frustrated with the value ascribed to beauty and how it can affect people's lives. I believe this frustration is what kept the need to understand beauty in relation to race alive.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Beauty might be in the eye of the beholder, but beholders mostly agree” (Patzer, 2008)

Value is placed on physical attractiveness. In subtle ways, people’s perception of your physical attractiveness impacts the way they behave towards you (Patzer 2008; Englen 2017; Jean and Feagin 1998). Termed as *lookism* in the 1970s, it is described as “treating people in ways biased by their perceived individual level of physical attractiveness” (Patzer 2008:36). The physical attractiveness phenomenon has been studied for decades by scholars from various disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology, biologists (Patzer 2008 Jean and Feagin, 1998; Craig 2002, Englen 2017; Frevert and Walker 2014; Pearson-Trammell 2010). While scholars have all produced different results, they agree on the fact that “in America, more than in most Western cultures, what you look like or more importantly, how others perceive you shapes your life in dozens of often subtle ways from the cradle to the grave” (Patzer, 2008). Gordon Patzer in his research on the physical attractiveness phenomenon (PAP) revealed that perceived level of physical attractiveness affects the way nurses treat newborns and how parents react to their children. Physical attractiveness has an impact on a child’s self-image and it becomes a large factor in how teachers evaluate and assist students in school (Clifford Walster 1973). Furthermore, physical attractiveness is a key factor in choosing an occupation and finding a job (Dion et al. 1972). Psychologists in their research on job applicant attractiveness and its influence on interview decisions, found that “it was apparent that applicants’ attractiveness influenced job related impressions in a favorable direction” (Gilmore et al. 1986). Thus, perceived level of attractiveness can place limits on an individual's level of success in a certain

field of work (Patzner 2008:23). Due to the significant impact that physical attractiveness has on the daily lives of people, it is important to move past the surface level interpretation of physical attractiveness as something that is superficial. Although superficial, the concept of physical attractiveness has momentous impacts on people's self-perception, self-esteem, the way they are treated and how they move about the social world (Patzner 2008; Jean and Feagin, 1998).

While men can be just as concerned about their appearances, women's bodies are more policed than men's bodies in the United States. In America, the conversation on beauty is usually relegated to women because traditionally, physical attractiveness has been linked to femininity in the United States. It is a gendered trait of female desirability, thus making it a "special category of women's experiences" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003; Gardner 2008). Scholars define the feminine beauty ideal as "the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain—" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003). Women's bodies are more policed than men's bodies and women have been socialized to be aware of the presentation of their body (Patzner 2008; Jean and Feagin, 1998; Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003; Wolf). From a young age, girls are told how they should dress, how they should sit, what expression to carry on their face. All things meant not for personal satisfaction but for the consumption of others, the male gaze, and the rewards that come with fitting into the acceptable beauty ideal. Scholars agree that this constant policing of women's bodies is a form of social control that restricts women's lives (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003; Jean and Feagin, 1998, Gardner 2008, Neal 1988; Freedman 1986). As women are increasingly gaining more social status and independence, society can no longer rely on using external means as a way of controlling women and

maintaining the gender hierarchy (e.g. establishing laws that prevented women from getting a job) (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003). According to scholars in their research on the social significance of feminine beauty, “reliance on normative controls becomes more important to maintain gender inequality at structural and interpersonal levels...as women’s status in society is enhanced, there is likely to be a greater reliance on normative controls via value constructs such as the beauty ideal” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003). Thus, the pervasiveness of the feminine beauty ideal is a means to an end. Because the enhancement of women’s status threatens the gender hierarchy, by relying on normative forms to “control” the gender hierarchy, (e.g. media being saturated with the phenotype of the ideal woman and how “important” it is for a woman to have those same characteristics to be considered beautiful), society maintains a gender dynamic where men are at the top and women are at the bottom (Bartky 1990; Currie 1997; Freedman 1986; Wolf 1991).

Historical Context

For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on black women. In this thesis, I define beauty as perceived level of physical attractiveness based on the individual's opinion, and the opinions of what others around them believe about their level of attractiveness. I am focusing on physical beauty as represented by the white standard of beauty. The reason I am using this definition and the way it is represented is because, in the United States, whiteness pervades cultural understanding of what beauty is. This is one of the reasons why currently, although, black women’s features are being regarded as beautiful, these features are considered even more beautiful when it is presented on white woman’s body. For years, the standard to occupy the state of being *beautiful/attractive* was associated with white femininity (Jean and Feagin 1998; Frevert

and Walker 2014; Gardner 2008). This standard of beauty was defined as being “a White, young, slim, tall, and upper-class woman” (Patton 2006:30) and did not include black people. Scholars who study body image and its psychological and social effects on women who do not fit the slim and tall ideal have found that internalizing beauty standards often resulted in body image distortion, anxiety, stress, lowered self-esteem, anorexia, and body dysmorphia (Mauritz Shoger 2008). Academic scholarship has explored the of racial construction of black women’s body and sexuality with a focus on black women’s bodies as hypersexaulized and desexualized. Early Black feminist scholars, such as Patricia Hills Collins and Anne Fausto-Sterling have been criticized for relying too heavily on colonial discourses around the black female body and neglecting contemporary lived experiences of black women (Bernard 1996). While this study shows how contemporary lived experiences of black women in the United States complicates the concept of racialized beauty, it is important to understand the historical roots of the United States that informed this beauty ideal. “Historically speaking, white beauty was defined in direct contrast to black (non)beauty” (Collins 2000; Gardner 2008; Jean and Feagin 1998). In the status characteristic of attractiveness, white fit into the *attractive/beautiful* state while black fit into the *ugly/unattractive* state. You could not appreciate white women’s beauty without having the opposite end which was black woman's ugliness (Gardner 2008:2). “The use of standards that characterize the ideal beauty as ‘young women with milky White skin, long blonde hair, and slim figures’ (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003:194) meant that black women, by default, could never be beautiful because they can never be white (Jones & Shorter-Gooden 2003)” (Gardner 2008:2). This racialized ideal of beauty that preferenced Eurocentric features over that of Afrocentric features (kinky hair, wide nose, big lips, curvy body, dark skin) stemmed from

“centuries of colonialism and slavery that distinctly categorized lighter-skinned Europeans as superior to darker-skinned Africans” (Frevert and Walker 2014).

During the slave period in the United States, white colonial masters used skin color differences amongst blacks as a “divide and conquer” strategy to prevent revolts (Pearson-Trammell 2004). Whites sowed seeds of distrust amongst black slaves by dividing tasks based on skin color. While lighter skinned blacks worked in the slave owner’s home, while darker skin blacks worked on the field (Russell et. al) which was “thought to be harder and more unpleasant work” (Pearson-Trammell 2010:7). In slave owner’s homes, there was an opportunity to access education and less violent treatment by overseers (Pearson-Trammell 2010:7). While scholars have found that work in the slave master’s home was often brutal and alienating, “practices such as those mentioned here continued to perpetuate the color caste system on and outside of the plantation” (Pearson-Trammell 2010:8). Because lighter skin signaled the presence of European ancestry, this racialized system situated lighter skinned blacks above darker skinned blacks (Neal and Wilson 1989; Feagin 2014). Nonetheless, whites placed themselves at the top of the racial hierarchy and relegated blacks to an inferior racial status.

During the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in development of science, biology, ethnography and history, there was a central interest in the human body (Jean and Feagin 1998:74). The most desirable body type amongst white Europeans and American scientists was that of White Europeans. “[White Europeans] physical superiority was linked to intellectual, aesthetic and moral superiority...over all other types” (Jean and Feagin 1998:74). This racial system is manifested in the feminine beauty ideal when a black woman with lighter

skin is favored over a black woman with darker skin tone or, when a white woman with tanned skinned is favored over a black woman with a lighter skin tone.

Understanding the construction of black women's bodies and sexuality can provide insights on racial construction of beauty as it appears in America today. Throughout history, Gardner in her sociology thesis on beauty standards and college women, argues that black women have "had little, if any, choice in how their bodies have been constructed" (2008:2). During colonial times, physiological features were used to determine if a person would be a criminal or sexual deviant (Swain 2012; Collin 2000). The black female body was viewed and treated in a dehumanizing way (Swain 2012). From the moment slaves were captured, sexuality was used as a means to control their bodies (Agiliga 2013:7). A slave master John Barbot wrote in "Description of North and South Guinea", that Black women have a "natural hot and lewd temper [that] soon wastes their bodies" (1732). Black women were seen as sexually uncontrollable. One slave ship doctor, Alexandria Falconbridge writes in "Slave Ships and Slaving: The Ship Doctor's Narrative" that

on board some ships, the common sailors [were] allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they [could] procure... The officers [were] permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure and sometimes [were] guilty of such brutal excesses as disgrace human nature" (1927:9).

During the eighteenth century, "the body of the black female symbolized three interlocking themes—colonialism, scientific evolution, and sexuality... and by the nineteenth century, the African, or black female body came into focus as entertainment and scientific discovery" (Story 2010:29). Gardener uses the treatment of Saartje Baartman also known as the "Hottentot Venus"

to “demonstrate how images of black women have been constructed and the inability of black women to exercise agency concerning these images” (2008:2).

In 1810, Saartje Baartman was showcased as a freak and on display for several years in Europe (Gardner 2008:2). Her large buttocks and genitalia were described as “protuberant and asymmetrical, grotesque and compelling in their excessive sexuality” (Wiss 1994:13). Baartman’s physiology served as scientific proof of “otherness that black female bodies were primitive, sexually ardent than their white counterparts” (Gardner 2008:2). “The image of the Hottentot Venus became an icon of Black women as a whole” (Gilman 1985). While Black phenotypes were regarded as undesirable, black women’s bodies were also hypersexualized, exoticized and fetishized. In efforts to control images of Black womanhood the during slavery and colonial period, black women were categorized as the hypersexual ‘Jezebel’ or the desexualized ‘Mammy’ (Swain 2012; Collins 2000).

The Jezebel archetype was unchaste and had an insatiable sexual appetite. In her work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins writes that the “Jezebel” archetype was one characteristic central to constructions of Black women's sexuality (2000:85). Currently, in the United States, the construction of black women’s sexuality stems from the legacy of the Jezebel archetype that functioned to relegate black women to the category of sexually aggressive women (Collins 2000:85). The “Jezebel”, “Whore” or “Hoochie” was put in contrast to her white counterpart and allowed for the construction of white womanhood as the site where normal female heterosexuality was expressed. The perception of deviance attached to black women’s sexuality and womanhood

through the Jezebel archetype is one that is constantly recycled in different ways and mapped unto black women's bodies.

In the 90s, in a new way, the Jezebel archetype pervaded social consciousness and even within black communities a new archetype, the "Hoochie Mama" a counterpart to the original Jezebel was born (Collins 81:2000). Patricia Hill Collins describes the "Hoochie Mama" archetype below,

one category consisted of "plain hoochies" or sexually assertive women who can be found across social classes. Women who wear sleazy clothes to clubs and dance in a "slutty" fashion constitute "club hoochies." These women aim to attract men with money for a one-night stand. In contrast, the ambition of "gold-digging hoochies" lies in establishing a long-term relationship with a man with money. These gold-digging hoochies often aim to snare a highly paid athlete and can do so by becoming pregnant.

(Collins 2000:82)

Made visible by popular culture and rap music, images that hypersexualize black women still permeates social perception of black women's bodies as commodities for sexual consumption. In cases where celebrities in popular culture (i.e Nicki Minaj) give a performance that showcases themselves as sexual beings, they are objectified and fetishized as sexual commodities or seen as inappropriate (Reese 2014). The history of the Jezebel archetype is translated in society's reaction to Nicki Minaj who is a black woman, as inappropriate when she released her *Anaconda* album cover wearing a thong and sports bra (Reese 2014) while Kim Kardashian, was celebrated as body positive when she posed nude for her *Paper* magazine cover (Heller 2016).

While black women are subject to hypersexualization they are also subject to the invisibility of desexualization. During colonial times, while the Jezebel archetype hypersexualized black women, the Mammy archetype stripped away black women's feminine identity. The mammy caricature was one of an asexual woman (Bogle 1994, Collins 2000, Swain 2012). To desexualize the mammy, she was portrayed as a heavyweight, old or middle-aged maternal figure with dark skin (Collins 2000, Swain 2012). She was de-eroticized and portrayed as lacking any sensual or sexual qualities.

The construction of white womanhood versus black womanhood during slavery and colonialism is expressed in constructions of beauty and race in America today. As mentioned, black women's features have been praised as beautiful but often their curvy bodies and thick lips are objectified and fetishized while it is admired as beautiful on a white woman. During slavery, white womanhood expressed normal female heterosexual desires, therefore, when black features (mainly curvy body and thick lips) are present on a white woman, often times, it is not seen as animalistic. The insinuation of sexual deviance and aggression while it may still be there, is minimized by the fact that the features are presented on a white body, thus, she can be regarded as beautiful. For the mammy archetype, her darker skin tone was one of the main physical signifier of her perceived ugliness (Collins 2000, Swain 2012). Black women who did not fit into the acceptable black beauty (lighter skin, flat stomach with big butt and thighs), often times with darker skin tone, are less represented in media as their dark skin tone deviates dramatically from the ideal form of beauty.

Before the Civil Rights Movement, Afrocentric features of darker skin, kinky hair, big noses and thick lips were largely regarded as ugly and undesirable. Black feminists scholars

argued “that white ‘beauty’ needs black ‘ugliness’ and as long as the white model of beauty dominates, black women and their stigmatized features will always serve as a point of comparison” (Gardner 2008). In the 50s and 60s, during the African-American Civil Rights Movement era, the pervasiveness of this beauty dichotomy throughout media sparked the “Black is beautiful” movement. While the movement was never synonymous with any one political organization, scholars described the movement as “expressing the spirit of self-love and exuberance felt by a generation that found a new way to see itself” (Craig 2002:26). Black people deliberately fought degrading messages in media and persistently rejected the notion of black as synonymous with ugly (Craig 2002:8). During the Miss America beauty pageant that served as a space to reinforce white superiority and beauty standard, the NAACP organized its first Afro-American beauty pageant to protest the long standing Miss America beauty pageant. Photographs of glamorous and beautiful black women were published in the black press and circulated within black communities (Craig, 2008:47). Scholar, Maxine Craig states that “while these images were part of black culture, they did not correspond to how all black men and women defined beauty. Nonetheless, they effectively communicated something simple; black women are beautiful, too” (2008:46). During the Black Power and Civil right movements, black people rearticulated the meaning of black racial identity (Craig 2010:9). Black people took pride in physical attributes such as their hair that was previously labeled as bad hair. Afro-hairstyles became good attributes. Altogether, black people took power into their own hands to define what was beautiful. Maxine Craig states that, this new standard of beauty that “celebrated dark skin, naturally kinky hair, and full lips offered redress to those women who had been devalued by earlier beauty standards” (2008:25). While there has been a tremendous change in the arena of

beauty after the Civil Rights Movement and more black women have been uplifted as beautiful in society (Esha Saxena 2018), historical systems of racism and oppression still has a great impact on society's idea of beauty in the United States today.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

Research supports the idea that Eurocentric features (e.g., light skin and long straight hair) is preferred and associated with attractiveness specifically for Black women (Bellinger 2007; Hill 2002; Robinson-Moore 2008). Thus, I divided my research question, *How are black women's lived experiences informed by this constant negotiation of beauty?* into 2 sections. 1) How does a beauty standard informed by racist history affect black women's self-esteem? 2) For black women whose self-esteem has been negatively affected, what methods of resilience do they employ? These two main questions guided my research. As a breakdown of my first question, my research sought to understand through black women's narrative, what their experience of beauty has been in relation to their race and skin tone. In terms of beauty, I specifically focused on skin tone because skin tone is the signifier of blackness (this characterization does not take into account albinism or vitiligo). Research shows that on a social-psychological level, skin color is related to feelings of self-worth, attractiveness, satisfaction, and quality of life (Thompson 2001; Bond and Cash 1992; Boyd Franklin 1991; Cash and Duncan 1984; Chambers et al. 1994; Neal and Wilson 1989; Okazawa Rey, Robinson, and Ward 1987), thus my research sought to understand African American women's understanding of their value and self-worth while existing in a society whose conception of beauty is informed by a racist history (Neal and Wilson, 1989). As a breakdown of my second question, my research aimed at understand methods of resilience black women employed when faced with racist and sexist macro/micro level aggressions in the context of beauty.

To answer these questions, I interviewed 14 self-identified dark-skinned, light-skinned and brown skinned women about their experiences with beauty in relation to race, colorism, its impacts on self-esteem and their methods of resilience.

Research Paradigm

The research conducted used qualitative methods. Qualitative research seeks to provide rich and in-depth analysis of social and human problems (Creswell, 1998). The research question required a method that allowed me to delve into the complexities of African American women's personal experiences of beauty in the context of race and skin tone. This research question required accounts of 1) African American women's unique experiences and perspectives when receiving messages of beauty about their skin color and 2) their interpretations of these messages in relation to their self-esteem. Thus, the research does not go into the field with an assumed answer, rather, it goes into the field with the aim of exploring the issues through the experience and narratives of black women (Pearson-Trammell, 2010). Asking black women questions on personal experiences of discrimination against black features (specifically skin tone), it's connection to their self-esteem and resilience is done to unfold and clarify the research question (Creswell, 1998; Pearson-Trammell, 2010). Findings in the data are interpreted through the lens of the meanings interviewees attached to beauty, skin color and self-esteem.

The research also followed an emergent design. The initial research question focused on the general topic of Eurocentric beauty standards' effects on black women. Throughout the process of collecting data, the data revealed major facets of the topic that was important to the societal perception of beauty and black women's experiences that was not initially thought of. The data revealed the gravity of colorism perpetuated within the black community on

dark-skinned women. It revealed black women's struggles of reconciling experiences of skin tone discrimination from black men, complex realities of lighter skin black women navigating the space between recognizing and experiencing preferential treatment of lighter skin while simultaneously resenting the value that society attaches to having lighter skin. In this way, the qualitative methodology applied to this research allowed room for flexibility so that new information revealed by the data would mold the research trajectory. In addition, in a qualitative study, my role "is considered and not discarded from the results of the data (Creswell, 1998). The researcher is an instrument of data collection, builds an intricate, holistic image, analyzes words, and reports detailed views of subjects (Creswell, 1998)" (Pearson-Trammell, 2010).

Sample

I conducted extensive interviews with 14 women who self-identified as black (for racial and ethnic background of participants, refer to Appendix) from ages 18-22. Similar to Pearson-Trammel who conducted a study resembling mine. I did not include minors because I also did not want "to confound identity development issues typically experienced by adolescents" age 18 and under. I choose to interview the 18-21 age group because these women are part of the millennial age group. Some recently entered the workforce, some are still in College or recently graduated from College. College is an environment that fosters the process of self-discovery amongst young adults. As a result, it is a space where young adults begin to develop a firmer sense of self-identity. As a 21-year old Nigerian-American woman in college, I also picked this age group because, from my experience interacting with peers, black women within this age group have become involved in championing their black female friends when it comes to embracing their beauty and worth as black women. Thus, at this point in a young

adult's life trajectory, I am assuming they have developed more resistance methods than when in high school.

Participants and Recruitment Strategy

I classified these 14 women into 3 categories. Each category had different criteria for inclusion:

The first category included a group of 10 women. While I interviewed the other women for certain reasons, which I will discuss below, these group of women were the main ones whose experiences I focused on. The inclusion criterion for this general group involved 4 college women who self-identified as dark skin, 3 who self-identified as light-skinned and 3 who self-identified as brown skinned. Because I wanted to ensure heterogeneity in my sample, I interviewed women from different colleges and sexual orientations. Most of them are friends of mine who I recruited by reaching out to them personally. I asked if they would be interested in being a participant in my research. To obtain more participants, I used the "snowball" method. "This process is, by necessity, repetitive: informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on" (Noy, 2008). I applied this method to my sampling because it makes use of natural social networks. There is an already established connection. The snowball method assumes the likelihood of trust. My assumption was that referrals would be more comfortable sharing experiences on personal topics of self-esteem and beauty to friends of friends rather than a person with whom they have no connection (Noy, 2008; Biernacki and Waldorf; Atkinson and Flint 2001). As a result, I asked friends I interviewed if they could refer me to some of their friends who might also be interested in participating. My interviewees attended Swarthmore

College, Agnes Scott College, and Morgan State College respectively. Although all were black women, they grew up in different locations (New York, California, New Jersey, Washington D.C, North Carolina, Virginia). While my sample was heterogeneous, I felt it important to have an even number of women in these 3 skin tone categories (light, brown, dark) to make the data I was receiving more balanced across skin tones. For the group of women on my college campus, I conducted face to face interviews with them at Swarthmore College. For the women who attended college in other states, I conducted video call interviews.

The next set of women are 4 owners of Instagram pages that actively promote embracing black women's beauty. The Instagram pages post quotes and images of black women's excellence and achievement, images of encouragement, images that praise black women's physical features and places black women and beauty in a positive light. These pages have thousands of followers and collectively draw in millions of views daily. The goal in deciding to include this demographic of women was because in these women creating such platforms which proactively empowered black women, I believed this sample size would help me understand more explicitly, the *methods of resilience* portion of my research. The inclusion criterion for this category was that they had to be women and had to be owners of Instagram accounts that celebrated black women's beauty.

Unlike the first category of women, I did not require these owners to be of a particular skin tone. I could not be selective in regards to skin tone because firstly, since these owners get hundreds, if not thousands of messages on social media, only these 5 owners out of the 50 owners I reached out to were available to take part in the interview. Secondly, unlike the 9 women I interviewed whom I know personally, I can not gauge what they self-identify as in

terms of their skin tone because I am contacting them through messaging on a social media platform. Nevertheless, this worked out because finding out which skin tones these women self-identified as, without initially knowing, added to my data analysis. Out of these 4 women with these Instagram pages, 2 self-identified as dark-skinned while 2 self-identified as being brown skinned. Because all the 4 owners wanted to keep their identity anonymous, they did not agree to a video or phone call. In that event, they opted for written interviews via Instagram messaging.

Interviews

Although the time duration anticipated for each interview was 45-60 minutes, some interviews extended beyond this time duration as most (not all) participants were forthcoming with their personal experiences. This might have been a result of me being a black woman, connections of friendship and/or similar field of study I had with them. For interviewees who I did not know personally such as the owners of the Instagram pages, they were also forthcoming with their experiences. Some of them (including other women I interviewed who were not in this category) expressed that this was a result of never having the opportunity in an interview setting and/or regularly, to discuss, in depth, their personal experiences of overt and covert racial aggressions in the sphere of what was considered beautiful and the impact this had on their self-esteem. The semi-structured interviews focused on getting African American women's lived experiences with not only explicit discrimination against their skin tone and black features (thick hair, wide lips and hips) but also delved into the subtle and ambiguous ways in which people around them; friends, family, peers enacted and mapped onto them ingrained prejudices of Afro-centric features as being less attractive. Furthermore, the interview focused on

subconscious and conscious behaviors within participants both presently and in the past that signal(ed) the influences of racist and sexist macro/microaggressions in the context of beauty (Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto 2015). The interviews additionally focused on uncovering performances of self-care and empowerment and development of strong emotional capacity in order to resist and reject the adverse impact experiences like these have on self-esteem (Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto 2015).

Questions such as *1) When you were growing up, where did you get your sense of what beauty was from? From your parents, mom, dad, other family members, television, peers? 2) Can you tell me an early memory whether that was happy or sad that had to do with your race and skin color?* focused on understanding these women's experiences of the social perception of beauty growing up. These questions were meant to elucidate how women understood people's behavior towards them in terms of beauty and whether this had anything to do with their race and skin tone or not.

The literature reviewed states "that self-esteem is an evaluation of self-worth and the extent a person perceives [themselves] as a worthy individual" (Byrd and Shavers, 2013). The interview asked questions like *2b) If this early memory was happy or sad, how did it make you feel about yourself?, Do you believe that your color has affected you in any way, whether positive or negative in terms of confidence? Do you think this had any effect on your relationships with family members, peers, and romantic relationships? Please share an example of each with me to clarify if their confidence was affected and if yes, to what extent in their daily and if not, why.*

In the literature review, resilience in a racial context is described as the ability “to persevere and maintain a positive sense of self when faced with omnipresent racial discrimination” (Brown and Tylka 2010, p. 264). Scholar Janette Faulkner (1983) is widely cited. Indeed Holder et. al quote their work. According to scholar Janette Faulkner, armoring is a “specific behavioral and cognitive skills used by Blacks and other people of color to promote self-caring during direct encounters with racist experiences and/or racist ideologies” (196). Faulkner believed that young women of color were taught ways to armor and protect themselves against racism at an early age (Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto 2015).

Questions such as *Some people have a way to deal with cultural expectations of beauty, and they do it by talking to themselves giving themselves encouragement, pep talks. Did you do any of this?, If you did, What did you do and do you feel it was important to do so, Why?, Did you do anything to empower and inspire yourself as a black woman? If yes, what do you do?* Are meant to elucidate adaptive behaviors demonstrated by African American women as a response to microaggression in the context of beauty (Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto 2015).

Similar to Pearson-Trammells’ study, the interviews were semi-structured. As a result, questions that were not anticipated came up to follow the topics that each participant brought up as part of their experiences with beauty, race and skin tone. Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed and then data analysis was performed through coding.

Limitations

I am a dark-skinned Nigerian-American woman, I moved to the United States nine years ago at age 11. I have to point to on the topic of how living in a society whose beauty standard is informed by a racist history has affected black women. Although I wanted my data to represent

people experiences without my preconceived ideas of what their experiences were coloring the data and analysis, I can not discount the fact that my personal experiences possibly created some biases within my study even though I carefully guarded against them.

Furthermore, because I have personal relationships with participants, prior to this study, some have knowledge of my interest in this topic. Throughout my academic career, the construction of beauty and race and has been a primary interest of mine. Thus, participants may have come into the interview with an already formed opinion which may have influenced their responses.

Another limitation in having the participant self-identify as having a dark, light or brown skin tone is that while they may self-identify into a category, socially, others may not see them that way and this could have caused some variation in the data. Furthermore, the data might have been affected by the fact the women who chose to participate in the interview, were women who had a desire to talk about their experiences because they could readily identify racist and sexist discrimination in the context of beauty and their methods of resilience.

Finally, the sample size is relatively small which creates the issue of generalizability. While I made an effort for heterogeneity within my sample; different sexual orientations and ages, a more complete sample would include more people with different socio-economic status.

CHAPTER II

SELF-ESTEEM

Overall Results

The literature reviewed states that “self-esteem is an evaluation of self-worth and the extent a person perceives [themselves] as a worthy individual”. The section ‘Self-Esteem’ refers to how these black women’s sense of self-worth and self-esteem has been negatively affected by the racialized messages of beauty. This section refers to the ways women have come to perceive their self, based on interactions in friendships, familial, romantic and peer relationships that reveal ingrained ideas of black being synonymous with unattractiveness. In the literature review, resilience in a racial context is described as the ability “to persevere and maintain a positive sense of self when faced with omnipresent racial discrimination” (Brown and Tylka 2010 264).

As stated in the introductory chapters, in this research, the physical feature distinctively focused on is skin tone. In the few research that has been done with similar goals as this thesis, the topic that has been explored are specific to colorism and dark-skinned women. In the literature review section, *‘Historical Context’*, it shows that due to the history of colonization and slavery, in society, black women with lighter skin tones are often privileged over black women with darker skin tones because it was a signifier of some European ancestry (Neal and Wilson 1989; Feagin 2014, Frevert and Walker 2014). Thus, the few scholarships similar to this are centered around the influence of white beauty standards on specifically how black women with dark skin tones have been negatively affected by colorism. I wanted to look at women with different skin tones (light, medium, and dark). This is because I wanted to understand how internalizing the larger structure of racism affected not just one group of women, but different

black women's experiences. I wanted to understand the nuances of experiences across skin tones and reveal the ways in which the cycle of internalized racism was perpetuated within the black community when it came to skin tone and beauty. I wanted to understand how these women's struggles were all similar but different and different but similar. What was revealed in this scholarship was that all 14 women experienced negative effects from internalized beauty standards but in different ways listed below;

1) Participants with darker skin tone spoke heavily to the theme of being *"Too Dark to be Beautiful"*.

2) Participants with medium skin tones occupied an in-between that was "acceptable" and sometimes not. In their narrative, the theme of *"don't stay in out in the sun too long because you do not want to get too dark"* emerged and a developed anxiety surrounding becoming too dark became their lived experience.

3) Participants with lighter skin tones' struggle with beauty standards when it came to physical features mainly surrounded the theme of *"struggle with hair and body image"*. But for participants with lighter skin, the data revealed that more importantly, major internal conflict stemmed from:

a) recognizing that there was a privilege given to people with lighter skin and grappling with the frustration of having this privilege that was not invited or wanted but was given anyway b) struggling with the idea that they were *"too light to be black and too black to be white"*.

Self-Esteem

I divided this portion of the findings into 2 different sections. In the first section, I mostly discuss the experiences of participants with both medium to dark skin tones. The second section discusses the experiences of women with lighter skin tones. All these recurring themes in their own way contributed to the participants diminished sense of self-worth and esteem. I divided this first section into 5 different core themes. For my findings, I have used pseudonyms to conceal the identities of interviewees.

SECTION 1**Core Theme 1: The Darker the Berry?...Insults Surrounding Being too Dark**

At the beginning of the interview, each participant was asked to recall their earliest memory of something that happened pertaining to their skin color in relation to beauty. All 14 of the participants recalled countless stories of being ostracized, being made fun of, bullied, teased and harassed throughout their childhood, adolescence and young adult life. Depending on the woman's skin tone, these insults took on a different shape and form. It is important to note that for the purposes of this study, I did not identify the participant's skin tone, rather, the participants self-identified as having dark, medium or light skin toned. In this category of verbal insults surrounding being too dark, the data revealed all the black women experienced being insulted but the insults often took different forms based on the black woman's skin tone (examples and details will be given below). 11 out of the 14 participants recalled instances and stories of being assaulted by other black peers and family members. While some of the comments the participants received were made intentionally, some comments and actions were not said with the intention to hurt. Although painful and uncomfortable to recall for some, with some tearful

accounts, speaking to this issue revealed how years of internalized oppression, self-hatred and ignorance produce unconscious behaviors within the black community that is detrimental to black women's self-esteem. As stated previously insults took different forms based on skin tone.

For women with lighter and medium skin tones, insults took the shape of getting darker (for example, during the summer months) and being told things such as they needed to stay away from the sun because they were getting too "dark/crispy" with the insinuation that were getting more and more unattractive. Below are some of the insults listed from black women with lighter and medium skin tones:

- **Zola:** "You think that you are black but you are not...Don't go out into the sun cuz I don't want you getting dark."
- **Issa:** "Comments about my skin tone came from family members who said it's the summer, make sure that you don't get too dark... they would say "Your so dark. Why are you so dark? You're getting too dark. Why are you out in the sun?"
- **Sapphire:** "I just had people like call me black or dirty or they'll say your skin is dirty"
- **Sapphire:** "I would be like "oh, I can't get any darker because the people are going to say look how dark she is by being in the sun". So, I didn't want my skin to get any darker than it was because, I was embarrassed of my skin color."
- **Yasmina:** "All the hot guys in our junior class when we were senior they all sat at the same table and they just randomly told her, "Oh yes, I would never hookup with a black girl... I just remember being upset... I remember feeling especially offended because of the context."

For women with darker skin tones, insults mostly took the shape of being told they were “too dark” therefore ugly. Below are some of the insults listed of women with darker skin tones:

- **Ifé:** “People would say really, really horrible...like dark-skinned girls have purple pussies... like they're disgusting... like nobody wants a dark-skinned girl unless you thick, like so many things because dark was just seen as being so horrible...”
- **Kellan:** “I was always being made fun of because of my skin color, not being pretty enough, being tall and lanky. things about how I'm "too black" or "I'm ugly".... What hurts most is that most of it came from my own black people”
- **Asha:** “The earlier days of social media (not MySpace, like facebook times) there were always jokes on dark skin girls comparing them to roaches, making fun of them when they wore colored hair...”
- **Sacha:** “I used to be called dog or mutt because of my skin or whatever... and then at some point someone like hocked a loogie on my bag... I mean he didn't like me to be fair, well, not to be fair, but he didn't like me...but specifically, he did it because he was like ‘oh you're ugly’.”

While some of these insults were said intentionally, some were said to these women very casually. While some participants stated trying hard to brush these insults away and take it with a grain of salt, it was evident that these comments as they also stated had negatives effect on them.

Insults like these act as forms of microaggression against black women. According to a study on the impacts of micro/macro aggression in black women's lives, microaggressions are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Donovan et al., 2002). These messages communicate a

hostile, derogatory or negative message and some of the most detrimental acts of microaggression come from well-intentioned people (Donovan et al., 2002, Sue, 2010) such as family members. An example of this is when family members told Issa and Sapphire that they do not want them getting too dark. Getting these comments from black family and peers demonstrates a manifestation of the internalization that happens when living in a social and political institution founded on colonialism, slavery, and racism. Because everyday occurrences of microaggressions appear quite harmless they are sometimes seen “small slights” and trivial. However, research has indicated that they have a powerful impact on people’s psychological well-being (Sue, 2010, Donovan et al., 2002). The subsequent themes will demonstrate how these microaggressions lay the beginning foundations of low self-esteem and how these act of casual degradation perpetrated against these participant resulted in a complex layer of issues relating to self-identity, worth, and value.

Core Theme 2: Negative Media Images

In Pearson-Tramell’s qualitative study of dark-skinned women on the topic of colorism, self-esteem, and resiliency, a core theme that kept emerging during the interview process was 1) how the black community had internalized negative media images about black women and their level of attractiveness, 2) how this resulted in both conscious and unconscious acts of microaggressions towards black women and 3) how this caused an unconscious perpetuation of racialized beauty standards within the black community. During my interviews, negative media images was a theme that emerged throughout participants response to the interview questions. All 14 participants throughout the interview noted that “where you get the idea of beauty is

definitely...media...because the whiter the better, right?" (Sapphire). It is important to mention that the women who spoke heavily on this theme in relation to skin tone were often women with darker complexions and a few women with medium skin tones. When these black women looked to media, the negative images worked to reinforce the idea that they were not considered attractive and that black women, in general, were seen in a negative light. All participants were aware of the fact that societal notions of beauty were created and sustained by media's representation of beauty. From advertisements that only featured black women with Eurocentric features to television shows that featured black women in roles where they were the less attractive character and portrayed as more aggressive. Not only were the participants aware that the notions of beauty were created and sustained by media and this directly impacted the negative idea of their level of desirability, they recognized that this, in combination with the way other people internalized these ideas of beauty and acted out of that internalization resulted in their low self-esteem.

Growing up, having few representations of African American women in television heightened the participant's awareness that black women were not often showcased on television because physically, they were less appealing to watch. Yara describes this dynamic below:

Since I was a kid...like compared to t.v today, I did see more representation but essentially... I don't know like it wasn't enough for me ..if that makes any sense... because like I was a very insecure kid so like...me seeing shows like Fresh Prince of Bel Air or like the Proud Family for like a short amount of time...but then like 80% of the t.v is just like white people, then it wasn't really as beneficial. (Yara)

Growing up, Yara was hard pressed to find television shows that had representation for black women. To see shows like *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* or *Proud family* about black families provided some form of outlet where she had a show that had positive representations of black women. Nevertheless, she points out that even during this time, almost 80% of television shows had no representation of dark-skinned black women. Because there were very few representations of darker skinned women on television, this added to her insecurities surrounding her body image and beauty. She expands on this topic below:

The way that black women are portrayed through media...it's like..sometimes it could be positive but a majority of the time, it's like they take a black woman, they take someone who is black but still has the features of white women or the quote-unquote, ideal women. So it's like they try to be like...what I see is that they try to be pro-black but the women they pick are either really skinny or they have a lighter skin. So it's just like, they are saying we support black women but only if its a certain type. They can't be too heavy or dark, the hair can't be too nappy. It's just a way of...the way the media tells black women is to assimilate into American culture. (Yara)

When looking for reflections of herself, she found that the black women that were portrayed in television often times had eurocentric features and were lighter skinned. Seeing that the black women that were portrayed on television had to be close to the white standard of beauty made her feel insecure. It reinforced the idea that as a darker skinned girl with nappy hair, who was not skinny, her features and physicality was far removed from what was considered beautiful. While she was grateful for some representation of black women in television, this was not enough as it only served to establish her insecurities. Her statement, “they are saying we

support black women but only if its a certain type right, they can't be too heavy, dark, the hair can't be too nappy” is a realization of the changing definitions and negotiations of what it meant to be beautiful. A realization that in society, black women whose physical features were considerably closer to eurocentric features had more of a chance of getting visibility than black women with Afrocentric features such as nappy hair, darker skin tone, and curvy body. This reveals how racist sentiments of whites being superior to blacks in the United States manifests in images and representations in media when it projects the idea that “we support black women but only if its a certain type...”, a type that fits more closely with Eurocentric features. While it seemed as though more black women were given representation on television and regarded as beautiful, racist ideologies underlie the selection of what black women was represented in media for the world to see. When black women were finally given some representation, it came with the requirement that their physicality needed to be close Eurocentric features.

For Nala, an owner of one of the instagram pages dedicated to uplifting black women, she says that she moved to the United States at age 11 and expresses that she had ever had to think about race before she moved to America. Thus, she did not understand the differences in races but, after spending some time in the United States, she soon discovered that she “[would] have to work twice as hard...because of [her] skin color and [that]...people always associated everything bad with black skin”. She too expressed having seen what was considered beautiful from media. When she began her modeling career, she started to see how Yara’s sentiment of black women with Eurocentric features being the more acceptable standard of beauty for black women play out in her life. She relays this below:

I saw what is considered beautiful from all over, especially social media, TV, and just

teens all around...Especially when I started to get involved in the modeling business...all the magazines and pictures and what is a "must" to make it as a model...they talked about how your hair needs to be straight when you go to auditions so it's "easier" to work with. How you have to be tall and fit with a lighter skin...and how beautiful was when you have this amazing skin that is not too dark, how your hair needs to be some way to be good looking. (Nala)

Although Nala saw this dynamic play out in her life, she did not internalize this. However, she spoke about how these messages pushed her to feel more beautiful to try to do something that “would not let this beauty standard be a reality”. In her life, she also expressed how this played out in her interaction with peers. As a girl who was a medium skin tone with curly hair, her peers believe that she had “good hair”. While she was praised by other black girls for having good hair, she expresses an uncomfortability by saying that:

Most girls in school used to tell me I have "good hair" like their hair is considered bad...I never took that as a compliment because all it did was put black girls down...I don't get hurt by those comments but it just kept making me upset because I hated hearing that, it was my friends who said that and I wanted them to understand you don't have to have long straight or curly hair to have good hair. (Nala)

This particular dynamic in how other black girls would compliment her hair and refer to it as “good hair like their hair own hair was considered bad” hair reveals two things. 1) It reveals black girls internalizing the beauty standard stating that any features closer to eurocentric features (light skin, curly or wavy silky hair) was what was considered beautiful 2) this reveals

an unconscious categorization of their afro hair as bad without them having to explicitly state it. From this theme of negative media images, the core theme “*Too Dark to be Beautiful*” emerged.

Core Theme 3: Effects of Being Too Dark to be Beautiful

Based on what was constantly seen in media, participants with darker and medium skin tones spoke heavily to the idea that for black women, beauty was correlated to the hue of their skin. As demonstrated in the literature review, in the African American community, higher value is ascribed to black women with lighter skin tones and this is derived from the Eurocentric standards of beauty that favored long straight hair, fair to light skin complexion, lighter eyes, often blue or hazel and a skinny/tall figure. This internalization was what displayed when findings showed that projections of preference of lighter skin tone often came from peers, authority figures and family members within the black community. During this process, only 4 out of 14 participants explicitly mentioned a stigma against darker skin coming from a non-person of color.

Sub-theme 3a: How this was translated in peer relationships

From a young age, participants noted that offenses of colorism were often committed by peers and family members that would imply that black women with lighter skin tones were to be allotted preferential treatment. They experienced various scenarios that downgraded darker skinned women and uplifted lighter skinned women. Often times growing up, participants recall there being a “light skin versus dark skin” discourse that was pervasive throughout their high school years. As Asha expresses, “while in school the conversation amongst my peers it made me upset. If two women are beautiful the lighter one is considered to be better looking because

of her skin and it made me feel less beautiful because of that. My confidence slipped”. While some parents reinforced this ideology unconsciously, some parents tried to uplift their young daughters but Kellan expresses that,

Even though my mother showered me with compliments that didn't stop the hateful comments that I received from my classmates or just people in general. I was always being made fun of because of my skin color, not being pretty enough, being tall and lanky. What hurts most is that most of it came from my own black people. (Kellan)

For Sacha, during her high school years, conversations surrounding lighter skin versus darker skin was a large topic of discussion. These conversations were also transferred unto social media. During the time, she described that the topic of “light skin versus dark skin” was ultimately done for entertainment but expressed that underneath this were grave ramifications and underlying the conversation were harmful insinuations that some women were more worthy and valuable than some others. She describes that in high school “it was like who is better? people would post pictures of a light skin person and a dark skin person and be like oh light skin people are better and put a whole bunch of emojis of thirst”. At first, she also participated in these conversations and laughed it off. This was not for lack of understanding what the conversation meant to her about her desirability and worth as a dark-skinned girl (which she goes on to talk about) but because as she describes,

When you go to school you wanna fit in so [when] the discourses [are] happening you don't really question...well not necessarily that you don't question, if you question then you do it in private, you don't really ask people like why is this happening then you kinda wrath like face the risk of being like cast and sort of an outsider. (Sacha)

While sometimes re-establishing the white beauty standard in the black community is done unconsciously, at the time, Sacha realizing that this conversation was detrimental to women's sense of value and confronting peers about it would have had other negative implications on her socially. Regardless, Sacha goes on to describe how she stopped engaging in this discourse. This moment revealed the complex nuanced ways that white beauty standards are upheld. She further explains that with the "the light skin dark skin debate...I'm engaging because at first it's funny like a nervous laughter...you know... so it's kinda just like haha, light skin, dark skin but then you realize that you don't fit into the light skin category". Because it had always been a conversation she was acquiescent about, very quickly, her participation in the discourse turned into an annoyance about the conversation. When she stopped engaging in these conversations, she expresses that "whenever the debate came up, it was like y'all don't see what this is doing. Like...y'all don't see what this does to people...like y'all don't see how someone's value can be diminished in a matter of seconds?". The literature review states that the way you are treated communicated to a person their sense of worth and oftentimes people who fit into the standard of physical attractiveness are often times treated better. *In Core theme 1: The Darker the Berry...Insults Surrounding Being too Dark*, Sacha was also the participants that stated that she was often called a dog or mutt. She shared the story of when a boy who did not like her had "hocked a loogie on [her] bag...because he was like 'oh you're ugly'". Through these interactions, people's sense of what she was worth in society was being communicated to her indirectly. Being surrounded by this conversation made her feel that she was being put down. During her middle school years, she recalled being bullied a lot, one reason was due to her skin tone. She recalled at a young ascribing so much value and worth to her skin tone. As a result, in

high school, when the conversation surrounding “light skin versus dark skin” came about, it quickly turned into annoyance as she expresses below:

It was just like I was annoyed because from jump, I thought it was stupid like I engaged and then was like this was dumb but then it just turned into annoyance because it was like I don't want to feel put down and I don't want to feel less than because of this foolish discourse that you guys choose to ascribe to I don't want to feel put down like this is a joke to you but like what's a joke to you is not a joke to other people. (Sacha)

She continues,

At one point I think this was 8th grade someone decided to make a rate list and I was at the bottom of the rate list. I think my scores where like negative 1000 a triple 0 and a hell no and uhm I like.. it was like oh you're just too dark. So I remember I was the darkest person in the class at that moment. (Sacha)

For Ifé, she remembers also being surrounded by the “light skin versus dark skin” discourse in her school. On a particular day on Tumblr, a social media site it was a dark-skinned appreciation day. She recalls creating a Snapchat story on this day about telling her friends what her experience with beauty was like as a dark-skinned woman. She recounts the story below;

In my story, I talked about how in 5th grade I was called ugly 87 times and I kept count in my journal how many times I was called ugly. Because I was so dark, because of my dark skin and then in 6th grade it got worse, where people would say really, really horrible things...like dark-skinned girls have purple pussies... like they're disgusting... like nobody wants a dark-skinned girl unless you thick, like so many things because dark was just seen as being so horrible...(Ifé)

Most of the participants, dark, light and medium complexioned, recall experiences of becoming conscious of the ideology that lighter skin was considered more attractive than darker skin at a very young age. Like Sacha and Ifé, they shared how throughout their life how this ideology was being reinforced. For Sapphire, when asked to recall an earliest memory of an experience whether positive or negative that had to do with her skin color in relation beauty, she says that:

I think the very first time was like elementary school. We were playing on the playground and like the pieces of wood that are in playground underneath it, there's dirt so like some got on my skin and some got on the white kids skin and like you can see it on their but it was kinda the same color on my skin and they were like oh your skin looks like dirt. I went home and thought about it and I was like my skin is not dirty or like I knew that there shouldn't be any comparison of my skin to like something dirty because also you can't help the color of your skin that you're like born with so I just remember that we were kids, so they thought they were joking but anyone being told that the color of their skin is equivalent to something that's like thrown on the ground or trash...that's basically you saying that your value is nothing. (Sapphire)

Sub-theme 3b: How this translated in familial relationships

In school, conversations surrounded mostly darker and medium skin toned women being told that they were too dark. The awareness of this ideology that lighter was idealized in society manifested in participants home regardless of skin color. Out of the 14 participants 7 women dealt with this at home.

With Ifé who retold the story of her experience of being a dark-skinned woman and being called ugly 87 times in school, this idea that she was ugly because she had dark skin was

reinforced at home. Not only did it reinforce her perceived ugliness, it translated into her feelings surrounding her value. On her mother's side who was Trinidadian, she was the darkest person. When she would go back to visit her Trinidadian family, they would question why she was so dark. She relayed that

When I went back home...the rest of my family is really light skinned, my mom was pretty light skinned and so I was the darkest person in my family and so even going back home to Trinidad, sometimes when I was younger, people would tell me like, "Oh you're not really Trini, you're not part of the family cuz you're so dark". Dark was always perceived as being really really ugly, [in the Snapchat story] I was basically saying how...I first felt that I was ugly in Trinidad with my family but then also you know seeing lighter skinned people all around me made me see what was valuable and what was valued...I really, really felt ugly. (Ifé)

In her statement, "seeing lighter skinned people all around me made me see what was valuable and what was valued", not only did her being regarded as less attractive affect her perception of her attractiveness, she was able to see, as the literature review states, that in society, when there is a higher degree of perceived attractiveness, these people are often socially and psychologically rewarded (Dellinger and Williams 1997; Hatfield and Sprecher 1986) while those who do not, are penalized which affects them socially, psychologically, emotionally and mentally (Frevert and Walker 2014, Jean and Feagin 1998). This positive reward and affirmation that people with a perceived higher level of attractiveness received communicated their higher value in society. This meant for Ifé she was penalized in the sense that since she had a dark skin tone, she was labeled as undesirable. This affected her psychologically and emotionally because she began to

internalize those messages she received not only from society but family and in turn began to see herself as not good enough. In participants with medium skin tone, this dichotomy of reward and penalty is more explicitly revealed through their experiences. In speaking with participants about family dynamics and attitudes towards beauty and skin tone, for black women with medium skin tone, the core theme “*Stay Out of the Sun: Anxiety Surrounding Getting Too Dark*”.

Core Theme 4: Stay Out of The Sun: Anxiety Surrounding Getting Too Dark

For Issa who has a medium skin tone, in her family, the idea of being rewarded when she was lighter and being “penalized” when she was darker came up frequently. This eventually had negative effects on her psychologically, emotionally and mentally. In her story, she states that in her family, although there was no preference in how people were treated based on their skin tone, these comments eventually had negative effects on her and how she thought about her body. When she was lighter skin during the winter months her value was communicated to her in different ways. For example, her mother would say, “*Oh, in the winter time you look so light. Like you look almost mixed*” as a positive reinforcement of her beauty. She states that “when I was little it always came up as you should be happy or proud of being a little lighter. I was told not to stay out in the sun too long so I won't get darker.” When she got darker during the summer months, she was constantly scolded about staying out in the sun for too long,

Issa expresses below:

When I do/or did get darker people would ask what happened to me because I looked prettier before... most of the comments about my skin tone came from family members who said it's the summer, make sure that you don't get too dark. For example, a family

member would say, "Your so dark. Why are you so dark? You're getting too dark. Why are you out in the sun?" No affection is shown. Just family members making unnecessary comments that eventually have an effect on you in terms of how you think about and treat your body. (Issa)

Occupying this in-between had a negative effect on her psychologically, mentally and health-wise as this caused her to developed an anxiety surrounding becoming too dark. She says that,

Because of the comments my mom and siblings said, It made me terrified of getting darker...I thought people would judge me so I used to look for sunblock cream with a high SPF. It was so bad that I literally had a Vitamin D deficiency. It was bad because a lot of the South Asians would say, " I'm getting so dark because I'm almost your skin color or I'm getting so black" and they'd look scared as if it was bad to look black. I think it had a negative effect on me when I was younger. I thought that people would not like me because I was too dark. (Issa)

Like Issa, 3 out of the 5 participants who were of a medium skin tone (and 1 out of the 3 women who were of a lighter skin tone) experienced anxiety surrounding getting too dark because messages of beauty that they received often praised them when they were a little lighter. This demonstrates research by sociologist, Gordon Patzer (2008) and Feminist writer Naomi Wolf (1990) in their research on beauty and physical attractiveness stating that society does reward beauty. Those with a perceived high level of attractiveness are more likely to be treated better (Patzer 2008 Jean and Feagin, 1998; Craig 2002, Englen 2017; Frevert and Walker 2014; Pearson-Trammell 2010). In Issa's story, this takes the form of being treated in an explicitly

positive way when she was lighter and being treated in an implicitly negative way when she got darker. Below Issa talks about the psychological effect occupying this in between had on her growing up:

[When] my mom would make a comment and say, "Oh, in the winter time you look so light. Like you look almost mixed" Hearing that and associating that as positive versus someone saying in the summer that I was getting too dark as being negative. These comparisons and comments happened so much when I was little that I eventually internalized comments and I became what was acceptable so that people would think I'm good enough. (Issa)

Not only were messages of beauty reinforced in school, for 7 out of 14 participants, messages of ugliness that were detrimental to the participant's self-esteem were reinforced at home. As previously stated, the literature review states that because physical beauty is closely tied to worth, it is deadly to personal feelings of self-worth for black women who do not fit into this category. In Issa's story, this sense of urgency and anxiety to fit what is acceptable in order to be considered good enough, shows how opinions of beauty (being commended when lighter and scolded when darker) seeps into the idea of being worthy (being good enough). Because there was a stark difference between how she was treated when she was lighter versus darker, the underlying message she received from these comparisons signaled to her that she was not worthy of positive attention when her skin got darker from being out in the sun.

For Sapphire, her anxiety around getting too dark had stemmed from comments made by peers and what she observed in society about beauty and skin tone. She states that while she

received immense love and support from her family, her brother unconsciously modeled that light skin was the standard of beauty in his dating preferences. She relayed that:

My twin brother he and I...are the same color. He only really dated white girls or like mixed girls, never anyone my color or my moms color or darker so to me, that also meant like okay well I guess because he only likes girls that are lighter than him... and his friend also seems to like only white girls, I was like well okay I guess maybe like darker skin girls like me aren't pretty. (Sapphire)

Sapphire expresses that without realizing it, her brother had reinforced the idea that lighter skin was preferred over darker skin making it difficult for her to find validation and affirmation of her skin tone. These indirect acts that established colorism had as much effect as the overt and direct comments and this was something she took with her going into relationships. She explains how this skin tone dynamic left her with a sense of inferiority going into relationships. She says, “for a while it made me seem like well, why should I even try to be in relationships because I felt like oh well, a prettier like white skin girl is always gonna be picked first over someone like me or darker than me”. This color dynamic that she witnessed from her brother and his friend chiseled at her sense of attractiveness. For many other women, they also spoke about how going into romantic relationships, they saw men that they were attracted to reinforce the dynamic that “lighter was better”. From this, the theme *“Invisibility: The Desire to be Desirable”* emerged.

Core Theme 5: Invisibility: The Desire to be Desirable

Similar to Pearson-Tramell’s study, this core theme refers to the ways in which the participants had felt unseen, unheard, unrecognized or unacknowledged (2010:62). For 10 out of

the 14 participants, the most prominent area in which they had felt invisible was in regard to potential love interests. 11 out of the 14 interviewees are heterosexual women and 3 are bisexual; often, although participants discussed having internalized this projection that “lighter was better” from the men in their life, they acknowledge women also perpetuated this colorist perspective. The notion that “lighter is better” that men both consciously and unconsciously projected especially in romantic relationships often times than not, is not intentional behavior meant to actively put women down but a result of the internalization of anti-blackness that occurs when living in a social system deeply rooted in racial prejudice. As Kellan mentions, “Yes, I do think it [negative images about black women] plays a huge role in black men's concept of black women. White women are made to seem like they have it all whereas black women are always portrayed badly.” Because white beauty standards affect the ways in which people perceive attractiveness, romantic relationships and dating preferences serves as sites where the effects are explicitly demonstrated. Ifé says that “ [while] I wanted to be light skinned because that was valued, it wasn't until I started dating and I started really entering that romantic sphere, that I really, really felt ugly”. 8 out of the 14 participants recalled being told some version of “I really only date light skin girls” when they were speaking to a potential love interests or someone that they were already in a relationship with.

For Ifé, when she first started dating, she dated men and repeatedly recalled her love interests saying things such as, “I really only date light skin girls... like... you are the exception and its only cuz you got a lil' booty and some breasts. That's why I'm dating you cuz I really only date light skin girls”. For Zainab in her experience dating, she says, “I had an instance where I dated this guy who literally told me that I was almost an 8/10 on my best day and that he

preferred light skin girls with long hair over girls like me. He ended up breaking my heart for a girl more his type. It really put my confidence down.” Women who were told this in their heterosexual relationships reported that it was said as though it was a compliment, that they were the exception but this only worked to slowly injure their self-esteem as these colorist and discriminatory acts signaled to them that skin tone had an evaluative meaning. Zelu recalls a particular incident where her ex had shown the workings colorist perspective on a subconscious level.

The person talking actually at the time was my ex boyfriend. And his other black friends. It [my confidence] slipped because it made me want to be like lighter. At the time he was my boyfriend so of course, I wanted to be what he thought was beautiful. But when he spoke it was as if lighter meant prettier. He said that light skins "breaks hearts". As if dark skins can't. I don't think he understood how it made me feel...My confidence slipped but now I know better. No one's opinion should make you question how you feel about yourself. (Zelu)

Zelu had grown up with a strong willed confident mother who had raised her to be the same way and reminded her constantly of her confidence, beauty, grace and intelligence. But, even in struggling to fight against this beauty stereotype and a persistent awareness to not let acts of colorism affect what she believed about herself, these remarks still had a way of chipping at her self-confidence. To these women, who were told a version of “I don’t normally date dark black girls”, it was a backhanded compliment that reinforced that they were not normally what was seen as valuable, statements alluding to the fact that they should feel lucky because they were chosen. Whether intentional or unintentional, what Zelu and Ifé’s partner at the time had said,

unfortunately, sent the message that their partners recognized that they could have had it better but settled.

Ifé continued to speak of how throughout the years, her dating experiences reinforced the fact that she was considered undesirable.

It's like that was accentuated when I was cheated on a lot of times in my relationships and my partners would cheat on me with light skinned women. My longest relationship, I was with him for 4 years, he was a light-skin Nigerian man, very much into his light skin persona. So he actually was in another relationship with a light-skinned Puerto Rican girl and so I had found out about that... uhm... It was really detrimental to my self-esteem and also when I came to college I was dating somebody and then, he eventually... after we broke up, started dating one of my really good friends and she's light skinned, curly hair, long hair and so I think seeing that and seeing the pattern of that, like people leaving me for light skin women..like...showed me that I wasn't valuable. (Ifé)

Sacha who had shared a detailed experience about the “light skin vs dark skin” debate that was happening during her high school years, at the time recognized the detrimental effects and dismissed the conversations as stupid and ridiculous. While she dismissed it as an annoyance, it was not until she tried to be involved in romantic relationships that the effects of this rhetoric struck her sense of self-worth. She relays

When the light skin darkskin debate came around I would get annoyed because I'm like this is stupid. But then, when I wanted to get into a relationship with somebody... so when I was in high school I was known for having a thing for Puerto Rican men or like just like latino men in general but then it really struck when like twice I was told ‘I don't

date dark black girls or you're too dark for me... so its like again not only... I felt...I felt com..I felt looked over in favor of someone who's lighter. (Sacha)

She further explains what the culture in her environment dating wise below,

People ascribe so much value in New York on skin tone...[they'll] be like "imma bag me this Dominican chick or like Puerto Rican chick" but the conversation never gears toward "imma bag me this black chick" black men are never like I'm gonna date a black girl. Puerto rican men are never like "I'm gonna date a black girl" like we are always outside of the realm of desire...on top of that people are ascribing intelligence unto skin color as well and for some reason, people are so afraid of intelligence where I'm from that like they usually think that black girls are loud and smart and are not worth it, so they are just like bye. (Sacha)

Due to assimilation of racist and colorist perspectives by participant's partners, interviewees experiences in intimate romantic relationship accentuated the notion that having darker skin was less valued in society. Overall, women who had darker and medium skin tones were often the only ones who spoke about feeling invisible, ignored and looked over when it came to the discussion around being too dark. On the other hand, women who were of a lighter skin tone spoke about a life experience that came with it's own sets of struggles. A plight that had detrimental effects on their own sense of self-worth and racial identity. In the subsequent sections, I will talk about the experiences of women with lighter skin tones.

SECTION 2

This second section discusses the experience of women with lighter skin. I divided this section into 3 different themes of; *Issues of Identity: Too light to be black, Too Black to be White,*

Core Theme 6: Issues of Identity: Too light to be black, Too Black to be White

To understand the present-day subdued feelings of resentment, hurt and confusion within the black community in regard to skin tone, it is important to iterate the past history of colonialism and slavery that privileged lighter skin over darker skin. In speaking with participants with darker skin tone, their experiences of being valued over lighter skin women led to feelings of insecurity on their perceived attractiveness around black women who were of lighter complexion. For participants with darker skin that wished to be of a lighter skin complexion, some experienced feelings of inferiority around lighter skinned women. Although not all darker skinned black women react the same way to colorism, it is important to understand that darker skinned women's retaliation toward lighter skin did not stem from a hatred of black women with lighter skin tone, this came from years of internalizing the rhetoric that "lighter is better", from hurt feelings of this idea being perpetuated by not only the larger social world but the black community itself. It stemmed from seeing an African American woman with a lighter complexion and longing to be that but an insecurity in understanding that they according to society, they could not be that which was perceived as having higher value. It is also important to mention that this retaliation also stemmed from some lighter skinned black women believing and perpetuating the rhetoric that lighter was better. While this is the case, it is vital to acknowledge

that due to this collective trauma there was unconscious retaliation, a misplaced anger from some dark-skinned black women against lighter skinned women. It is vital to acknowledge that lighter skinned women bore the brunt of bullying from people with darker skin tones. In their life experience, they endured feelings of alienation, unfair judgment such being perceived as stuck up or conceited leading to confusion and hurt, having their race and ethnicity questioned and feelings of embarrassment and guilt surrounding undue favoritism of black women with lighter skin.

For women with lighter skin tones, a much bigger struggle stemmed from racial identity formation within a group whose race and ethnicity was often called into question. Their blackness, often questioned by other members of the black community led to feelings of isolation and ostracization. In Cunningham's article, "Colored Existence: Racial Identity Formation in Light-Skin Blacks", she writes that "the longing to be accepted, the sting of rejection: these may be the most pervasive and emotionally challenging components of the current light-skin Black experience." 2 out of the 3 lighter skinned participants report that it was often clear to them that they would not be fully accepted by whites because they were too black to be white but they also report never being fully accepted by the black community either as they were considered not black enough.

For Amina, her issues with self-identity mostly stemmed from her experience around her peers. When asked during the interview to recall her earliest memory of something that happened that had to do with her skin color in relation to beauty, while darker skinned women reported being told they were too dark, therefore ugly, she mentions that "I've had a lot of people tell me that I'm not actually black. Like I look like I'm mixed and I must have at least one parent who is

white”. Yasmina also recalls being told by a darker skinned friend, ““it just to us you're not black because you're light skinned””. Yasmina relays that “it’s just like a hard thing like I'm too black to be white but now I'm not black enough to be black so where do I go?”. Amina whose parents are both black relayed that all through middle school and high school, this harassment encompassing the notion of not being black enough was her experience. She communicated that the only time this stopped was when she arrived in college. The mistreatment and bullying she endured as a young child made her feel isolated and alone. Below she recounts one experience of being harassed by a black peer:

There was one girl who cornered me when I was in middle school and she asked me if I was mixed and I said no because I'm not mixed because both of my parents are black and she's like, “Yes you are! I was like, “No I’m not,” and she says YOU’RE NOT [black]! and I was like “YES! YES, I am” And she said “There’s no way that you’re black”, and I was like do you want to see a picture of my parents? Is that what it would take for you to leave me alone? Is that what it would take for you to accept me as black? And so that was just one example of stuff like that happening to me. (Amina)

Growing up she described her middle school experience as a nightmare because she endured endless taunts and bullying. She expresses that while this also had to do with other factors such as her being very small and short, it was compounded upon by the fact that she was also a lighter skinned black girl. She describes the nuances of her experience below:

I had never had black friends that were girls they always bullied me when I was in school. When I was in elementary and middle school I got bullied a lot by like black girls

I was really short as a kid so that's what they told me. I mean in all of middle school some girl who happened to be black stole my lunch box and was like rifling through it while I was right there and I walked up to her and was like what are you doing and another girl slammed my locker close in front of my face. I had almost gotten into an altercation one time with some other girls who were being mean to me....I think it was partially how I look but also how I sound, I think that was like a big thing because like I don't sound black enough for some people and that makes them really angry and they don't want to leave me alone about it. (Amina)

Yasmina also expresses in her story, the idea of not sounding black enough and how this contributed to her feelings of otherness within the black community.

This may sound weird or bad but like I'm not really in touch with my blackness because I've been around white people my entire life so I don't have like a black person's street cred and I'm light skin so people can detect from it me and other black females... in general... I don't get along like I'm currently PR chair for the black student association on campus like we don't click and I feel like they don't like me. I don't know why, I don't feel like I belong because they have all these black culture references and they speak [AAVE] and I don't sound like that and I don't know information like that and I feel like I definitely stick out and they don't bother to try and make me feel included so I feel like I just don't get along very often with black women there are a lot of instances where I just don't feel comfortable because I feel like I'm literally an *oreo...an oreo is like someone who's black on the outside but white on the inside and for me what makes it worse is that I'm not even an oreo... I'm like a golden oreo because I'm light skin *laughs*. (Yasmina)

Similar to Yasmina, Amina describes several moments where she felt uncomfortable and disconnected from people's perception of blackness and how her self-esteem had suffered because of it.

I didn't feel like I fit in with anyone...and I had a lot of like anxiety around black people and anxiety about my blackness because I didn't feel like I was black enough which now as an older person, I'm like that's dumb but [back] then, I was really stressed out about it and I got into high school and I didn't have black friends for awhile and I was like, I suck, I suck at this. I don't have any black friends, I don't have any friends that are girls that are black, I don't know how to talk to people about these things... like everyone thinks that I'm some sort of fraud!... I don't know I always felt like a fraud, I always got a lot of, oh you sound like a white girl and you talk like a white girl and I used to get this from other people who were black and also other people who were white because if I'm not black well I know I'm not white. (Amina)

This confusion that Amina felt added to her feelings of insecurity surrounding her blackness. For Yasmina being told that she sounded white from other people and the fact that she was light skinned, she explained, made her feel like everyone's hall pass color,

Because I'm light skin, I'm given this sort of can I say...well I'll use the word...I'm given this sort of privilege, where I don't have to think about why someone doesn't like me because I'm sort of everyone hall pass color... I'm like the token, like the everyone of everyone. (Amina)

Core Theme 7: “*Light Skin Privilege...I Don’t Want It*”

Contrary to Yasmina and Amina, Zola, had a unique experience surrounding her racial identity. While Yasmina and Amina had gone through the experience of being too light to be black, Zola grew up with a mother who tried to get her daughter to take advantage of her light skin and did everything to conceal her and her daughter’s black identity. Growing up as a black girl who was Dominican in the United States, Zola struggled with identity because to her mother, a white-passing Dominican woman who had grown up in the Dominican Republic, black was synonymous with being bad. For Zola, her mother was the main perpetrator of colorist and discriminatory acts. Although Zola eventually came to understand her blackness by going through a long process of self-discovery, growing up, the relationship she had with her mother was ridden with turmoil and she described herself as a troubled child.

Zola lived in a neighborhood with many immigrants from the Dominican Republic, in this environment, people privileged lighter skin over darker skin. Zola says that in her neighborhood, “light skin is the right skin and white skin is the right skin”. Parents in [her] neighborhood say it to their own children. Because Zola’s mother also believed this, her mother was adamant about the fact that Zola was not black and reacted very negatively when Zola would call herself black and get darker from being in the sun. Growing up, Zola had felt that, “even though [she] was very light, [her mother] didn't like [her] because of some of the aspects of [her] blackness. Growing up, when her mother would run into an old friend from the Dominican Republic, they would say “‘oh, your daughter she’s a Habra. She's a little black’ and [her] mother would say, ‘No what are you talking about, she’s white’”. Zola says, “I would look at my mom, puzzled and ask her what she was talking about because to me, I was not white.” As Zola

got older she began to rebel against her mother's idea of her identity which during the time created strife in their relationship. "There was a lot of yelling and crying", says Zola, She states that,

I think that my mom was upset because she had this very light daughter that didn't want to be as white as possible. My mom was like 'this is all I worked for. All my life I worked on being white and this girl (my daughter) doesn't want to be white but black. All my life I have passed for white and wore this whiteness on me and I had all these privileges in DR. Now I am in the United States which my whiteness is worth even more and this girl (my daughter) her Spanish isn't good, she's very American and she wants to claim that she is black the blackness that I want to forget about'. (Zola)

Zola's experience of growing up with her mother is a depiction of how internalization of racism takes shape and affects people's livelihood. According to the literature review, "the racialized system (of slavery) situated light-skinned blacks above darker skinned blacks (Neal and Wilson 1989; Feagin 2014) nonetheless, whites placed themselves at the top of the racial hierarchy and relegated blacks to an inferior racial status". In Zola's statement, while her mother believed she was doing what was best for Zola because she did not want her daughter to be regarded as something that was considered negative in society, the very belief that blackness was negative even though she herself was black is an internalization of systemic prejudice that relegates black people to an inferior racial status. In a poem, Zola writes she explains that the poem was about how her mother did "many things to look white and...about her trying to make Zola look white" Zola states that:

“[the] poem talks about how she would slick my hair back and I would look white enough to forget about my grandfather [a darker skinned black man] and white enough to assimilate in her arms and into that whiteness. The last line of my poem says, that I would be *the whitest thing that she had the honor of creating.* (Zola)

Although Zola’s mother interpreted her actions as wanting the best and wanting her child to have an easier life, what was happening was that on a conscious level she recognized the negative connotations that society attached to being black and understood the privileges bestowed upon whiteness. But, underlying this recognition was the workings of systemic racism deeply rooted in her subconscious that an anxiety surrounding being discovered as black was always at the forefront of her life experiences. As a result, her interpretation was that she needed to do everything in her power to detach herself and her daughter from their blackness.

Although Zola and her mother are in a good space now and her mother does not make any bad comments because she recognizes how it affects Zola, the psychological trauma Zola endured was not only feelings of low self-worth, but also a depression that resulted in harmful behavior. Zola expresses that, “I used to be sad and cry all the time because my mom didn't like me because I was black. I just wanted my mom to love me...I drank a lot and blacked out a lot. I became an alcoholic. I would cry and say, my mom doesn't love me because I am black”. Not only did Zola believe that her mother did not love her because of her blackness, she believed that her mother was frustrated because she could not understand why Zola did not take advantage of the fact that she had lighter skin. Through a long process of self-love and acceptance, Zola believes that she has now reached a point where she is sure in her self, who she is and her black

racial identity. She speaks on being given an unwanted and un-welcomed privilege because of her lighter skin below

Sometimes in a family one child is light and the other is dark and it's the dark child that gets treated worse. Because I am light skinned I get listened to more and a lot of people who are light skinned say, " I guess light skinned is the right skin. Yeah!!! I am so light". I'm like that is so ugly to say. Look at yourself! where do you come from? Aren't you proud to be black? They say, " I am proud to be black" but then I'm like, why do you love yourself because you're sooo light. Do you not love yourself because you are black? I feel like that's part of my light skinned privilege of telling people that it's terrible not to appreciate someone fully because they are darker. Then I ask, is your mom dark? Do you not like her because she is dark? (Zola)

Yasmina, on the other hand, explains the frustration she feels on lighter skin being privileged in society

I didn't know about this whole light skinned dark skin war thing until I saw this thing on Facebook this was freshman year of college because I had never known that was a thing and I remember seeing...it was like really offensive towards dark-skinned women and I looked at and I was like I did not get it what the fuck? Then this whole idea of not just racism but of colorism started going everywhere and then there were ads of like all skin colors are beautiful and not like white versus black but within our community. I just became hyper-aware that like in slavery time like I'm possibly treated better just because I'm light skin and because of that issue something that I can't control, I am somewhat stigmatized against by my own race simply because I am a different color. (Yasmina)

What was confusing for Yasmina to navigate was a frustration with seeing darker skin women being put down but then also being stigmatized by her own race because of this privilege that she did ask for and did not want. Yasmina who is also a friend of mine had described a situation where her romantic interest had told her that he would never consider being in a relationship with me because I was too dark and he liked lighter skinned girls. She articulates her feelings below:

That's the shit that pisses me off. It's just so fucking annoying like the outside world has categorized us and has allowed us to see each other differently based on our skin complexion but because we as the black community are now doing that to ourselves that's just validating that shit and now people are gonna be like ohhh so they think this true then it must be true and I feel as though because I'm light skinned I never have to think 'oh I'm too dark for him'...that's so ridiculous so I feel like...I wouldn't say fetishized, that's not true but I feel like we're just in the lighter-skinned age and it's too fucking stupid cuz we've always being in the light skinned age...everyone wants to look mixed race and shit and I'm just like and like ugh it drives me crazy, I don't want this, I just wanna live, I don't want to be anyone's fucking fetish. I just, I hate it. (Yasmina)

Core Theme 8: On physical beauty: Struggle with hair and body image

On the topic of experience with beauty in relation to skin tone, although Yasmina says she did not experience explicit racism, she goes on to say that because she did not grow up around black people, she believes that she “missed some crucial development and maybe some confidence building that could've happened”. She says that if she had had the experience of growing up around more black people and people that looked like her, she would have had a

better understanding of her perceived level of attractiveness in a predominantly white school.

She says that during her high school years,

If I had hung out with people who looked more like me that could've made me...at a young age it's hard...because I didn't have those people around to tell me anything so I grew up making my own assumptions about why I wasn't liked, about why I wasn't attractive and why certain parts of me was attractive and that it was just because I'm black. (Yasmina)

Yasmina recalls that in her predominantly white high school, although she was lighter skinned, she was not considered attractive. She tells her experience below,

I remember in Junior year my friend told me that like all the hot guys in our junior class just randomly told her "oh yes, I would never hookup with a black girl" I asked her why and I honestly don't recall her getting an answer and I just remember being upset...I remember feeling especially offended because of the context in which she brought it up in as if she was trying to make me feel even worse about my physicality and my blackness being unappealing. (Yasmina)

While Yasmina does not recall experiences like this happening often, she recalled generally not being regarded as attractive in her predominantly white high school and stated that she could not understand why. At the time, she believed that it was because she was not as wealthy and could not dress as nice as the other girls but looking back, she realized that she was not deemed attractive because she was black. Because most of the girls around her were skinny, she also suffered from body image issues as she believed that to be the dominant beauty standard which she did not possess. Although this study particularly focuses on the physical characteristic of

skin tone, it was important to briefly mention that while for darker participants their experiences of not fitting the beauty standard mostly came from their skin tone, for lighter skinned participant their experiences of not fitting into the beauty standard came from their hair. As a result, they did everything they could to get their hair to fit was considered more physically appealing. Yasmina states that in high school when the boys had made a comment about never dating a black girl, she says,

It made me think beauty was most importantly having nice long pretty hair because even my friend who weren't black what they had was like really nice pretty long hair and that to me was what was the biggest differentiating factor between myself and the other girls.
(Yasmina)

Zola who had afro curly hair states that she was also affected by what society deemed beautiful.

People would come up to me and say that my hair is different and asked if I got a relaxer and I'd say no my hair is naturally like this and people would be like, " No it's not. don't lie"...Because I didn't want people to know that my hair had texture to it. It was my black friends that knew my hair had a relaxer in it and I would deny it and pretend like I didn't know what a relaxer was. I'd say to them, "relaxer? I don't know what a relaxer is. What is a relaxer?." (Zola)

Amina also recalled how what was deemed acceptable and beauty, hair-wise pushed her to relax her hair even though she hated it. Below she says,

I relaxed my hair and straightened and I hate relaxers and I hate getting my hair straightened. I HATE getting my hair flat ironed. I can't stand it but like that's what I did because it made my hair more manageable and it made me more presentable. (Amina)

Core Theme 9: Low Self-Esteem

This section discusses how all participants self-esteem was affected by white beauty standards. 11 out of the 14 participants reported experience low-self-esteem or a slip in confidence in their self, their abilities, and intelligence. All respondents discussed and inferred feeling inferior, isolated, confused, devalued, invisible and or ostracized. Many of the respondents questioned their worth either as an object to be consumed/fetishized or as someone who society deemed not worthy to be seen or acknowledged in a positive light.

After being asked how her about how her confidence was affected, Sapphire says

I was definitely really shy in middle school and like the beginning of high school probably even up until my senior year. Just because I felt like I didn't have anything valuable to say and just because I didn't want to be seen if that makes sense. (Sapphire)

Zelu also shares a similar feeling, she says that because of how she was treated due to her darker skin tone, she says "I could barely give eye contact, I was quiet, & I just refused to talk to anyone. I still haven't talked to anyone about that nor even my mother. Too embarrassed.

For Sacha who had endured taunts and bullying from peers for being too dark, when she was asked about her emotional state, she said

[as a young child] I thought was gonna get lighter and when it never happened I used to get really really sad because I also ascribed my own worth and my own value on my skin tone to the point were my mother would put powder on us when it got hot outside to like

dry the sweat and I would put on the powder and be like “oh my god, now I’m light-skin”
like it ran that deep. (Sacha)

Ìfè also shares a similar sentiment. She says,

I’d have these really vivid dreams that I could just sit underneath a dryer and it would
make my hair straight instead of nappy and that like it would make me a voluptuous light
skinned woman and that I would experience like 30 seconds of pain but then I would get
out from underneath the dryer and my nose would be long and straight and, my lips
would be thinner and I would have this light skin. (Ìfè)

For Zola who had endured projection of the lighter skin beauty standards from her mother, she
felt unloved by her mother and it drove her to become an alcoholic.

My mom said that I looked ugly. I could never ask my mom in the morning how I looked
because I knew what she was going to say I looked ugly because of my hair. When I did
ask her, she said, " Oh, you know what I am going to say, fix your hair".

So for a long time, my mom would say that I am going to lose all my hair. You don’t
know what you are doing. You look ugly. She said this to me up until my senior year.
(Zola)

Zola’s self-esteem had been damaged to the point where she had felt that no other negative
comments anyone could say about her skin tone or blackness mattered because the damage
from her mother ran so deep, that nothing else could cause a more piercing damage.

I felt like if my own mom thought that I was ugly then nothing else mattered. Everything
that my mom said and people were now saying to me, I already heard it from my mom
and she made me so I really didn't care anymore. (Zola)

For Amina who felt ostracized by the black community but went to a predominantly white high school, she believed her not being beautiful was a fact. She says, “nobody thought I was attractive and I didn't think that I was beautiful”.

It is apparent that the perpetuation of white beauty standards both within and outside the black community had negative effects on black women's self-esteem. For many of the women that were interviewed, lack of validation from people in their communities and some family members contributed to their low sense of self-worth. Interviewees shared that they endured projections of beauty standards in their school, at home, within their communities and there seemed no escape from the avenues in which they experienced negative treatment.

Conclusion

The women shared that they became aware that they did not fit the beauty standard at an early age through interactions in school with peers, with members of their community, with their own family and via mass media. Even with efforts to see themselves as beautiful or to combat the beauty stereotype, they saw reinforcements of the white beauty standards in their everyday interactions where they were treated as inferior or fetishized. Emotionally, the participants recalled feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, confusion, inferiority, isolation, and ostracization. In spite of their life experiences riddled with some form of trauma and prejudice, remarkably, these women developed resilient strategies to help them overcome these adversities. The next chapter will talk about the tools these women have used to overcome negative messages of beauty standards that made them feel unworthy and unloved.

CHAPTER III

RESILIENCY: MY BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL

My Black is Beautiful

From the color of my skin, to the texture of my hair
to the length of my strands, to the breadth of my smile

To the stride of my gait, to the span of my arms, to the depth
of my bosom, to the curve of my hips, to the glow of my skin...
My black is beautiful

It cannot be denied. It will not be contained.
And only I will define it.

For when I look in my mirror, my very soul cries out,
My black is beautiful

And so today, I speak it out loud, unabashedly,
I declare it anew.
My black is beautiful

Whether celebrated, imitated, exploited, or denigrated
Whether natural from inside or skillfully applied
My black is beautiful.

To my daughters, my sisters, my nieces, my cousins,
my colleagues and my friends,
I speak for us all when I say again,

My Black is Beautiful



(Soulful Beauty, 2018)

This section refers to what black women have done and continue to do to build an armour against the negative effects a beauty standard informed by racist ideologies has had on their self-esteem. It highlights that battling with the resulting issues with self-worth is an ongoing process that is not only an individual journey but a journey that is also done collectively as black women.

This portion of the results discusses themes that emerge from the methods participants use to develop resiliency against the effects of beauty standards. I divided this section into 9 different core themes. Similar to Pearson-Trammells research, I divided this section into themes of *Resistance*, *Positive Reinforcement*, *Environment*, *Maturation*, *Outlet*, *I Am My Sister's Keeper*; *Duty to Uplift Others*. Excerpts from participants are used to demonstrate each theme.

Core Theme 1: Resistance

“Resistance” is one of the themes that emerged throughout the interviews when participants were asked to discuss what methods they use to empower themselves. For many women, resistance took a form actively shutting down negative comments about their skin tone and beauty. Furthermore, embracing themselves created a barrier that shielded them from the effects of negative remarks and experiences when they did encounter them. Resistance also took the form of recognizing their own strength and worth and finding avenues to assert that.

Participants recognized that society's opinion of black women's level of attractiveness seeps into how they as black women are treated. They have been made to feel invisible, unseen and unheard and when they are treated this way this serves to create a life experience in which at

times they are treated in a way that signals that they have nothing intellectual and substantial to contribute in work, intellectual and social spaces. Thus, some participants report making an active effort to be unapologetically black, to be visible and to be heard in spaces that try to make them feel inferior. In regards to this, Imani stated that “ I am not willing to be considered lesser than I actually am and be considered to contribute less than I actually can because I am black or a woman. That will never happen.” This active affirmation of her ability and strength allows her to block out any treatment as lesser than.

For Sacha, this took the form of actively refusing to listen and believe her peers stereotype about darker skinned women and understanding that the perception of darker skinned women as ugly and the treatment as a result of this perception was a societal problem, not hers. It was important to her that she understood not to internalize the treatment of bullying, harassment from her peer’s perception of her dark skin as ugly. She says that in middle school after internalizing her peers negative messages and also beginning to ascribe her self-worth to her skin tone, in high school when the dark skin versus light skin conversation at her school came around, she decided, “I don't want to feel put down and I don't want to feel less than because of this foolish discourse that you guys choose to ascribe to. I don't want to feel put down”. She began to rationalize the treatment of bullying that happened to her because of her dark skin because it was important for her to understand that there was nothing wrong with her. She says,

I guess when I stopped I guess because like I got bullied a lot as a child and eventually I had to start rationalizing like why I was getting bullied... like, it's not me. I don't think I used to think that it was me at some point like “oh many people are bullying me so I must

be doing something wrong” but then I really sat down, and I was like, “well you people must be bored... so whatever you're saying must not hold that much weight”. (Sacha)

She developed resilience from a very young age that when she did encounter colorist remarks in high school, it did not take long for her to develop a barrier towards those remarks. She says that,

I feel like I generally when I get issues like this [colorist remarks], [I've learned to] kinda divorce emotions from thought. So while I was going through all of this I was never sitting there like "ahhh damn", woe is me. I was kinda just like this is happening I'm over it...I'm not here for it. (Sacha)

For Zola whose mother was the main perpetrator of anti-blackness which was reflected in her denial of her daughter's black identity. Zola actively rebelled against her mother. She refused to listen to her mother when she would tell her not to stay out too long in the sun. Because her mother was ascribing her worth to the non-black part of her identity, she tried to diminish anything that identified Zola as black. Because she believed that afro hair that was unattractive, she ended up damaging Zola's curls with excessive heat. At that point, Zola says, “I was upset and I think that's when I started to get rebellious and gradually restore the natural state of my hair”. Although it was a difficult and emotional process, she worked to actively rebel and speak out against her mother's negative perception of blackness and black women's attractiveness. Her mindset is reflected when she was asked what advice she would give young girls struggling with a similar situation. She says,

Don't be afraid to have different ideas from your parents because they lived different generations and had different lives...Don't be afraid to go against your parents. If they are abusive have your opposing ideas in secret and say to yourself that's not what I believe in.

Try to do little things to change their minds. I did it but my mom would hit me all the time. I was a troubled child. (Zola)

Furthermore, as a light-skinned person aware of colorism, she finds it important to speak out against colorists remarks and perspective, below she says,

Because I am light skinned I get listened to more and a lot of people who are light skinned say, " I guess light skinned is the right skin. Yeah!!! I am so light". I'm like that is so ugly to say. Look at yourself! where do you come from? Aren't you proud to be black? They say, " I am proud to be black" but then I'm like, why do you love yourself because you're so light then. Do you not love yourself because you are black? I feel like that's part of my light skinned privilege of telling people that it's terrible not to appreciate someone fully because they are darker. Then I ask is your mom dark? Do you not like her because she's dark? (Zola)

While the process of self-acceptance and resistance is on-going, emotionally challenging and not always perfect, through resistance, these women have found ways to speak out or create barriers that serve as a form of self-preservation and protection against negative messages about their beauty and blackness.

Core Theme 2: Positive Reinforcement: You are beautiful, You are Worthy

The core theme *Positive reinforcement* refers to the various ways participants have received support, positive affirmations and validation from their interactions with their friends, family, and the black community. For Asha surrounding herself with friends that supported each other and reinforced each other's beauty as black women emphasized the importance of being

surrounded by an environment that is supportive and validating. For Asha having close relationships with other black women helped her in developing a positive self-identity. In being in relationships that constantly reminded her of her worth and beauty, she says of her relationship with her best friend, that “growing up we took the route of just being in each others company and always making sure the other person knew their worth and didn't talk down on themselves. As we got older we've taken bigger steps, for instance, It was her idea that I start this page”. Zelu is one of the interviewees who owns an Instagram account with a growing 25,000 followers. The sole purpose of her platform is to uplift black women and affirm black women's beauty. On a daily basis, she posts content that constantly praises black women's skin color, kinky afro, big lips and noses so that other black women can see positive representations of their beauty in media. She created this page as positive reinforcement for other black women because through the supportive circle of friends that she has, she understands how important it is for black women and girl to have and see other black women as an affirming presence.

For many participants, being surrounded by other black women served as a constant affirmation of their beauty and worth. For Amina who had grown up in a predominantly white environment, when asked about her process of self-acceptance, she states that “I got black friend which was a first step. It was like revelatory for me because I had never had a black friend”. For Sapphire who had also grown up in predominantly white environments, when she was asked which advice she would give for a younger black girl like her, she stresses the importance of being surrounded by other black women. She says,

You need to be around people who look like you to use as role models...surrounding yourself with [specifically] black women who can tell you that you're beautiful. [And I

would say to her that] You're beautiful and you're worthwhile because I think those two go hand in hand. When I was younger I felt like I was unvalued because I wasn't beautiful. I feel like those two things go hand in hand. [It] influences your self-confidence. It's hard growing up as a black girl. People who don't have this experience don't understand what it's like...just having representations of other like black women and black beauty to go off of and just having a good support system to show you your value and show you your worth and make sure that you don't forget that. Ever.

(Amina)

Like other participants, another source of positive reinforcement for Sapphire were family members who always reminded her of her worth. Despite the negative outside comments that she would receive about her skin tone, she asserts that she always got positive reinforcement from her sister and her aunt. Although she did not believe them all the time, having that support served as a shield that helped her withstand negative messages about her value and beauty. She expresses,

I have an older sister and my aunt [who's] basically...my mom...in middle school they definitely noticed the way my confidence was really low and the way I felt about how I look, so they would definitely reassure me that black is beautiful but they really made sure that I was comfortable in my own skin color and in my hair texture. (Sapphire)

Below Sapphire describes how critical having those positive reinforcements from her family and friends was in her development of a positive self-identity

Having my really close friends like when a feel like "oh I'm not pretty, oh this doesn't look good on me" but them just reassuring me that you can rock whatever. Don't be

embarrassed of your skin color or your hair. I definitely had to take a lot of coaching is the word but kind of like guidance. If I didn't have that from external forces, I would probably still be close to the same self-confidence that I was in middle school. (Sapphire)

For Zelu who from a young age was very clear that negative remarks about her beauty and value were not true, she said that her confidence came from her mother. She experiences how vital her mother is in instilling powerful messages of self-reassurance in her. She says that her mother's guidance fostered resiliency and without it, she would have been deeply affected by people's negative opinion of black women's attractiveness and the treatment that ensues from it. Below she states,

How I was taught to love myself, my hair my skin and how I value myself meant a lot growing up. My mother always told me to love my thick hair and my dark skin. She always gave me a reminder that I was beautiful. I held onto that and never thought less of myself. It was important for her to instill that in me because not a lot of parents know to give their child that reminder. When she was growing up, she didn't get that reminder and she needed it. Especially raising me in America, she needed me to know that my color was beautiful. Even if others said otherwise. (Zelu)

Core Theme 3: Environment

As all of the women interviewed were college students they all mentioned that moving to college away from their environment had an influence on being able to cultivate a positive self-identity. College is a place where young adults form a more solid form of self-identity. For some participants who had grown in up in predominantly white environments moving to an

environment with more people who looked like them allowed them to strengthen their resilience against negative beauty messages and stereotypes about black women.

For Imani, who had lived in a predominantly white neighborhood, on a subconscious level, because of her blackness, people around her had desexualized her. She expresses that she never realized that that was what was happening until speaking about it in the interview. To her, people just never interacted with her in a way that acknowledged her as having sexual characteristics or as being near the normal realm of beauty beautiful. It was as though her lack of attractiveness because she was black, was a subconscious fact that no one spoke about but knew. She says she was not treated badly or differently because of it, it was just something that was subconscious in her town. She says,

I just assumed that's the way it was and that wasn't going to change until I left, I don't know if I thought that is how all white people are or it's only Seatown. However, I know that I felt subconsciously shitty about it. I thought it would be different once I leave. I knew...I will find a place for, "I am considered beautiful". In the broader world, I can be anything I want. I can be beautiful. I consider myself to be beautiful and the other people out there can see it. (Imani)

Below she describes how transitioning to a different type of environment gave her positive reassurance of her beauty,

Back home, I don't think anyone could ever find me beautiful. At home [in college] it was like I know there are other people out there that can find me beautiful [and leaving home, I was able to find that]. I think it's because People here can have an opened mind, that's their normal...(Imani)

For Yasmina who had also grown up in a predominantly white neighborhood, when she moved to college, most of her friends were ethnically diverse and being surrounded with a group of diverse friend who had a shared otherness provided Yasmina with a sense of belonging that she had never experienced. In the self-esteem section, she expressed that now that she has a diverse group of friends and is surrounded by more black people, she feels that she missed out on something crucial growing up and having this would have been beneficial to her as a young child. Below she expresses her regret,

Here in college...african americans makeup a good third or fourth of the population so we can't bee ignored.. just simply being around people who look like me even in smaller sense it just made me realize what a community i had missed out on for what I think the most crucial years of my development...but now that I'm here and I have people that look like me..honestly just having fellow minorities around me, in general, made me more aware of the community that I missed in some crucial development and maybe some confidence building that could've happened if I had hung out with people who looked more like me... at a young age it's hard because I didn't have those people around to tell me [about what's experience you will go through because you're black] so I grew up making my own assumptions about why I wasn't liked, about why I wasn't attractive and why certain parts of me was attractive and that was just because I'm black but, if I had a community of black people in general, minorities in general to tell me otherwise it might have maybe changed how I see myself...maybe...(Yasmina)

Through moving into another environment, Yasmina was able to understand her experiences when she was younger better and why in regards to her attractiveness she was always treated

differently. It helped her understand her experiences of having her body sexualized while simultaneously not being considered attractive in a predominantly white space. Stepping into a space more black people and being made aware of colorism has also helped her understand the uncomfortable space she occupied of being a black light skinned girl. Through being in an ethnically diverse environment, she was able to understand how her interactions with people when it came to her attractiveness was informed by a history of colorism and racism. Furthermore, while she says that in terms of confidence in her attractiveness and body, it is an ongoing process, but, being in the environment of her college with people who looked like her has made her feel more comfortable in her attractiveness and body as a black woman.

For Sapphire moving into an environment where she saw more black women people who and she considered beautiful reassured her of her beauty and worth and worked to foster resilience against any negative messages about black women, their value, and beauty.

Coming into college, I have a lot more black friends than I have had growing up...it's definitely made me more confident in my beauty and also there are so many varieties of black people and in that, black beauty. It's like this whole different spread of what black looks like. (Sapphire)

Through moving into another environment, these participants were able to see various representations of black women's beauty and worth. Being in this type of environment nurtured and solidified their sense of self-worth and self-esteem. From the theme of change in environment by moving to college, the theme *Maturation* emerged.

Core Theme 4: Maturation

All participants expressed that greater self-love and acceptance came by virtue of growing up. As participants got older and gained more wisdom, they were able to dispel myths that labeled black women as ugly. As some participants got older, they began to question decisions they made in relation to beauty and deconstruct whether their decisions were being informed by white beauty standards. For example, Amina who had been perming her hair to get it straight states below,

Me having straight hair was aspiring to beauty standards that were not made for me and I'm not going to alter myself in that way because it's not pleasing to me and if it not harming you then who cares. I definitely feel that my style, my hair, I do it to please me. I do it to make me happy because like I see it in the morning and I want to like what I see in the mirror. Everybody else opinions on that is irrelevant and they can suck it like if you really want to tell me all of your opinions on black women and what they can and cannot do with their hair...I don't care what you have to say. It doesn't matter to me. You're not a black woman. (Amina)

As Amina grew older, like other participants, she began to dispel not only messages that black was synonymous with ugly but the fact that other people's opinion on what she looked like mattered. Sapphire also shared that as she grew older, her opinion about what she looked like more than anyone else was what mattered. She says 'I feel like [my confidence also grew] with age. I'm grown, I don't really...not that I don't care but like I don't know, I just feel I'm confident in the way I look?'. One of the methods Sapphire used to feel beautiful after receiving negative messages about her beauty, was through wearing makeup. After a while, she realized that she started to rely on makeup and would wear it everywhere. Now that she's older she says,

I'm starting to get more confident in the way I look without my makeup and I have to realize that both of the faces that I have makeup and no make up is the same person at the end of the day so I have to be comfortable with that so yeah...now beauty for me is just being confident in whatever skin color you have. (Sapphire)

As Sapphire grows older and gains more insight, she cares less and less about people's issues with how she looks. For some participants, it just "clicked" for them. While they do not know the exact moment, they often described at some point they stopped caring as much about people's disapproval of their looks. Issa states below of the moment it "just clicked" for her

Sometime in high school when I stopped obsessing over my body my views about skin color changed. I became more confident in myself. I felt that I didn't have to try as hard anymore and felt secure with the people that I was hanging out with. I felt secure enough to believe that I didn't have to preserve myself or alter myself anymore. I still had insecurities but my perception about skin color stopped being one of them. (Issa)

Now, she says that,

I feel like I'm not trying to look like what I was trying to look like before. I am just trying to look like how I feel like looking. So, if I am going to care about what anyone thinks I'm trying to do. I [don't care to] fit into something that white people are trying to propose on to me. (Issa)

As participants gained insight with age, their skin color became something they learned to embrace every day.

Core Theme 5: Outlet

To develop resilience and combat negative beauty stereotypes, 8 out of the 14 participant report performing some form of self-care and creating an outlet where they could express their feelings. 11 out of the 14 participants reported performing acts of self care such as journaling, writing stories, poetry, dancing, listening to music, drawing, painting, meditating, taking part in sports and affirming their beauty and self as a black person through academic pursuit. For Kellan who is another owner of an Instagram page for uplifting black women, she shares that when she was younger and used to be deeply affected by the negative comments about her beauty, she began to write stories.

I wrote a lot. I use to make up stories and just dot them down on this website. I use to write about how I wished my life was and I use to create fantasies. It helped a lot because I could just get things out there. Also creating this page helped a lot too and it helped others. That was the main reason I created this page to help others feel good about themselves. (Kellan)

Having an avenue where she could let out her feelings gave her release and relief from the emotional weight she carried from the negative comments she would always receive. Zola who struggled with her mother's anti-black sentiments also reports writing poems and performing them as an outlet.

I went to a predominately white private school. I was in a program where they would get poor black and brown kids and place them in fancy private schools. So I was very quiet because I didn't want anybody to get me into any trouble. So I wrote this poem about coming from the African diaspora and going through the struggle and being proud of my

roots. The whole school was quiet... ambiguously like brown girl with a thought? and I stood up and said, "I am black and I am proud". I was talking about an uprising. One of my lines was...and the white man won't be surprised when we up rise because who knew that we had pride. Everyone in the school was like "What?!" After that, I started writing poems about my mom. (Zola)

She states that performing this poem in her predominantly white school gave her strength against any messages that tried to put her down because of her blackness. Because of the strength it gave her, she began to write poems about the experiences she had with her mother when it came to her beauty, identity, blackness, and worth.

For Amina, she found an outlet through her academic pursuit. When asked how she empowers herself as a black woman, she explains that she does this by centering her academic career around blackness and black women. She explains how majoring in religion empowers her as a black woman. This empowerment strengthens her self-identity which then allows her to be able to dispel any negativity surrounding her blackness making her less desirable and worthy.

A lot of my academic career is centered around blackness I'm a religion major but the way that I entered into religion was through the class, *God is a White Supremacist* which is about whiteness as a like intellectual concept...like whiteness as a force that works inside of the social system and manipulates things inside of the social system. In the class, we read a lot of different black writers and they talked a lot about how the social system we exist in and about black perceptions about black people so like one of the ways that I feel more empowered [is having an] intellectual connection with these ideas and studying/reading about them. I'm always around it and I know more about everything

and I understand everything a lot more and that's what I chose to study all the time and I like it it makes me happy because academia is not made for black people so why not find academia that's for you, that's about you, that you find intellectually satisfying and stimulating. There all of these black people black women black men hum black people who had done and said and just amazing amazing things that you never hear about and find it really intellectually satisfying to have a place where my realization and my opinions on this are valued and they matter and they have like weight to them but where I get to study women who look like me who have done and said things that are amazing.

(Amina)

For Amina having examples of inspirational black women through academia has provided her with role models to look to. For her, engaging intellectually about how whiteness operates in relation to blackness in the social world helps her understand not only the world but her life experiences better. Having this outlet where she is able to understand how systemic racism and prejudice functions, strengthens her self-identity and knowing about motivational black women in black history allows her to dispel myths that treats black women as inferior, unworthy, undesirable, and unloved.

Core Theme 6: I am my sister's keeper; Duty to Uplift Others

This theme emerged when participants were asked to give advice to younger girls in their same position who are being treated as unworthy, undeserving and undesirable. For this particular section, the 4 participants who were owners of Instagram pages dedicated to uplifting black women and appreciating black women's beauty were asked why they had felt the need to

create a platform like this. For these 5 women, they all mentioned that they created their platform to praise other black women because there was not enough of this in media. For them, they expressed that it is important to praise black women and make them feel beautiful because of the damaging effects being told and being treated otherwise has on a black girls sense of self-worth.

From their own personal experiences, they express understanding how important it was for them to have positive reinforcement that recognized them as worthy, loved and beautiful. To them, any black girl can go on their pages and receive this positive reinforcement and find role model anytime they are made to feel less than or inferior because of their blackness and looks. Slowly these pages are changing the negative narrative about black women and their attractiveness.

When asked why she created her platform, Zelu says, “I created this page to bring a new light in black men and women. I'm not looking for models or anyone who thinks they are perfect. Instead, I uplift the people who think otherwise”. Kellan says, “It was important that I made this page because there wasn't enough of it. When I first started out, there weren't as many pages celebrating black beauty until I made mine. Now I see tons of pages and I love it. Girls should be able to come on this page and see themselves”. Another participant expressed the importance of inclusivity when uplifting black women and making sure that in uplifting black women beauty, another standard is not being created she states that

One thing I did was buy making this page because I saw a lot of posts downing women who have natural hair and also women who have permed hair. Also because there are a lot of pages for black women with natural hair but almost none of them are inclusive of black women with permed hair and I wanted to create a platform for all of them. (Asha)

When these women who are part of changing the rhetoric in media about blackness and attractiveness were asked to give advice to young girls, they said,

- **Zainab:** “I would tell the girl to love the skin she's in. There's nothing wrong with being full of melanin and she should embrace it”
- **Zelu:** “Know that you are beautiful in and if you don't see that, know that God does. Taking the time to make in his image. Don't think less of yourself”
- **Nala:** “black Is beautiful...love your skin and hair and everything about you. There is nothing wrong with being a black woman, society is just blind to realize how amazing being black is. To stop letting society standard of beauty define how you feel beautiful. You are beautiful if you feel beautiful. You can't make everyone happy so why not just make yourself happy and love yourself because self- love is the best love. Always empower other black woman because it's important. Society does make life hard just because of race and gender but never let that stop you from better yourself, they don't want you to be successful so do exactly that
Stick together and stand up for what's right because you would want someone to do the same for you”
- **Asha:** “an advice that I would give to black girls would be to never down themselves no matter what they hear or see people say about them and that everything about them is magic from their hair to their toes”

While contributing to changing society's perception of black women's beauty, many of these women had encouraging words to give. They stressed the importance of looking out for other black women, making sure to uplift other black women and remind them of their beauty. These

women stressed the importance of instilling these positive messages of beauty and value in black girls from a young age in order to build self-confidence from early on so that young black girls do not grow up internalizing negative messages that they are receiving about their beauty and worth in society. The 6 themes of resilience, *Resistance*, *Positive Reinforcement*, *Environment*, *Maturation*, *Outlet* and *I am my sister's Keeper: Duty to uplift others* are tools that participants used to assist them in combating the negative impacts of white beauty standards on their self-esteem.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Beauty is a concept that is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated. In the United States, the concept of beauty is still largely informed by America's racial history. Thus, this research aimed to answer the question, 1) How are black women's lived experiences informed by this constant negotiation of beauty 2) How does a beauty standard informed by racist history affect black women's self-esteem? 3) For black women whose self-esteem has been negatively affected, what methods of resilience do they employ?

The Black women who spoke of their lived experiences revealed how their lives had been largely negatively impacted. The pervasiveness of inescapable messages of anti-black sentiments in regards to skin tone has been traumatic for black women. Regardless of skin-tone, beauty messages these black women received from media, family, peers and romantic partners signaled to them that in regards to their level of physical attractiveness, their blackness was a shortcoming. Participants expressed not only feeling unattractive but because of internalizing negative treatment due to racialized beauty standards, they believed that they were not valued or worthwhile. Thus many report, feelings of invisibility or sometimes shrinking themselves in order not to be seen or heard.

Although dark-skinned women have more representation in media in comparison to 60 years ago and dark-skinned actresses like Lupita Nyong'o have been considered one of the world's most beautiful women, growing up, darker skinned women report that beauty messages made them aware that they were too dark to be considered beautiful. As adults, these women

relay that in their reality, their dark skin is a site still being contested as to whether or not it is considered beautiful.

Black women's reality of being too dark to be beautiful reveals how racist ideologies the placed white skin Europeans and superior to dark skinned-Africans during slavery and labeled darker skin as ugly, tainted and inferior latches unto social consciousness of what skin tone can be considered beautiful. A beauty standard informed by racist ideology the placed white skin Europeans and superior to dark skinned-Africans during slavery.

Furthermore, in romantic spheres, the black women's perceived unattractiveness due to their dark skin, worked to desexualize them as often times, they were not be seen as dateable or sexually desirable (Joy, Clarrissa, Brittany). Like the Mammy archetype with her distinctive dark skin, stripped of any sensuality or sexual desires, they too were stripped of having any sensuality or sexual desires. When dark skin women did get involved in romantic relationships, they were told they were desired only because of their physicality; their big butt and big breasts (Ífé). When the black women in this study do find themselves being desired, regardless of skin tone, they report often being objectified and hypersexualized ([to guys] my only redeeming quality was that I had an ass - Yasmine). The largely sexual non-romantic desire for black women's bodies revealed by black women in this study, and the comfortability with which people mentioned this (I'm only with you cuz you have big titties and an ass - Ífé) to them, points to internalized racist ideologies of colonial classification of black bodies as sexually deviant and the resulting hypersexualized Jezebel Archetype. For the black women in this study, those they either fell into the categories of being undesirable or simultaneously being undesirable and desirable. This thesis proposes further study on black women lived experiences simultaneously occupying the

state of being desirable and undesirable. For darker and medium skin toned women, who did not have a big bottom or large breasts, amongst many other things that contributed to their feelings of invisibility, their desexualization caused them to also feel invisible. For dark skinned women who had big butts and big breasts, they relay a nuanced experience of being simultaneously desirable and undesirable. In people's desire for them, they were still invisible as they were more likely seen as objects for sexual consumption.

The topic of colorism which arose from this study revealed, internalization of racism by the black community, ways in which black women negotiate and re-negotiate beauty and how nuanced the concept of beauty is. It revealed what type of black women was considered beautiful and when black features got to be labeled as physically attractive. In all women regardless of skin tone, the study revealed that when black features appeared on lighter skin tone, it was admired as beautiful unlike its hyper-sexualization on darker skin.

Black features on lighter skin tones, even when hypersexualized was simultaneously admired as beautiful due to being on a lighter skin tone (Yasmine). In this racialized concept of beauty that favoured darker skin tone over lighter skin tone, the construction of white womanhood versus black womanhood during slavery and colonialism is expressed. During slavery, white womanhood expressed normal female heterosexual desires, therefore, when black features (mainly curvy body and thick lips) are present on a white woman, often times, it is not seen as animalistic. Although the light skinned black woman is not white, her light skin signals some presence of European ancestry. Thus, the insinuation of sexual deviance and aggression while it may still be there because she is black, is minimized by the fact that the features are presented on a lighter skinned body, thus, she can be regarded as beautiful. The study found that

internalization of racist ideologies caused the black community to also function as perpetrators of this colorist perspective. Receiving colorist messages of beauty from community members caused more harm to black girl's sense of self-worth as they struggled in their negotiations of beauty. Women with medium skin tones expressed a developed anxiety when they became darker as they were viewed as having lost the characteristic, their lighter skin, which caused them to be regarded as beautiful. Hence, while they were considered beautiful when light, when dark, they were not and were treated as beautiful/undesirable accordingly thus, often opting to deliberately stay out of the sun at a young age. This study revealed that this constant negotiation of beauty due to living in a society with racialized beauty standard caused feelings of low-self esteem within these black women. *Racialized Beauty: The Lived Experience of Beauty and Race, The Impact on Black Women's Self Esteem and The Development of Resilience and Empowerment*

One of the aims of this study was to answer the question, For black women whose self-esteem has been negatively affected, what methods of resilience do they employ?

For black women in this study, the research reveals battling with the resulting issues with self-worth as an ongoing process that is not only an individual journey but a journey that as a done collective. The stories of these black women report embrace oneself while receiving a barrage of negative messages of beauty is not an easy feat and is one that requires strength, vulnerability, and ingenuity. While this study these covered positive ways women build resilience, a question that arose during data analysis was how; did black women develop negative coping mechanisms as a result of negative messages of beauty and if so, how has negative coping mechanisms also contributed in the process of developing resilience. Thus

further study including negative coping methods is proposed. For black women in this study, incorporating different positive variables into their daily lives allowed for the of nurturing of resilience. Chapter 4 notes methods such as Resistance; sometimes taking the form of actively shutting down negative messages of beauty, Positive Reinforcement; receiving support, positive affirmations and validation from their interactions with their friends, family, and the black community, and amongst many more, having an Outlet such as art, music, poetry as source of comfort and resistance have tremendously contributed to black women's development of resilience and empowerment. For these black women, self-love, self-acceptance and resiliency is an ongoing process. On this journey, the key is in granting oneself grace, patience and love, and an understanding that self-love is not a destination one desperately reaches for, but an adventure with frustrating moments of setbacks and rewarding moments of progress.

APPENDIX I: Racial and Ethnic Background as Identified by Participants

NAME	Racial and Ethnic Background	AGE (yrs)
Sapphire	Nigerian-American	20
Issa	Caribbean-American	19
Ìfè	Trinidadian, Ghanaian and African American	21
Imani	Caribbean-American	19
Sacha	Nigerian-American	19
Amina	African-American	19
Zola	Dominican and Black	19
Yasmine	African-American	21
Zelu	Haitian	20
Nala	Ethiopian-American	18
Kellan	African-American	21
Asha	African-American	21
Zainab	African American	20
Yara	Jamaican-American	21

APPENDIX II: Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research Study
Swarthmore College * Swarthmore, PA

About Research: I volunteer to participate in this research by Victoria Tinuke Akintayo, An undergraduate student majoring in Sociology and Anthropology at Swarthmore College. I am aware that the aim of this research is to understand race and skin color in relation to beauty.

- 1) I understand that my participation in this interview is voluntary and I will not be compensated for my participation.
- 2) I will be asked questions pertaining to how I understand perceptions of what is Beautiful in America and its effects on black women. I will be asked to discuss how these perceptions of beauty negatively or positively affects my life as a black woman. I will be asked some personal questions on self worth; my emotions on how/what I feel about myself as a black woman. For example: I will be asked how my perception of my worth as a black woman has changed over the years? I understand that some of these questions may be personal or may make me feel uncomfortable. I understand that it is entirely up to me to go into as much/little detail as possible.
- 3) At any point in the interview session, if I feel uncomfortable, I have the right to refuse To respond to a question or decline further participation without penalty.
- 4) I understand that this interview will be recorded and be saved in a password-protected file on the researcher’s personal laptop computer. The interview will take about 45-60 minutes of my time.
- 5) In any information obtained from this interview, I am guaranteed full disclosure. My identity will remain anonymous and my responses will remain untraceable back to me.
- 6) I understand that there will be note taking during the interview. If at any point this makes me feel uncomfortable, I have the right to notify the interviewer so that they can change the way they are recording my responses.
- 7) If I have a question about the research during, before and after the interview session, I have a right to contact interviewer at vakintal@swarthmore.edu or the Chair of my department at Professor Willie-LeBreton, Sociology and Anthropology, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore PA, USA .

By signing below, you are certifying that you are at least 18 years old and agree to be interviewed.

Signature _____ Date _____

Agreement to be Audio-Recorded:

I would like to record this interview. I will store the recording in a password-protected file on my computer (or phone) and will destroy the file when my research is complete. If you do not agree to be recorded, I will simply write notes. By signing below, you are agreeing to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX III: Interview Questions

1. How do you identify as in terms of race, skin color, gender?
2. What's your age?
3. Can you tell me an early memory whether that was happy or sad that had to do with your race, skin color, hair? If happy or sad, how did it make you feel about yourself?
4. Everyone seems to have a sense of what beauty is. When you were growing up, where did you get your sense of what beauty was from? From your parents, mom, dad, other family members, television, peers?
5. Do you believe that your color and/or people's opinion of your hair texture or body has affected you in anyway, whether positive or negative in terms of confidence?
6. Do you think this had any effect on your relationships with family members, peers and romantic relationships? Please share an example of each with me.
7. Some people have a way to deal with cultural expectations of beauty, and they do it by talking to themselves giving themselves encouragement, pep talks. Did you do any of this? If you did, What did you do and do you feel it was important to do so, Why?
8. Do you do anything to empower and inspire yourself as a black woman? If yes, what do you do?
9. Seeing yourself now versus when you were younger, how has your perception of yourself as a black woman changed over the years?
10. If you were to give young black girls who were struggling with self-worth advice what would you say? What would you suggest they do?
11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

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