# Strong, Black, and Woman:
## Examining Self-Definition and Self-Valuation as Black Women's Everyday Rhetorical Practices

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*Drawing from a larger qualitative research project focused on Black women's naming practices, I consider how Black women employ Black feminist consciousness practices of self-definition and self-valuation to name, define, and describe their identities. Given the complex history and popularity of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) image within public and private discourses, I focus on how five self-identified Black women claim, utilize, and theorize strong in relation to their identities and as part of their everyday lives. This research calls for more critical engagement of the individual and collective meanings behind words commonly associated with Black womanhood, but doing so by prioritizing the voices and lived experiences of Black women.*

As a controlling image of Black womanhood, a re-appropriated term used for socialization and survival of Black women and girls, and/or a reclaimed word for Black women's resilience and self-reliance, the word *strong* is deeply rooted within Black women's histories and everyday lives. Technological advancements like the growth of social media has created more spaces for

Black women to share their voices and experiences, which includes publicly proclaiming their identities as *strong* Black women. Most recently, social media has been a site for Black women to publicly affirm their identities, as well as a space where others continue to misinterpret Black women's practices of self-empowerment. This includes recent controversies surrounding the hashtags and social movements #BlackGirlsAreMagic and #BlackGirlsRock. In May 2017, Congresswoman Maxine Waters publically talked-back to political commentator Bill O'Reilly who attempted to humiliate her by making fun of her hair. Under the hashtag #BlackWomenAtWork, Waters tweeted, "I am a strong Black woman. I cannot be intimidated, and I'm not going anywhere. #BlackWomenAtWork." She elaborated on this statement on a segment of *MSNBC* by emphatically stating, "I'm a *strong* Black woman and I cannot be intimidated. I cannot be undermined. I cannot be thought to be afraid of Bill O'Reilly of anybody."

Black women asserting their strength, and claiming an identity embedded with experiences of Black women's oppression, as well as their resistance and self-empowerment, is a rhetorical act that Black women employ across discourses, including the public sphere and within their everyday lives. Although many Black women use their self-defined knowledge to reaffirm their identities as *strong*, it should not be assumed that all Black women share the same definition and understandings of this term, or that all Black women utilize the identity of *strong* within their public and private lives in the same way.

In this essay, I focus on recurring themes within my qualitative study on Black women's naming practices where self-identified Black women participants consistently used the word *strong* to name, describe, and define their identities. Through questionnaires and interviews, participants identified *strong* as describing their identities and shared their unique experiences and individual definitions for this word. By presenting and sharing five Black women's personal definitions of strength, I consider how these women's viewpoints complicate, challenge, and offer counter-narratives to stereotypes of Black womanhood prevalent within public and private discourses, including the Strong Black Woman (SBW) myth. Although these women are not public figures and are not speaking within the public

sphere, I argue that studying Black women's practices of naming and interpreting their identities within everyday contexts create opportunities to better understand how many Black women use both language and lived experience to resist misperceptions of their identities that exist within private and public spaces. It also offers a better understanding of the meanings and functions of complicated and, at times, controversial words that Black women use to affirm themselves.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SBW MYTH AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE LIVES OF REAL BLACK WOMEN

Historical, theoretical, and empirical scholarship on the SBW image exists across disciplinary fields. The foundational works of Black feminist theorists, writers, and activists have greatly contributed to our understanding of the historical, racial, economic, and socio-cultural conditions in which controlling images of Black womanhood originated (bell hooks, Partricia Hill Collins, Michelle Wallace, Marcia Gillespie, Angela Davis, and others). In *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Michelle Wallace describes the Black superwoman in the following way:

> From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less "feminine" and helpless, she is really *more* of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman (107).

According to Sheri Parks in *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture* this image of the super-strong Black woman is, and has been, pervasive within Western culture because of its relationship with the Sacred Dark Feminine archetype. Parks says, "When American colonists forcibly imported African women and

brought them into their homes as midwives, nurses, cooks, confidants, they also co-opted the archetypal image of the Sacred Dark Feminine and used it to romanticize human slavery in the land of the free," (33). This co-opted image was then translated into stereotypes including the SBW myth and other controlling images that incorporate characteristics associated with this myth like the aggressive and overly controlling Matriarch or Mammy, the quintessential nurturer and caregiver. Ultimately these stereotypes were used to dehumanize Black women and justify oppressors' physical abuse and sexual exploitation of Black women.

There is a significant body of research in sociology and psychology that focuses on the SBW myth and its influences on the mental and physical health of Black women. A majority of this research examines the SBW scheme by asking Black women to define and explain their understandings of the SBW scheme directly (Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant; Dawn Marie Dow; Ellen Harrington, Janis Crowther, and Jillian Shipherd; Natalie Watson and Carla Hunter, and Lindsey West, Roxanne Donovan, and Amanda Daniel). For these studies, by asking Black women to provide their own definitions of the SBW scheme, researchers were able to consider Black women's relationship with and endorsement of the myth, and the potential affects the SBW myth may have on Black women's mental and physical health.

For example, in *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant interviewed 58 Black women about the SBW myth. Her research considers the ways Black women in her study resisted and internalized the myth, while also situating "strength" as a means for maintaining a stratified social order that obscures Black women's feelings of suffering and anger. Similarly, in "The Price of Strength: Black College Women's Perspectives on the Strong Black Woman Stereotype," Lindsey West, Roxanne Donovan, and Amanda Daniel used open-ended questions to interview 90 Black college women about their definition of SBW, their relation to the SBW ideal, and whether they thought SBW negatively affected their health. The authors found that although many of the women situated SBW as positive and saw themselves as aligning with the SBW image, they also recognized the negative affects it had on their health. West et.al.

described these contradictions as a part of what they call the SBW paradox, which may sometimes be "a positive form of coping and a protective factor for optimal mental health," but at other times, "it may be a negative form of coping and a predictive factor for poor mental health" (403).

In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America,* Melissa Harris-Perry incorporated focus groups and data from other studies into her analysis of Black women's construction and embodiment of strength within their everyday lives and as citizens. She concludes that Black women's self-reliance and perceptions of themselves as strong independent women are positive and powerful, but these intrinsic beliefs about Black womanhood also have emotional and political consequences for Black women (216). Harris-Perry argues that although there is power within the re-appropriated SBW image, it is still a façade, a mask, a distortion that prevents Black women from gaining recognition within the public sphere, acquiring the full benefits of citizenship, and being human (217).

In her theoretical framework called the Strong Black Woman Collective (SBWC), Shardé Davis considers how Black women communally regulate strength within themselves and each other. Davis situates the SBW image as an ideal that is communicated by Black women and utilized in ways that are beneficial, such as being able to resist oppression and lead to self-empowerment. At the same time, Davis proposes that Black women's regulation of strength can also be problematic, particularly how it discourages Black women from communicating their vulnerability and emotions.

Davis's argument is that strength is communicated, regulated, and utilized by Black women, as opposed to only being imposed on Black women by oppressive systems within U.S. society (27). She offers a unique perspective for engaging discourses on women's strength that prioritizes the voices and experiences of Black women. In my own research, I am most interested in engaging Black women's perspectives about their own identities. Instead of interrogating the benefits and consequences of Black women identifying *strong* as a word for naming and describing their identity, I consider participants'

meanings of *strong* as they understand it and use it within their everyday lives. My intentions are to prioritize the voices and choices of Black women, and situate their choice of the word *strong* as a site for further inquiry and better understanding.

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The interview excerpts presented in this essay are from a larger qualitative study on Black women's word choices for naming and describing their identities, and the practices they engage in to give meaning to those words. I used Black feminist epistemologies to frame my study, and grounded theory approaches for collecting and analyzing data.

According to Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* U.S. Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that "reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators" (269) (i.e., Black women) and emphasizes "the importance of intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix of domination" (269). In her chapter titled "Black Feminist Epistemologies," Collins discusses how dominant perspectives create limitations on what is recognized as truth and knowledge. Because of this, Black women's (and other subordinated groups') knowledge is subjugated in ways that make it difficult for intellectuals to study and for outsiders to understand.

Collins outlines four principles that inform Black feminist epistemologies, which she describes as a partial lens, but representative of a Black woman standpoint. These principles include: 1) recognizing lived experience as a criterion of meaning, 2) using dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, 3) engaging in ethics of care where individual expressions and emotions are approached with empathy, and 4) ethic of personal accountability where knowledge is acquired through dialogue and taking accountability for one's claims.

These Black feminist epistemological principles provided a framework for my interpretation of Black women's word choices for naming their identities, particularly how they engaged in practices of self-definition and self-valuation. Collins describes self-definition

as a part of a Black woman consciousness, or a womanist standpoint. Collins situates definition as power, and for Black women, self-definition is a power that oppressors have attempted to deny Black women through propaganda, stereotypes, and controlling images of Black womanhood. She says, "The insistence on Black women's self-definitions reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image…to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself" (125). As a counterpart to self-definition, in "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," Collins defines self-valuation as "namely, replacing externally derived images with authentic Black female images" (16-17). Self-valuation is a way for Black women to reclaim aspects about their identity that they value, including characteristics that have been stereotyped and caricatured. It is an opportunity for Black women to challenge and rewrite these distorted images in ways that relocate the value and functions of specific aspects of their identities.

These Black woman consciousness practices informed my research questions for interrogating how Black women name and define their identities. These questions are as follows:

- When asked to identify, name, and describe their identities, what words do Black women use?
- What do these words mean to individual Black women? Black women collectively?
- How do self-definition and self-valuation function as rhetorical practices? How do Black women use/employ self-definition and self-valuation?

A total of 12 self-identified Black women participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 18-57 and all participants resided in the United States during the time of the study. There were two data collection phases, including a pre-interview questionnaire where participants identified specific words that they use to describe themselves as Black women, and a follow-up interview where they expanded on their responses, provided context, and shared their meanings of their words.

The pre-interview questionnaire was distributed digitally, and participants were required to complete the pre-interview questionnaire prior to being interviewed. The pre-interview questionnaire asked general background information about participants, including their name, age range, and whether they self-identified as a Black woman. It also asked participants to generate three separate lists in relation to Black womanhood:

- List #1: Create a list of 4-5 words that you would use to name, define, describe YOUR identity as a Black woman
- List #2: Create a list of 4-5 words that you would use to describe influential Black women in your life
- List #3: Create a list of any additional/words/phrases/ thoughts you may have about Black women

At the completion of this pre-interview questionnaire phase of data collection, a total of 136 individual responses were collected from a total of 12 participants.

The second primary data collection source was interviews. Interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone, and each interview was audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. Although a total of 12 participants completed the pre-interview questionnaire, only 10 of those 12 women participated in the interview portion of the study. Within interviews participants were asked open-ended questions about themselves and their identities as Black women, which included in-depth discussion of their Lists #1-3 word responses and definitions.

Following Kathy Charmaz's guidelines in *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, I used coding practices as a part of my initial analysis of data, as well as memo-writing and charting to build categories and make comparisons across data sets. To locate word patterns within the data, I first identified words that were repeated across participant responses in the pre-interview questionnaire. If the same word was used by at least 2 different participants I marked it as a potential pattern, or common term, for List #1, List #2, or List #3 pre-interview questionnaire responses. A total of 10 patterns were identified within my initial analysis of

pre-interview questionnaires. Using line-by-line coding of interview transcripts, I further analyzed these word patterns focusing on how they were being defined by individual participants. Then I compared participants' word choices and definitions to locate similarities and differences in how they used and defined these common terms.

In the next section, I present data from participant pre-interview questionnaires and interview responses to List #1, which are words that participants used to name, define, and/or describe their identities as Black women. From initial coding, I identified five words that occurred at least twice within List #1 pre-interview questionnaire responses. Those common words/patterns included: *delicious* (2x), *unique* (2x), *worthy* (2x), *beautiful/pretty* (4x), and *strong/powerful/ badass/unbreakable/resilient* (9x). Nine out of the 10 Black women who participated in follow-up interviews referred to their personal strength and power. Given the popularity of the word *strong*, and other similar terms, within pre-interview questionnaire responses and interviews, I further interrogated this word choice to better understand how some Black women name, claim, and define this term within their daily lives.

Due to limited space, I present and interpret the responses of only five out of the nine participants who claimed *strong* (or some variation of the word) to name, define, or describe their identities. I share their voices here as representations of the processes and practices of self-definition and self-valuation as they function within the everyday lives of some Black women. Their interpretations of the word *strong* talk-back to misperceptions of their identities constructed and perpetuated within both private and public discourses.

## "WHAT I MEAN BY STRONG IS": STRONG BLACK WOMAN VIEWPOINTS AND DEFINITIONS

Given the complexities of the SBW image, including its potentially beneficial and also harmful effects on the lives of real Black women, I believe it is important that discourses on Black women and strength include the voices and lived experiences of Black women as they exist within a range of contexts, including public and private spaces. Self-definition and self-valuation practices as they are employed by

many Black women daily allow them to claim and give meaning to their identities, even if this includes using words with complex and controversial histories like *strong*. In her Preface to *Talking Back: Talking Feminist Talking Black*, bell hooks discusses girls', particularly Black girls', acts of speaking out. She says, "When the issue is speaking out, the content of what is spoken is more important than the speech act…Who is speaking is never as important as what is being said, even though who speaks is important to our understandings of any politics of gender" (x). Similarly, in the case of Black women's speaking practices, I believe their raced, gendered, and other identities are important because they inform why participants chose specific words to name and describe their experiences. But, what they say, how they define words like *strong* and connect their definitions to specific contexts and stories, and utilize these words for specific purposes, i.e., the content, is equally important.

The five Black women's definitions of *strong* presented in this section all offer their own unique content on what *strong* means to them as Black women. Unlike the SBW myth that offers overly simplified depictions of Black women's strength, these women offer their viewpoints on *strong* that are informed by their lived experiences, multiple intersecting identities, and daily realities as students, friends, mothers, providers, community members, and survivors within today's U.S. society and culture.

## BRIANNA'S DEFINITION OF STRONG: SELF-MOTIVATED AND INDEPENDENT

During the time of the interview, Brianna, who was in her mid-20s, introduced herself as a political science student and working single mother of a young son. Within her pre-interview questionnaire Brianna was asked to provide words that best described her identity as a Black woman. She used the following words: *strong*, *beautiful*, *independent*, and *unique*. The following audio-clip is an excerpt from Brianna's follow-up interview where she provided context and meaning to her use of *strong*:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1xbKNd8ZLDf8UYX2djpg c53L4DMdkb6im

Brianna interprets her use of *strong* by first identifying her position and the context from which she was speaking. This includes her explaining that during the time of the interview she was in the process of finalizing her divorce, while also mourning the death of her brother. Brianna's use of self-definition where she reveals a series of deeply personal and emotional events happening within her life allows her to establish a rhetorical position of authority on strength that is informed by her realities and current lived experiences. Given her position and the context, Brianna claims *strong* as a word for how she has had to physically respond to these moments of loss within her life. She says emphatically, "I feel like *I'm strong* because I just keep pushing forward. Like every time something happens like motivation, motivation not to stop."

While analyzing her own strength, Brianna also looked beyond her point of view to also interrogate others' perceptions of her. She says, "It's a lot of people that I know and they ask me, 'How—how can I be so strong?' Or, 'how can you know—can I continue to live my life like nothing has happened?'" Like Black women writing and speaking in public spaces have to negotiate audience members' perceptions of them to make space to speak and be heard (See Shirley Wilson Logan, Jacqueline Royster, Debra Atwater, and Johnnie Stover), Brianna within her everyday life is aware that others' views about her are something that she has to negotiate while claiming and performing an identity of *strong*. She recognizes that others are somewhat astonished by her ability to persevere, despite her circumstances, and they understand her embodiment of strength as unique or exceptional ("How can you be so strong?"). To talkback to this misunderstanding of her abilities, and counter the notion that she is exceptional or excessively *strong*, Brianna suggests that she is not immune to moments of weakness ("I have my moments"), and she situates her experiences as not extraordinary but her version of human struggle ("I'm not the only one going through something in life."). She attributes her strength to acts of self-motivation, and seeing these life occurrences as things that she has to will herself through like any other person.

In addition, Brianna also connects her use of the word *strong* to her independence. The following excerpt is from Brianna's interpretation of the word *independent*:

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Similar to how she interpreted *strong*, Brianna defined *independent* by further identifying the context from which she was speaking, and the circumstances that required her to enact a kind of self-motivating strength and self-sustaining independence. She specifically identifies her multiple roles as student, worker and single-mother as representations of her independence. She says, "I work. I go to school. I take care of my child on my own, and I feel like that alone just stands for a lot." As Brianna explains further, at the time of the interview, she was not willing to take legal actions to demand that her child's father assist her in supporting their son. In response to the idea that she should have to "remind" her child's father to help her with parenting, she says, "I feel like I just have it…I don't need it."

In describing the SBW myth, many scholars identify independence and self-reliance as a key attribute of the SBW image. For example, in her discussion of SBW as an ideology, Chanequa Walker-Barnes identifies independence as the third attribute of the SBW. She describes the SBW's excessive display of self-reliance as "a woman who meets the needs of others without appearing to have any needs of her own, at least any needs that she cannot meet without the support of anyone else" (32). She notes that popular culture, especially hip-hop and R&B culture, are primary sites within the public sphere where images of the independent SBW, or "Miss Independent," is perpetuated and celebrated (29).

Although one could interpret Brianna's decision to juggle these multiple roles as her willfully assuming the role as an overly self-reliant "Miss Independent," Brianna identifies for herself (and others) her own reasoning for her choices, which is important for understanding her meaning of *strong*. For her, demanding that her son's father contribute to their son's life is an unnecessary action for her to perform. Given her other responsibilities, and the personal

events going on in her life, Brianna may not just be saying "no" to court-ordered child support, but also "no" to another battle, another responsibility, and another potential loss on top of what she is already managing in her life. Her choices and how she employs strength and independence for specific reasons and purposes ensures her own survival and progress in the midst of difficult life experiences.

## KANINI'S DEFINITION OF STRONG: RESILIENT, QUIET, AND (WHEN NECESSARY) LOUD

During the time of the study, Kanini self-identified as a Kenyan, wife, and mother in her 30s. In her pre-interview questionnaire responses, she used the words *strong*, *non-conformist*, and *misunderstood* to describe herself as a Black woman. Throughout her interview, Kanini discussed her own resistance to traditional gender norms that prescribe "appropriate" behavior and roles for women within society. These beliefs and values also translated into her self-definition and self-valuation practices, particularly how she claimed her multiple roles within her family as a caregiver and provider. These positions influenced how she defined the word *strong*. In the following audio-clip, Kanini begins her interpretation of *strong* by first claiming another term for herself—*resilient*:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1pF3WP2dKGnU3GiVSGDFYUHQeEksytXHd

It is important to note that Kanini did not initially include the word *resilient* in her List #1 pre-interview questionnaire responses, but while defining the word *strong* in her interview she added (literally hand wrote) the word *resilient* into her responses. In this excerpt, Kanini uses *resilient* to refer to her personal experiences of pain. Although she did not share specific details, her emphasis on "dealing with a lot of pain" and her comments about various types of pain, including "physical, emotional, and psychological" burdens, demonstrates how resilience functions within her life as a mother and wife trying to keep her family functioning.

Lindsey West et.al. summarize Regina Romero's two-part description of the SBW image with the first part being strength and independence,

and the second part being SBW's role as caretaker (392). As an image that is readily drawn on to represent Black women's identities and behaviors, these characteristics of excessive strength, independence, and caretaking is often incorporated within other stereotypical and controlling images of Black womanhood. In "Black Women and Motherhood," Collins explains how, until recently, analysis of Black motherhood have been dominated by the perspectives of White and Black males. On one hand, White males promoted controlling images of Mammy and Matriarch within public discourses to support their own interpretations of Black women's desires and roles as both good mothers (to their White families) and bad mothers (to their Black families). On the other hand, Collins states that Black males also contributed to public discourse on Black mothers by emphasizing the strength of Black mothers and their self-sacrificing nature, creating and promoting the image of the super-Black mother (150). In both cases, these images of Black motherhood result in problematic images of Black womanhood that do not account for real Black women's lived experiences and personal perspectives (151).

Kanini's discussion of her resilience, especially her emphasis on the actual physical, emotional, and psychological pain that she endures to care for her family offers a counter-narrative of Black motherhood from a Black woman's perspective. From what Kanini shares in her interview, her intentions as a Black woman/mother/wife/family-oriented person is to care and provide for her family, which includes ensuring that her family "works" and "stays together." She situates herself as someone who is "willing to fight" for her family and community, and she understands this fight as not free from pain. This verbal expression and acknowledgement of her pain shows Kanini's vulnerability. She is not an invincible superwoman. Instead, she is a real woman who employs methods of resilience in her multiple roles for the benefit of herself and the survival of her family.

In a follow-up question, I asked Kanini to speak more specifically about her use of the word *strong* in her pre-interview questionnaire. She responded by making distinctions between two types of strength she employs within her everyday life: *quiet strong* and *loud strong*. She said the following:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1vqqFtnK_
GVMlhSX13IDxrWyxVZxv8vf8

Similar to Brianna, Kanini also looked beyond her point of view to consider others' perceptions of her. Although Brianna experienced others seeing her as extraordinarily *strong*, Kanini's experiences were much different. She felt that people often perceived her as physically and mentally weak. According to Kanini, people misunderstand her as someone who is "naïve, timid, and unenlightened." Kanini used her definition of *strong* to correct these misperceptions of her identity by explaining that she is neither naïve, timed, nor unenlightened, instead she is well informed ("I know I know a lot") and this self-defined knowledge is a part of her inward strength, or *quiet strong*.

Along with her quiet strength, Kanini described herself as having another dimension of strength that she reserves for moments where she needs to demand respect from others. She calls this more outward display of strength her *loud strong*. She says, "I also know, like, you can't play around with me…if I need to stand up for myself I will do that and you are going to run because I'll come on you, and I'll come on you hard." For Black women, demanding respect, having to fight for one's dignity, and when necessary, "check" (i.e., correct) whomever attempts to deny them their humanity are practices that many Black women engage in within a range of contexts and spaces daily. As noted by Gwendolyn Pough in *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop, and the Public Sphere*, Black women's rhetorical practices for making space for themselves within public discourses is not—and cannot—always be quiet, polite, and in alignment with dominant standards. As suppressed voices within the U.S public sphere and Black public sphere, bringing wreck, a "rhetorical act that can be written, spoken, or acted out in a way that shows resistance," (78) allows Black women to survive within these spaces, validate their experiences, have their voices heard, and resist "stereotypes and marginalization that inhibit their interaction in the larger public sphere" (87). Communications and language studies scholars have also discussed similar language practices within everyday settings, including talking with an attitude, signifying, laughter, cut-eye and suck-teeth, etc., are effectively used by Black women to communicate their perspectives, offer social critique of a situation, be seen and

heard within a range of public and private spaces (Denise Troutman, Geneva Smitherman, John and Angela Rickford, Marcyliena Morgan, and others).

These visible and vocal displays of strength are used by Black women, like Kanini, to affirm their self-defined knowledge, while also resisting misrepresentations and misinterpretations of their identities and behaviors, and offering new perspectives that more accurately align with Black women realities.

## DARLENE'S STRONG: CARRYING THE WEIGHT

During the time of her interview, Darlene, a wife and mother in her late 50s, used the words *worthy*, *pretty*, *different*, and *confident* to describe herself, while also using *strong* to describe both herself and influential Black women in her life. Darlene shared the following thoughts about the word *strong*:

> https://drive.google.com/open?id=1dAFwHPBUXA-F68TEwDgIMpICX_ZQlMVw

Darlene directly connects her understanding of the word *strong* to her identity as a Black woman and her ability to help others in her life who are in need. The way in which Darlene connects her personal strength to her care for loved ones, shares similarities with Kanini's definition of *resilient*. Each woman saw her strength as a quality that serves both themselves and others. What makes Darlene's interpretation of the word *strong* unique is her emphasis on labor. Unlike Kanini who generally speaks of the pain and her personal fight for her family, Darlene highlights how her strength and "ability to help others" often comes with added labor and pressure of "carrying a lot of weight." She explains that this "means carrying other people besides just [herself]." In a range of contexts, including as a friend, a family member, and a co-worker, Darlene is typically seen as a go-to person for assistance and advice. These acts gave her a reputation amongst her communities as a *strong* person.

The image of Black women being "the carriers" is commonly discussed across discourses on Black womanhood. For example, in

her essay, "The Myth of the Strong Black Woman," Marcia Gillespie defines the SBW myth as this belief "that [Black women] have to give up our softness in order to be strong, that we're required to be female Atlases" (32). Drawing on Greek mythology where the Titan Atlas was condemned to hold up the sky after being defeated by the Olympian gods, Gillespie relates this punishment suffered by a god to the pressure some Black women feel to be *strong*. Gillespie suggests that this physical demonstration of toughness is often seen as a prerequisite for being recognized as *strong* for some Black women. In her novel, *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston's character Nanny says the following about Black women as the designated carriers of others' burdens:

> Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (14)

According to Darlene, being a Black woman who is *strong* does include carrying and holding up others, but unlike Atlas, Darlene situates this role not as a punishment or a demonstration of her god-like abilities, but a symbol of her care, love, and humanity. The labor of carrying the weight of loved ones and community members speaks to a history of Black women assuming roles as leaders and mothers within their immediate and extended families. As discussed by Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, traditionally Black women community othermothers assumed the responsibilities of assisting, protecting, and uplifting vulnerable members of their communities (208). In *"We Are Coming": The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*, Shirley Wilson Logan discusses how racial uplift was a major part of 19th century Black churchwomen and club women's activism (18). A popular slogan used by the National Association of Colored Women during this era was "lifting as we climb" (National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc.). This slogan conveys a message of self-reliance, but also emphasized a communal effort to support and uplift members of their community. Logan says that

nineteenth century Black women's perspectives on racial uplift included "encouraging those who were in need to take initiative and challenging those who had accomplished to "lift" those who had not" (18).

In my interpretation of Darlene's vision of her strength, I connect her acts of carrying others with her as she moves forward in life—personally and professionally—as speaking back to Black women's legacy of racial uplift within public movements and organizations, and within the privacy of their home communities. These acts of "carrying" and "lifting" are not about all Black women willfully assuming the roles of "mules uh de world" (Hurston 14), instead it's about Black women using their labor and sharing their strength with others to ensure the survival and growth of their people, their families, and their communities. As Darlene says, this role can be "difficult at times" but she, like many other Black women, "did what [she] had to do" to be *strong*. She claims and affirms her actions and choices, while acknowledging the additional labor that comes with her embodied version of strength.

## MONÉ'S DEFINITION OF STRONG: A MINDSET TO PUSH THROUGH

Moné identified herself as a Haitian American, Black woman and student in her late 20s. When asked to describe herself in the pre-interview questionnaire, she used the following terms: *spiritual*, *optimistic*, *stubborn*, and *strong*. In her interview, she interpreted her use of the word *strong* by saying, "Strong. Can't be a Black woman and be weak." In a follow-up question, I asked her to elaborate on this statement. The following audio-clip is Moné's response and further interpretation of *strong*:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1E0iTvWcQjaespeyNr4mu0SnIsf7L7hq7

From her initial statement that "Black women cannot be weak," to her more detailed interpretation of how being *strong* has functioned within her life, Moné identifies the possible risks of showing vulnerability as a Black woman in a racist, sexist, classist American society. In the beginning of her interpretation of *strong*, Moné says that being

*strong* is a part of Black women's "nature" and is "built in you as a Black woman." Creators and perpetrators of the SBW image often play on the myth that something is inherently different about Black women, which allows Black women to endure pain, trauma, and abuse without being weakened or visibly affected. It is important to note that whether this myth suggests that Black women are superwomen or animals, both standpoints deny Black women their humanity.

Although Moné's initial thoughts may seem in alignment with this myth that there is something innately different about Black women, she further explains that the "difference" that she is referring to is the oppressive conditions in which Black women are forced to live, work, learn, and survive daily. Under these oppressive circumstances she has developed a sense of strength that she must employ in nearly every space she encounters to protect and support herself, while also creating opportunities for her own growth and success despite unequal treatment. Similar to Kanini's *quiet strong*, Moné situates her strength as inward, a state of mind that she believes "cannot be weak" if she is going to make it, or "push through." According to Moné's experiences, being weak as a Black woman is not being mentally prepared for the obstacles that one will inevitably face within U.S. society and culture. Being *strong* is essentially about being prepared for those encounters of discrimination, silencing, unequal treatment, etc., and overtime developing a mental strength for resisting and challenging oppression.

To add to her interpretation, Moné identifies her parents, specifically her mother, as embodying the kind of determination and focus that she recognizes as *strong*. By reflecting on her mother's experiences, Moné comes to the conclusion that strength is not an ability that Black women develop on their own, but something that can be taught as a method of daily survival. She says, "Strength passes down for us to, like, push through." Moné's understanding of strength being passed down so that future generations can also "push through" (and hopefully beyond) speaks to these practices of socialization for survival (Collins 198). As a recipient of her mother's strength, Moné is able to negotiate, survive, and thrive within these spaces "not originally made for [her]."

## WILLOW'S DEFINITION OF STRONG: I'M STILL A BADASS

Willow self-identified as a Black woman and lesbian in her 30s from a working-class background. Within her pre-interview questionnaire, she used the words *woman, stud, soft dom*, and *badass* to describe her identity. Unlike the other women presented thus far, Willow did not include the word *strong* in her pre-interview questionnaire, but she did define the word *badass* in ways that were similar to how other participants used *strong*. I include Willow's interpretation of badass here because of her unique perspective and deviation in word choice. The following audio-clip is an excerpt from Willow's interview:

> https://drive.google.com/open?id=1zDIJ3kNDu2E7tEUmYQ
> PemeL2zEUfzXcg

In her definition of *badass*, Willow begins with her understanding of Black women's traumatic histories. She describes this trauma as complex, existing in "ways that we can articulate, and ways that we can't," while also affecting individual Black women and Black women collectively. Although Willow does not specifically name or delve too deeply into Black women's articulable histories of trauma, her reminder of their existence is an indirect way to acknowledge the pain embedded within Black women's experiences and standpoints. These histories include Black women and girls who were kidnapped, enslaved, killed, whipped, raped, worked excessively, denied basic human rights, stigmatized and stereotyped in ways that would continue for generations to mark them as inferior, inhuman, invaluable, omitted, outsiders and Others.

As Willow suggests, although this trauma exists and persists for many Black women, the identity of *badass* allows her, and other Black women, "to re-cultivate their identity," and "reinsert their own sense of independence and strength" within discourses. Just as Willow reminds us of Black women's traumatic histories, she also reminds us of Black women's resistance, which she sees reflected in how they identify themselves, as well as their physical actions. In her chapter "The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood" in *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis says the following about enslaved Black women's resistance:

[…] [Black women] asserted their equality aggressively in challenging the inhuman institution of slavery. They resisted the sexual assaults of white men, defended their families, and participated in work stoppages and revolts…From the numerous accounts of the violent repression overseers inflicted on women, it must be inferred that she who passively accepted her lot as a slave was the exception rather than the rule. (19-20)

In her definition of *badass*, Willow is referring to this legacy of Black women who refused to "passively accept [their] lot as a slave," (Davis 20). Instead, they insisted on claiming and asserting their humanity, despite the potentially violent consequences.  In alignment with this standpoint, Willow names Black women's strength, independence, and pride in a way that is not mythical, but calls on practices of Black women re-cultivating and re-inscribing their identities for themselves, even in the midst of trauma and violence. In other words, Willow sees this ability to resist and refusal to relinquish one's pride and humanity as *badass*, and she claims this identity for herself individually, and Black women collectively. Her renaming and reclaiming of Black women's strength and independence does not erase the historical and contemporary trauma, but accepts it—all of it—as a part of her self-defined knowledge and self-affirmation of *still* being a *badass* Black woman.

## DISCUSSION: TOWARDS COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF STRONG

These five Black women's definitions offer their unique perspectives about the word *strong*, including its value, meanings, and functions within their everyday lives. As participants within this study, they incorporated their lived experiences and self-defined knowledge to offer more complex standpoints of Black women's strength. Common and interrelated themes across participant interpretations of *strong* included: participants differentiating between their perspectives on their identities and the viewpoints of others, engaging moments of pain and weakness as part of their understandings of *strong*, and empowering themselves by celebrating their labor, achievement, and survival.

## PERSPECTIVE: NEGOTIATING SELF-DEFINED KNOWLEDGE AND VIEWPOINTS OF OTHERS

For many participants, their viewpoints and experiences for claiming the word *strong* as part of their identities informed how they interpreted the term and how they utilized this identity within their everyday lives. For instance, as part of her interpretation, Brianna articulated the context from which she was speaking. She was aware that her current life experiences, such as finalizing a divorce, dealing with the loss of her brother, raising a son as a single mother, and being a provider, affected her word choice in the moment, as well as how she defined that term. Nedra Reynolds in "Ethos as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority" refers to this practice of stating the position from which one is speaking as a way for underrepresented groups to develop and build their own "ethos from the margins." Reynolds states that this way of building ethos allows persons with under-represented voices to establish authority, and "[challenge] the dominant discourse" (332). By providing context, Brianna establishes a space for understanding how and why she believes *strong* characterizes her realities, while also establishing herself as the primary authority for interpreting her experiences and actions.

Other participants, such as Kanini and Darlene, also emphasized the importance of their perspectives. Kanini's interpretation of her strength as having two parts, i.e. *a quiet strong* and *loud strong,* developed out of her recognition that her identity and behavior is often misunderstood by others. Kanini notes that her efforts to utilize her inward strength is often misinterpreted by others as her being "naïve, timid, and unenlightened." In response to this confusion, she has to draw on her self-defined knowledge to affirm this knowledge and empower herself. She admits that there are times that others' beliefs about her identity, personality, and abilities become overwhelmingly disrespectful, which requires her to enact her more visible and *loud strong* to correct their views and demand respect.

Unlike Kanini and Brianna, Darlene more openly embraced others' perceptions of her as a *strong* person. Her ability to help others established for her an identity of strength within multiple communities. Although Darlene admitted to the difficulty of being

a "carrier," in her definition she offers her perspective on the labor associated with being *strong*, while affirming her own abilities to positively affect the lives of others. Given Darlene was older than the other participants, her experience with negotiating conflicting views of her identity more than likely influenced her response. Darlene accepted others' perceptions of her as a "strong person," but also made visible her labor that allows her to claim that identity for herself and on her own terms.

## PAIN: ACKNOWLEDGING MOMENTS OF VULNERABILITY

The most obvious theme across participant definitions of *strong* was the incorporation of experiences of pain as a part of their daily experiences and understandings of being *strong*. In her preliminary framework for analyzing Black women's communal regulation and communication of strength, or Strong Black Woman Collective (SBWC), Davis articulated four propositions for interpreting this phenomenon. Her fourth proposition states that "[c]ommunication patterns of strength enable the SBWC to confront and retreat from oppressive structures outside but also impede vulnerability and emotionality within the collective" (27), In other words, the SBWC allows Black women to build and sustain support systems amongst each other, affirm each other's' strengths and power, and resist and protect each other from oppression, but this same collective may prevent Black women from expressing their emotions, being vulnerable with one another, and discussing weaknesses (30).

Within my own research, which was situated within a Black woman communal space, participants used their definitions of *strong* to offer counter-narratives to oppressive and inaccurate depictions of their identities. In doing so, several participants also communicated moments of vulnerability and emotionality within this space. For some, these moments often existed while they were reflecting on experiences of pain. These instances were typically in the form of brief phrases that participants used to acknowledge their pain, but rarely elaborated on, or further explained. For example, Brianna's statement that in spite of being able to self-motivate, she also "has her moments," Darlene's confession that her choice to help others can be "difficult at times," and both Moné and Brianna referring

to their strength as self-motivation to "push through" difficult situations within their lives.

Other participants like Kanini more explicitly identified experiences of pain, be it "physical, emotional, or psychological," and how pain was a part of her life and influenced her practices of resilience and embodiment of strength. Similarly, Willow incorporated trauma into her meaning of *badass*. Although neither Kanini or Willow, expanded on their thoughts on pain and trauma in detail, they also did not mask the existence of pain and trauma within their lives as Black women, or their definitions of *strong*. Pain seems to have function within their definitions, and understandings of their identities as *strong*, but additional research is needed to better understand what those functions are for these individual Black women, and Black women collectively.

## POWER: INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE JOURNEYS TO FREEDOM

Self-definition is a key part of a womanist consciousness. It is essential to many Black women's survival, and is a part of their journey to coming to voice (Collins 111), and freedom of mind (Collins 123). Ultimately, Collins claims self-definition, as it has been used by many Black women throughout history within both public and private spaces, as power (132). By engaging in practices of self-definition and self-valuation, Black women in this study claim their power to define their own realities, and offer counter-narratives to the dominant, and historically oppressive, images that persist within public discourses.

Both Moné and Willow defined *strong* using historical lenses, relating their understandings of strength to Black women legacies of resistance. Moné's emphasis on her positionality, particularly living and working within unwelcoming environments and spaces not historically made for Black women, informed how she understood *strong* as a state of mind. She affirmed her inheritance of this *strong* mentality from her mother and other Black women that came before her. In addition, Willow connected her definition of *badass* to Black women histories of trauma. She claimed that Black women's (and other historically oppressed groups) ability to still see themselves positively, despite attempts to strip them of their dignity and humanity, as worthy of celebration. In alignment with Collins' definitions of self-definition

and self-valuation, Willow re-articulates the power dynamics for defining her realities, acknowledges the traumatic and oppressive histories associated with Black womanhood, and then refutes these false images by reclaiming Black women's self-defined images and histories of strength, independence, and pride for herself.

It is important to note that Brianna, Moné, and Kanini all situated their strength as inner power that they employed to motivate themselves. Both Brianna and Moné described their strength as their ability to "push through," a phrase reminiscent of the African American mantra of "making a way out of no way."  Kanini specifically identifies one aspect of her strength—her *quiet strong*—as existing on the inside, and she employs this strength to affirm her own knowledge and self-worth, even as misinformed others mistake her quietness as weakness. Collins says, "Any Black women who is forced to remain 'motionless on the outside,' can develop the 'inside' of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom" (129). In this sense, claiming the word *strong* as a part of their identities allowed participants to redefine the strength that others often misinterpret, while making visible the inner strength that others often ignore. Ultimately, their collective interpretations of strength offer a more holistic view of how some Black women understand their abilities, their labor, their resilience, and their power.

## CONCLUSION

Black women within my study claimed an identity of *strong* to describe their daily experiences and practices. When Black women engage in practices of self-definition and self-valuation, they reclaim their power to name their own identities in ways that best represent these Black women's lived experiences. As a Black woman, and a researcher, my intentions are to listen to better understand these women's stories and recognize their roles as agents/actors who incorporated experiences of pain, power, survival within their definitions of *strong*. Although participants in my study were not asked to explicitly discuss the SBW scheme/myth, given the culture and society in which we live, and the historical connections between Black women and strength, it is important to recognize the impacts these mythological images of Black women can have on Black women's perceptions of themselves and naming practices.

Melissa Harris-Perry in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* describes the SBW image as a Black woman self-construction that has evolved out of harsh circumstances within Black women's histories. She says that Black women resist naming themselves Mammies, Matriarchs, and Jezebels, and instead emphasize their independence and self-reliance as a part of their strong identities and practices of self-definition (185). Harris-Perry describes this practice of renaming their identities and crafting SBW as a counter-image as an emotional and political triumph for Black women, but also argues that this symbol of Black womanhood can be dangerous if not seriously interrogated. If this readapted image of SBW becomes an *expectation* for *all* Black women, this seemingly positive image can also deny Black women their humanity (Harris-Perry 186).

Given the potential harmful consequences that can come with not critically engaging the SBW image as it is employed and claimed by Black women, it is important to celebrate Black women's public and private naming of their strength, but equally important to consider the meaning behind these words as they relate to Black women's identities. As Joan Morgan says in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, the SBW myth "is not to be confused with being strong, Black, and female" (87). Morgan explains, "I draw strength daily from the history of struggle and survival that is a black woman's spiritual legacy. What I kicked to the curb was the years of social conditioning that told me it was my destiny to live my life as a BLACKSUPERWOMAN Emeritus" (87). As the SBW image continues to be associated with Black female identity, and claimed by Black women across discourses and spaces, it is imperative that this image is supplemented with Black women's voices, stories, and meanings. This includes Black women's everyday naming and theorizing of their identities.

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