Spring 5-3-2024

The "Communal Gaze:" How the Collective Community Responds to the Narratives of Sexual Violence Vocalized by Black Women

Brianna Christie
University of Maine, briannachristie06@gmail.com

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THE *COMMUNAL GAZE*: HOW THE COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO THE NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE VOCALIZED BY BLACK WOMEN

By

Brianna Christie

B.A. Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, 2022

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Communication)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2023

Advisory Committee:

Dr. Liliana Herakova, Associate Professor of Communication, Advisor

Dr. Haley Schneider, Associate Professor of Communication

Dr. Judith Josiah-Martin, Principal Lecturer, School of Social Work

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UNIVERSITY OF MAINE GRADUATE SCHOOL LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The University of Maine recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of Penobscot people, where issues of water and territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations— the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac—through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The University also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.

THE *COMMUNAL GAZE*: HOW THE COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO THE NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE VOCALIED BY BLACK WOMEN

By Brianna Christie

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Liliana Herakova

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillments of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in Communication)
May 2023

This research theorizes, from within a Black Diasporic experience, the epistemic power *communal gazes* have on women who share, or consider sharing, their narratives of experiencing sexual violence. Black women's experience with sexual violence in the African Diaspora is complicated by historical legacies and norms within their communities (Hartman, 1997; McDonald, 2019). The present study builds on and extends gaze theory, feminist standpoint(s), and aesthetic theory, particularly as related to the body as a rhetorical space. Informed by these theoretical perspectives and critically honoring Black women's stories of (considering) sharing their experiences of sexual violence, this thesis addresses three research questions: 1) How does literature authored by Black women of the African diaspora construct experiences of the communal gaze, following knowledge of sexual assault perpetrated against Black women? 2) How does sharing/narrating experiences of sexual violence with community members change meanings of the body for Black women? 3) How do performances of the *communal gaze* relate to colonial and white-oppressive legacies of invading Black spaces?

To answer these questions, both critical rhetorical and ethnographic research methods were used. Conducting a rhetorical analysis on four novels resulted in contouring the *communal*

gaze in the wake of experiencing sexual violence. The *communal gaze* emerged as a straining dialogic site of re/configuring relationships with/in the family, the embodied self, and the natural world. Additionally, the *communal gaze* can be either *dominant* or *oppositional*. The dominant gaze seeks to affirm oppressive norms, such as controlling women's bodies and their agency. On the other hand, the oppositional communal gaze is a decolonial way of speaking back and transforming oppressions, via, for instance, creating alternative communities and coalitions.

Findings from semi-formal interviews showed that the *communal gaze* and/or its anticipation is a silencing mechanism within Black women's immediate and extended familial structures, when it came to sharing their stories of experiencing sexual violence. However, the women I interviewed felt responsible for and capable of changing these norms. They did this specifically through building new, supportive coalitions, physically and mentally transforming themselves, and hoping for communities to dismantle the gaze.

The *communal gaze* brings a relational lens to experiences of living through sexual violence and its narrative aftermath, and how those become meaningful to the person, how it shapes them, and helps them navigate the world through transformation, coalition, hope, and resistance. It adds insight to gaze, feminist standpoint(s), and aesthetic theories by naming the dynamic relationship between sexual assault survivors, their sense of selves, and their communities as a space of negotiation and transformation. Additionally, the lens can be utilized by practitioners to support survivors by inquiring in their engagement with *communal gazes*.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the Black girls and women who have yet to share with their community their stories. Let this work be your voice for the moment. To the Black girls and women who have shared your stories. You are the reason this work has inspired me. Your stories have been heard.

To my participants, Archivist, Britney Le, and Diamond. Your courage to share your narratives with me will be forever cemented in this work. The imagined community we've created with one another combats the imagined and real gazes we've experienced. I hope you all continue to transform and be the beautiful women I had the pleasure to meet and know.

To my friend, Marissa Hoerr. Your motivation and dream to pursue higher education, as well as your encouragement during my degree progress has not been forgotten since your passing. The community you've built for storytellers, like me, makes finishing this thesis even more meaningful and rewarding. You are loved and missed.

Finally, to the girl I was before writing this. To the woman I became while writing. To the woman I am now. To the woman I will be after.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Community plays a significant role in the family and identity dynamics of marginalized people (Scharp & Hall, 2017). The community's reaction to specific scenarios influences a person's experience and the overall discourse, setting up norms and expectations. Due to this prominent role, it is important to name the phenomenon of a community "looking at" something and somebody differently, whether positively and/or negatively. The *communal gaze*, a framework that I intend to explicate with the publication of my thesis, aims to examine the community's culture-shaping reaction after a woman within that community vocalizes her experience of sexual violence and assault. I first began conceptualizing this framework in a 2022 undergraduate course, noticing the frequent presence of the *communal gaze* as awareness of cultural standards and practices that is at the forefront of minority communities. If one goes against these standards and practices, the community will gaze at them in a different way (Christie, 2022). Seeing that many cultural standards around womens' sexualities make the topic taboo (Holland et al., 1994), a known or vocalized experience of sexual assault becomes a point of disruption within the community, producing a reaction that may aim to affirm the cultural norms and in, the process, dismiss or further victimize the survivor. However, this is not always a linear relationship.

Although I first conceptualized the *communal gaze* while examining Black and Asian literary narratives of sexual violence, specifically Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, in the context of this thesis, only Black[1] narratives from the

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[1] The capitalization of Black is intentional for this thesis to reclaim power from the oppressor and give agency back to the Black community.

African Diaspora will be examined. Narratives surrounding sexual violence, such as those in social movements like #MeToo, have long ignored the experiences being told by Black women. Although the #MeToo Movement was created in 2006 by a Black woman, Tarana Burke, it was "colonized" by white women celebrities, whose stories have occupied center stage since 2017 (McDonald, 2019). The #MeToo Movement highlighted the prevalence of experiences of sexual violence among Black women. However, research surrounding sexual violence in Black communities focuses on the statistics of assault and not the narratives themselves. This dismisses survivors' knowledge and erases perspectives. Furthermore, traditional Western scholarship focuses on the individual experience and may, for example, examine mental health impacts on the person (Jina & Thomas, 2013; Vandemark & Mueller, 2008) or sometimes how relationships are influenced by sexual violence (Vitek & Yeater, 2021). However, even when a systems approach is taken, this is often still done with the individual at the center, reflecting a cultural bias. Thus, Western literature on sexual violence rarely, if ever, addresses sexual violence from a communal perspective and within considerations of historical contexts, as called for by decolonial researchers (Mack & Na'puti, 2019). However, new literature advocates for a more complex systems-based approach to understanding the complexities of experiencing and disclosing sexual violence (Gómez & Gobin, 2020).

Considering the above, the purpose of focusing on the African diaspora is to theorize, from within a Black Diasporic experience, the epistemic power *communal gazes* have on women who share, or consider sharing, their narratives of sexual violence. With this theorizing, I am building on more Afro-centric paradigms in considering the person-community nexus and how culture can change without using Western research orientations (Mohammed, 2022; Pindi, 2021). Through such theorizing, this thesis aims to contribute to Black feminist theorizing as liberatory

and healing, so as to claim the epistemic value of Black women's experience in a society that routinely undermines it (hooks, 1994). Additionally, listening and writing about narratives of sexual violence from Black women gives voice and processing space to those who had or anticipated negative community reactions to vocalized experiences of sexual violence.

Trusting and learning with Black feminist knowledge and theorizing in the flesh, this thesis traces the development, refinement, and application of the *communal gaze* as a lens to help us make sense of the contextual sharing or silencing experiences of sexual violence. Through the analysis of literary works (novels), I articulate the *communal gaze*. Then I apply and refine the developed lens in the analysis of interviews with Black women who have their own experiences with anticipating the community gazing at them in response to shared stories of sexual violence, as well as how their sense of place within their bodies changed in relation to this lived or expected community response.

This thesis fits within and contributes to feminist standpoint theories. Feminist standpoint theory provides an "interpretive framework dedicated to explicating how knowledge remains central to maintaining and hanging unjust systems of power" and "advocates using women's everyday lives as a foundation for constructing knowledge and as a basis for critiquing dominant knowledge claims that are based on men's lives" (Allen, 1996, p. 258). From this perspective, one can see how the *communal gaze* lens advocates for women of color honoring their lived experiences and narratives as knowledge with the potential of shifting power dynamics and cultural discourses. Additionally, the *communal gaze* acknowledges the structures within communities of color that uphold colonialist and white/western systems of power. With the help of feminist standpoint theory, the *communal gaze* framework critiques internalized misogyny and whiteness within communities of color.

This thesis is written and organized to provide readers the opportunity to follow the development and implementation of the *communal gaze* as an analytic lens. Chapter 1 presents a literature review on theories that inform the *communal gaze:* gaze theory, feminist standpoint theory, and aesthetic theory. Additionally, the literature review discusses space and place for Black women and Black bodies as well as the importance of narratives discussing sexual violence. Chapter 2 presents the research methods used to conduct this research as well as the ontological and epistemological approaches that guided this research. Processes used for data collection and analysis are also examined. Chapter 3 is a rhetorical analysis of four selected novels, the purpose of which was to create a model of the *communal gaze* as a lens, formed by three overarching themes: family, the body, and nature. With these themes in mind, Chapters 4 and 5 apply and refine the lens through analysis of semi-formal and photovoice interviews conducted with three women in the African Diaspora. The interview analysis helped identify more specific components of the communal gaze lens, namely: complex layers, mental and physical health, space and place, and coalition. Lastly, in Chapter 6, the findings are summarized to answer the posed research questions and provide a concluding description of the *communal gaze* as an analytic lens to help notice relational, personal, and communal changes when narratives of sexual violence are shared or silenced. Limitations and directions for future research are also discussed.

The process of writing this thesis offered me healing and understanding. It was generous in learning about and feeling in coalition with other women from the African Diaspora. It was also challenging and saddening in having to confront cultural realities within my community, without tearing the community or my relation to it apart. In the end, I hope this thesis is a

reflexive, ever-changing space that will allow us to face, name, and transform the hurtful legacies that live through us. I open this thesis with a sonnet:

This is about me.

This is about my recovery

From the tragedy I find

Myself in. My body detached

From my soul. It's scattered across the

Floor of my freshman dorm.

I have no body. No ability to preserve

The fragility of myself. I've stopped

Crying out for help. Who am I?

Someone who was assaulted?

Faulted by the world for being a

Woman. I refuse to lose the girl

I was before this. Do I choose to sing

The yellows or the blues? - Brianna Christie, 2021

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review provides a background understanding of previous scholarship and theories that helped me develop the *communal gaze* lens. As there is, currently, no literature specifically dedicated to the *communal gaze,* understanding theories that examine various forms of the gaze, Black bodies, gendered bodies, space and place, and narratives is integral to constructing the new lens that I propose. First, gaze theory and feminist standpoint theory are reviewed to understand meanings and impacts of the gaze. As gaze theory stems from feminist theories and scholars within film studies, feminist standpoint theory offers a way to destabilize oppressive ways of looking. Next, literature surrounding the body as a rhetorical device is examined; specifically, the movement of bodies in space and place, experiences within the body, and its connection to legacies of enslavement. Then, the importance of narratives about sexual violence is discussed as the *communal gaze* was first conceptualized from said narratives. Lastly, with this review and discussion, the gaps found in the literature prompt the purpose of the study and related research questions.

The Gaze and Feminist Standpoint(s)

The *communal gaze* lens emerged in relation and response to gaze theory, which is rooted in film studies. Specifically, feminist film theory was shaped around a critique of the male gaze by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In this essay, Mulvey suggests that the camera in Hollywood films and productions composes power relations by arranging viewers to have the perspective of a heterosexual male which allows for the objectification and commodification of women's bodies (Sisco King, 2020). The gaze, analyzed in film, questioned how the presumption of a heteronormative, western, cis-male viewer

impacted the ability to "look" as directed by the film lens (Columpar, 2002), and created

positions of power. Additionally, those who were directing and producing these films were

predominantly heterosexual, cis, white men who objectified the female characters and actresses

in film, movie, and television shows (Sisco King, 2020). The gaze expands beyond film and

male objectification as Mulvey's concept considers multiple gazes that are built through power

relations from the acts of looking and being looked at. This helped to structure what is known as

"gaze theory" (Sisco King, 2020). However, this theory failed to account for the key factors that

social locations and intersectional positionalities play into the gaze.

To investigate these key factors, postcolonial studies on film theory developed theoretical

concepts that acknowledge the role that race, ethnicity, and nationality play in "looking"

(Columpar, 2002). One such extension is the theorizing of the white gaze in literature and film,

which is used to colonize characters of color as well as create a certain white/west-centering

perspective for individuals to view or read a type of text. In addition to being a tool to colonize,

the white gaze is used to dominate and subjugate (Stehle, 2020). In thinking about the gaze's

ability to reinforce power and control, bell hooks' notion of the oppositional gaze (2015) aims to

resist this power imbalance. hooks was critical of the lack of attention to Black female

spectatorship in works of film theory by white feminists (Sisco King, 2020). In response, she

argued that the gaze is "always raced" as Black women are always subjected to the controlling

and connected gazes of white supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy. In order to combat this

system of power within the gaze, hooks suggested resistance and "looking back" which is her

concept of the oppositional gaze (Sisco King, 2020).

From a young age, hooks knew the power adults held over children. Because of this

realization, she found herself thinking about the connections between the power white people

hold over Black people and the ways power and domination are demonstrated and reproduced in different places (hooks, 2015). When she was growing up, hooks never dared to look, sneak a peek, or stare dangerously due to the power adults had over her (hooks, 2015). The "Black folk" within hooks' community wielded the same white colonial powers, reproducing them in different Black "locations" using the same strategies and tools to enforce control (hooks, 2015). However, the oppositional gaze is the "subalterns'" desire and longing to look, which is a rebellious act (hooks, 2015). Because any type of gaze affirms the right to look at the world, the oppositional gaze gives/claims agency back to those who might otherwise be "gazed at" by dominant groups (Stehle, 2020).

This desire to look seems to be generational. hooks (2015) remembers reading in her childhood history books about white slave owners punishing the enslaved for looking and connects it to the traumatic relationship of Black parenting and Black spectatorship. The politics brought forth by enslavement and racialized power relations connect to the strategy of domination and control used by adults within the southern, Black, rural communities that hooks grew up in (hooks, 2015). This same intersection and connection can be applied for any, and possibly all, Black communities within the African Diaspora. However, hooks highlights Stuart Hall's call for Black folx[2] to 1) is to recognize their agency and 2) is to acknowledge this agency is multi-dimensional (hooks, 2015).

In contrast to Mulvey's theory, hooks understands the gaze as multiple ways of looking and multiple gazes happening at the same time (Sisco King, 2020). Like Stuart Hall, hooks calls attention to the agency of those being looked at, specifically Black women. Drawing from the experiences of Black women, hooks notes that one can be both the object of another's gaze and a

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[2] Used in this context to explicitly signal the inclusion of groups commonly marginalized

subject with agency (Sisco King, 2020; Stehle, 2020). With this in mind, the oppositional gaze is important for Black girls who grow up in an environment that labels them as the "Other" (Jacobs, 2016). The "other" has positioned Black people, specifically Black girls, historically to have the status of being outsiders in comparison to the oppressor (Jacob, 2016). Additionally, because of their intersectionality, the white and male gaze have a heavier weight on womxn[3] of color. Taking hooks and Stuart Hall's call to agency into consideration, Allen's feminist standpoint theory should also be applied.

In addition to their shared feminist orientation, gaze theory and feminist standpoint both relate to knowing, having the right to know, and claiming one's own knowledge. The white and male gaze is a common gaze seen throughout film and other mediums. Again, the gaze aims to dominate, subjugate, and colonize (Stehle, 2020). One's oppressive gaze affirms agency and control over the person being looked at, but this agency can be claimed back, complexly negotiating social relations of power. The gaze is a structure that establishes who is in charge, not only of the room, but of other's perspectives. Similarly, Indigenous communities note the importance of the sovereign body, which is a concept also seen in LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit communities (Mack and Na'Puti, 2019). Sovereign bodies address the resistance to colonialism and violence. This implies that sovereign bodies have the right to gaze, oppositionally, as a form or way of knowing the world. It gives agency back to the body to withstand the challenges and hierarchical power that colonialism has fostered (Mack & Na'Puti, 2019). This act of protecting the home and body is an act of survival which can be seen in storytelling and sharing narrative about the sexual violence one has experience.

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[3] Used in this context to explicitly signal the inclusion of those who identify as women of color, but are not cis women. This allows for an expansive view of gender as it is a spectrum.

Relatedly, feminist standpoint theory provides an "interpretive framework dedicated to [giving a detailed explanation of] how knowledge remains central to maintaining and hanging unjust systems of power" and "advocates using women's everyday lives as a foundation for constructing knowledge and as a basis for critiquing dominant knowledge claims that are based on men's lives" (Allen, 1996, p. 258). Feminist standpoint theory aims to destabilize systems of power by challenging notions of universal knowledge and naming the locations from within which one looks and is looked at. Thus, as a social location, the community can be a major device in upholding or dismantling oppressive behaviors and legacies.

Like hooks' (2015) oppositional gaze, feminist standpoint theory was developed to challenge the systems of power that question women's agency (Allen, 1996). Specifically, Hennessy (1993) notes that, to oppose, one must "formulate a more coherent explanation of feminism's authority, who it speaks for, and the forces of oppression and exploitation it contents" (p. 14). Therefore, feminist standpoint theory upholds knowledge of the oppressed as it offers more possibilities to provide societal change. Most normative, widely-circulated knowledge is based on the dominant lives of men, as noticed in gaze theory as white, male gazes' wields the most power in terms of looking. Thus, it is important to situate the points-of-views from women to reveal the aspects of reality that are harder to notice from the dominant views of men (Allen, 1996). Feminist standpoint theory fulfills basic feminist goals by focusing on gendered differences. However, it further strives to uncover oppression and highlight acts of resistance (Allen, 1996). Therefore, a Black woman's standpoint is needed to continue the uncovering of oppression to provide knowledge to bring forth societal change which is done through the act of resistance.

Claiming a Black feminist stance "contends that Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression" (Collins, 1989, p. 747). Black women have been neither passive victims or willing participants in their own subordination due to enslavement, thus prompting Black women to claim agency to create knowledge from their viewpoints. These two viewpoints being 1) Black women experience a different world from those who are not Black and female; and 2) these experiences of being both Black and female create a distinctive consciousness for Black women to navigate the world different from the dominant group of men and non-Black women. This understanding also informed the foundational Black feminist framework of Intersectionality, through which Crenshaw (1991) mapped out how being at the crossroads of gender and race limits Black women's opportunities to move through social structures (such as workplaces) and results in inequitable treatment and realities. As Black women's experiences are far different from dominant groups, feminist standpoint theory encourages the vocalization of lived experiences, finding a voice, and "unlearning not to speak" (Allen, 1996, p. 259).

In fact, the act of vocalizing may elicit Black women to experience "conscious raising" which stimulates acts of resistance (Collins, 1989; Allen, 1996). It is important to focus on voices and viewpoints of the oppressed to create new perspectives that focus on both understanding and changing existing practices of oppression like the *communal gaze*. Likewise, Mack and Na'Puti (2019) argue for a decolonial feminist critique to deepen the understanding of the complex repetition of sexual violence. To do this, Mack and Na'Puti (2019) foreground witnessing as resistence in an Indigenous community's response to sexual violence. Bearing witness is a powerful tool to notice the painful realities that one would rather not confront (Crenshaw, 2016). By witnessing and sharing, one can imagine and build a decolonial feminist

practice when it comes to the community's response and even gaze. It is notable that witnessing is an embodied act of care that honors the fundamental self-determination and sovereignty of one's body as their first territory (Mack & Na'Puti, 2019).

<div align="center">**The Body**</div>

Geographies, Space, and Place

When thinking about structures and different "places" of the body, feminist scholarship is at the forefront as many scholars advocate for incorporating feminism into research focusing on communication (Allen, 1996). Here, feminist practices are being utilized to examine the communities' gaze(s) that impact women's relation to their bodies. Thus, the community plays an important role in the construction of rhetorical spaces. Rhetorical spaces are highly charged sites that often serve as places for public and/or private memories that contain "residues" from history (Bruce, 2016). If the body is a rhetorical space, for Black women, the "residue" are the subconscious wounds left on the bodies of their enslaved ancestors.

Geography in relation to Black populations is the "space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations" (McKittrick, 2006, p. x). This understanding of geography allows for one to engage in narratives from Black people in relation to Black history and its ramifications. Of course, geography in its scientific meaning is the study of where things are found and why they are present in those places. However, geography is not "secure and unwavering" as humans produce space, the meanings within that space, and make geography what it is (McKittrick, 2006, p. xi). In thinking of Black histories and geography of imaginative configurations, Black bodies have their own geographies that mesh experiences of oppressive domination and the social production of space.

The colonization of bodies is an important theme to consider when discussing rhetorical space, sense of place, and abjection. When thinking about Black women and their experience with sexual violence and assault, identity plays a crucial role. In the context of feminist scholarship, feminist and Black geographies explain how the intersection between race and gender influences responses to sexual violence (Hartman, 1997; Towns, 2016). Black and women of color scholars push the notion of the body being a rhetorical space by seeing the need to consider actual, physical bodies, rather than abstractions of oppression. There is a clear difference between Black and white bodies using an intersectional lens (Chavez, 2018). Black women's lived experience and knowledge of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) informs their connection to their bodies as knowers. In the #SayHerName campaign, this intersectional lens is applied (Towns, 2016). The #SayHerName campaign highlighted multiple instances of police brutality against Black and brown women in the United States. In thinking about the brutalization, and ultimate invasion, of Black and brown female bodies, the space-time compression ignores the consistent dislocation and disconnection felt by people of color due to colonialism.

Developed by Nancy Munn, the space-time compression is considered a "symbolic [center] of relations produced out of interactions between bodily actors and terrestrial spaces" (Low, 2016, p. 101). Friedman (2004) adds to the discussion of dislocation and home by expanding upon Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* by saying:

The body is the home of the heart. Flesh [Spillers, 2000] is the body of home. But what is home? Who feels at home while at home? "I had to leave home so I could find myself," writes Gloria Anzaldua in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. "But I didn't leave all the parts of me: I kept the ground of my own being [. . .] So yes, though 'home' permeates every

sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home." Both home and elsewhere-wherever she travels and relocates-are sites of dislocation. Anzaldua works and reworks the itineraries and terrains of multiple dislocation-the bodily, psychological, and spiritual effects of belonging fully nowhere. She is rooted in a sense of home as a place she can never be at home and from which she must escape to feel at home with herself (p. 191).

Home and dislocation are themes seen in Friedman's (2004) quote. Dislocation transcends the physical body, but is seen psychologically and spiritually. If Black and brown bodies, flesh, do not feel a sense of belonging in the United States, then they dislocate, or disassociate, to a place that feels like home which is the premise of the space-time compression.

In thinking that the body is space, then sexual violence furthers the displacement one feels geographically because of the violence. Chavez (2018) notes that "Black and women of color feminist scholars push even further the need to attend to actual bodies and bodily differences in ways that demand intersectional analysis to understand bodies in rhetorical practice" (p. 245). Here, it is important to understand how geographies differ from person to person. Differentiating which bodies can easily move about and which are constrained is determined along the lines of race and gender (Bruce, 2016) which is seen in the #SayHerName campaign as well as Hartman's (1997) writings of trials from enslavement. The lack of agency refused to Black women, in itself, is subjection which results in the feeling of abjection.

Aesthetic Experiences and/in the Body

The body is a space that, based on experiences, becomes an assemblage of charged sites that communicate experiences and narratives of sexual violence, being Black, being a woman, or being a Black woman who has experienced sexual violence. In order to better understand how

the body is that kind of space, it is necessary to explain a rhetorical perspective on the body. Low (2016) discusses how the body is another form of space outside of buildings and structures as society produces buildings and structures that maintain and/or reinforce social forms. Thus, bodies have the ability to maintain, reinforce, and/or uphold societal expectations of movement, aesthetics, and/or agency.

However, there are differences between the body and what it means to embody something (embodiment). The body is a biological, emotional, and cognitive machine, whereas embodiment is a borderless way of knowing that is accessible to humans and can be studied and defined by the perceived experience and one's engagement in the world (Low, 2016). Additionally, embodiment is the understanding of how cognition is realized or represented in a physical system, especially a body. In sum, embodiment and being embodied refers to when cognition uses the body as a vessel to experience, perceive, and engage with the world. Embodiment is the performative and interpretive elaboration *of something other*, meaning it captures, conveys, or communicates an experience (Bowman, 2019). For example, the embodiment of power is an interpretative elaboration of those in power which is performed by oppressors[4]. Therefore, experiences of embodiment can be positive and/or negative. It is important to note that embodiment can be seen as two different things: a mental restriction and physical performance. As a mental restriction, embodiment is something that one automatically has and can not separate from. However, because the body is a physical and biological entity, lived experiences and the body's agency is a location for speaking and acting in the world which is the physical performance piece of embodiment (Low, 2016).

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[4] Bowman (2019) uses the example of a police officer being an example of an oppressor

Ultimately, embodiment is multiple aesthetic experiences that one can have. An aesthetic experience, similarly to standpoint theory's naming of all knowledge as situated, "intimates to us that our point of view is, after all, only *our* point of view, and that we are no more creators of nature than we are creators of the point of view from which we observe and act on it" (Scruton, 2011, p. 100). Aesthetic theory theorizes that one's point of view and way of navigating the world is dependent on experiences and sense making. As mentioned, embodiment is how one's body is used to experience and perceive the world (Low, 2016). Thus, these perceptions are unique to the individual which allows for various interpretations of sense making and navigation. Due to the agency surrounding the body, embodiment, and unique experiences, many scholars examine the rhetorics of the body (Bruce, 2016; Bowman, 2019; Boylorn, 2016; Chavez 2018; Friedman, 2004; Holdredge, 1998; Irving, 2007; Mulla, 2015; Town, 2016). Feminist scholars and theories, contributing to the rhetorical use and understanding of the body as space, can be applied to embodiment to notice the ways in which bodies are geographical sites that hold on to experiences that have impacted women, rhetorical spaces that are charged places for memory (Bruce, 2016).

In regards to agency, the female body and sexuality are often topics of debate, for example in reproductive rights and the debate surrounding body autonomy to (not)receive an abortion. Although female bodies and sexuality are spoken about, many discussions about sexuality are disembodied (Holland et al.,1994). Disembodiment is, of course, the opposite of embodiment: cognition surrounding the body is lost (Nechvatal, 2001). In sum, disembodiment is a socially constructed tool to disempower women. Instead of being connected to one's body and mind, a disconnection is formed between women and their bodies when sexuality is the topic of discussion. As a negative aesthetic experience, disembodiment can produce abjection.

Black Abjection

Abjection (of the self) is when someone "finds that the impossible is [their] very *being*, and discovering that [they] [*are*] nothing other than abject" (Kristeva & Lechte, 1982, p. 128). Specifically, in order for someone to experience abjection, they are in a state where they are neither the object (a "tool" or instrument used by someone), nor subject (the loss of self). This leads them to be in a state where one does not have a clear relationship with the world anymore, the basic order of things is interrupted, and "they are neither human, animal, nor thing" (Fanon, 1967; Sharpe, 2016). Yet, they are still conscious, as one who is in abjection can recognize that they are experiencing the loss of subjectivity. Abjection then becomes a state of (non)being and not a specific event that removes one from their body for a moment. Because of the legacy of dehumanizing Black people in the United States, Black women are born into abjection due to being Blackened from the beginning of their existence (Spillers, 2000; Fanon, 1967). To further explicate this phenomenon, we need to understand abjection through enslavement.

Black abjection is the wreckoning with white, Western concepts of what it is to be human, animal, or thing. Enslavement brought forth abjection as Black people were determined property while also trying to have self agency. Many Black folk do not expect to experience abjection and are, instead, thrown into it from experiences of racism and/or discrimination. For others, abjection can be experienced once a Black person realizes that they are Black and "Blackened" (Moten, 2013). Specifically, white gazes can make one feel worn down into nonbeing, thereby taking them out of the world as they realize these gazes are because they are not white (Fanon, 1967). Once someone realizes that their own identity is blackened in the eyes of the oppressor, one's world is realized. The idea of being Blackened in the eyes of the

oppressor is important in understanding the *communal gaze* as it the act of gazing is foundational in white, oppressive Western culture.

Additionally, gender carries weight to the abjection that one can experience as the "black and female difference is registered by virtue of the extremity of power operating on captive bodies and licensed within the scope of the humane and the tolerable" (Hartman, 1997, p. 86). Already, the enslaved woman's body is experiencing trauma by being Black. However, a new trauma is layered as the enslaved woman's body experiences gendered violence. Blackened gender, mother, sexuality, and other key feminist tropes don't adhere to the Western symbols of integrity due to enslavement condemning Black beings and flesh. Their flesh and body were captive to the enslavers. These bodies "locate precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange" (Spillers, 2000, p. 76). In the eyes of white, Western society, Blackened (f)actors do not warrant being seen as human (Spillers, 2000). Instead, Blackened (f)actors continue to bring abjection as they are deemed a commodity. Black women's bodies are unmistakably abjected as it is in constant exposure to gendered and racial violence. Because of this, Hartman's (1997) work focuses on gender, specifically Black enslaved women, to combat white feminism as it still condemns Black women to a "zone" of nonbeing (Broek-Sallah, 2018). This is combatted using resistance through an oppositional gaze and through a Black feminist standpoint lens as mentioned above. Agency is, again, questioned in regards to the Black, female body.

Writing of enslaved Black women, Saidiya Hartman (1997) notes that enslaved Black women began to experience the ramifications of not having a sense of agency over their bodies. They existed outside of the gendered universe because they were not granted the same privileges as white women in regards to their sexuality, agency, and identity. This became a structural

position for many Black women to begin seeing themselves as "flesh" and non-being (Spillers, 2000; Fanon, 1967). Because of this, sexuality and gender was further used to oppress Black women as they were neither white nor seen as a woman. This is a particular experience of abjection. Additionally, "it naturalizes the discourse of protection and mystifies its instrumental role in the control and disciplining of the body, and, more important, maintains the white normativity of the category "woman" (Hartman, 1997, p. 99). Because of this, enslaved Black women are further dehumanized and not considered anything other than property. Evidently, sexual violence furthers the abjection Black women feel.

Narratives about Sexual Violence against Black Women

In addition to this thesis looking at gaze theory and the body, another foundational element is the narratives from Black women about their experience of sexual violence. In order to properly read and analyze fictional novels as well as collect and analyze stories from Black women, it is important to understand how and why narratives of sexual violence are written and communicated.

Narratives about sexual violence are not new to this era and generation. In modernist America, rape and sexual violence had become a prominent trope (Sielke, 2002). Similar to Chavez (2018), the early feminist writers of color were not satisfied with the narratives being written about sexual violence by white women and men. This was due to the fact that these narratives ignored the racism and social conditions that fostered sexual violence against Black women. Black women's lived knowledge of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) was necessary to depict the political consequences of rape for the Black community *and* the personal effects and trauma for the individual person who experienced the violence (Field, 2020). Narratives from Black women are a way to re/claim embodied knowledge with regards to sexual assaults and

oppressive traumas. These narratives are a way for the silenced bodies to speak on the silencing structures. Although Black women are now starting to write their own narratives about sexual violence, there is still a lack of these stories. This is due to the idea that many people refuse to believe these narratives, where distrust may stem from within their communities (Serisier, 2019). Thus, the *communal gaze* will be shaped by communities (not) believing survivors, (not) supporting victims, and (not) holding perpetrators accountable.

Despite not knowing the age range that past literary narratives about sexual assault were written for, today, a major audience for this topic is young adults (YA) (Harde, 2020). Young women and girls are starting to learn about their sexualities and the social codes surrounding male sexuality which has shown that young women may be assaulted by an acquaintance, someone in their social circle, or someone close to them (Harde, 2020). Due to this, it is no surprise that YA novels and literature include themes that reflect real world experiences of young girls such as sexual violence, consent, drug use, etc. (Harde, 2020). Additionally, the characters in these YA novels represent the audience that is reading them. In the four novels read for my literary analysis, a common theme throughout was that the main characters' ages ranged from six to seventeen. It seems that in the recent novels about sexual violence tailored for young girls, there is a chance to address gender-based violence as these novels can be a tool for activism, sexual education, and change (Osman, 2021).

Although narratives are being written about sexual violence, today's literary representations of rape and violence do not depict or discuss the frequency of sexual violence in the real world (Sielke, 2002). Additionally, little of today's representations of sexual violence in fictional texts discuss Black and women of color lived experiences (Sielke, 2002). Examples of dominant approach to narratives about sexual violence include: 1) the idea that male sexuality is

at fault for what happens to women/girls (Harde, 2020), 2) the rape myth of the predatory Black rapist resulting from enslavement discouse (Field, 2020), and 3) the superior position of men prompting women to be subordinate (Osman, 2021). Most texts do not discuss the frequency of real world instances of sexual violence in Black communities allowing communities, themselves, to not believe victims. Because of this, the second part of my thesis will aim to somewhat fill this gap in literature and texts. Lived experience narratives from Black women will be collected and further analyzed to not only see the *communal gaze* in action, but the real depiction and frequency of sexual violence opposed to the one's written in fictional texts analyzed in the first portion of my thesis.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Looking at the literature synthesized above, it becomes clear that Black women of the African diaspora may hold unique and valuable knowledge about experiences of sexual assault and their aftermath. Such knowledge can inform supportive community responses, which is why it is important to examine and explain a *communal gaze* lens through the analysis of both literary and lived narratives. First, examining four novels rhetorically, this thesis aims to conceptualize the *communal gaze*. Specifically, I ask:

> RQ1: How does literature authored by Black women of the African diaspora construct experiences of the communal gaze, following knowledge of sexual assault perpetrated against Black women?

Examining the stories of lived experience of sexual violence and community responses to Black women sharing their narratives, the second methodology and analytical approach of this thesis aims to answer the questions:

RQ2: How does sharing/narrating experiences of sexual violence with community

members change meanings of the body for Black women?

RQ3: How do performances of the *communal gaze* relate to colonial and white-

oppressive legacies of invading Black spaces?

CHAPTER 3

FAITHFUL WITNESSING: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

I am motivated to name and theorize the *communal gaze*, so that scholars of color can work to dismantle oppressive behaviors in our communities. I position myself as a Black, immigrant, feminist, woman storyteller who is conducting this research to give voice to Black women in the African diaspora. As such, my interest in this topic draws from my own lived experiences. I have witnessed the *communal gaze* when family and friends vocalized their assault to the community they consider themselves a part of. In the wake, they felt ashamed, blamed themselves, and questioned why the community gazed at them negatively. Personally, I have not told my family that I had experienced sexual violence, fearing the negative reaction that might be given to me. I want the "perfect" image my family has of me to last. It has been five years and I have not told anyone in my immediate family. Only close friends and those who bore witness to the work I created know about the assault I experienced. During these years, I have felt disconnected from my body and community. I hope to find some form of healing through the activism and publication of this thesis.

Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics

This research was carried out using intersubjective "faithful witnessing" (Figueroa, 2015), as I, as the interviewer, have also experienced sexual violence, and identify, in the broad sense, as an insider in the racial and gender communities of the participants. As described by María Lugones (2003), faithful witnessing is a methodology of collaborating with those who have been silenced. Faithful witnessing is both a political and feminist philosophical approach that positions itself with women of color and decolonial epistemologies in line with the feminist standpoint theory's praxis of engagement (Allen, 1996). Using faithful witnessing becomes a

strategy and tool through which oppressed groups form communities in order to combat multiple, systemic, and intersectional oppressions (Figueroa, 2015). Faithful witnessing is done by "stand[ing] with" those you are seeking to gain knowledge from. To stand with participants, researchers must be "willing to be altered to revise [their] stakes in the knowledge to be produced" (TallBear, 2014, p. 2). To continue an ethical, feminist research practice, one should be able to listen to the community they are seeking knowledge from. This means being open to changing one's perception, perspective, and self that was seen in the beginning stages of the research process (or during the research itself). Additionally, faithful witnessing destabilizes foundational, singular, and the silencing of narratives, recognizes the resistance of oppressive tendencies/legacies, and gives authority to the perspectives of the oppressed (Figueroa, 2015).

In practice, when designing interview questions (Appendix F), I made sure to counter oppressive tendencies and remain open to transformation, rather than seeking definitive answers in extractive ways. Interview participants chose their own names for confidentiality and anonymity purposes. Allowing interviewees to choose their own names resists colonialism's dehumanization of enslaved people when ridding them of their names and identities. Interview participants were also not asked to retell their experiences of sexual violence to avoid retraumatization. Instead, interview questions (Appendix F) focused on the before and after of sharing their narratives of experiencing sexual violence. I ensured that participants were comfortable and utilized faithful witnessing by using a semi-formal interviewing technique. Interviews were more conversational and less formal.

As mentioned in the positionality statement that opened this section, I find myself in the same demographic as the women I interviewed. Because of this, I made sure that each participant understood my position and motivations, while conducting this research and how it will help

inform not only my graduate work, but our shared community. Additionally, as faithful witnesses to one another, interviewees and I worked together to build a safe space. Particularly, in my second conversations with each participant, I had noticed that comfort and trust between us had grown. This was understood to be the case as interviews felt more vulnerable and open to co-creation. One participant, for instance, spoke longer than in her first interview. I was also able to open up to the participants to let them know why I am conducting this research and my role within the Black community.

In addition to faithful witnessing and wanting to build relationships with participants, I conducted "members checks" after interview analysis was written. Member checks are a method within qualitative research where analyzed interview data is returned to participants to check and confirm the results (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking reduces researcher bias and allows for more ethical research. Of course, member checking raises questions regarding participant confidentiality (Birt et al., 2016). However, since participants in this research used pseudonyms, confidentiality was not a concern. I conducted member checks by, first, writing the analysis of both semi-formal and photovoice interviews. Because one participant wanted only image descriptions of her photovoice activity to be included, I sent her portion alone. I asked her to look over the document and report back any mistakes made and if it captured her images. Edits and feedback were implemented from her response. Once overall interview interpretations were written, all participants were given the complete chapter to review interpretations, quotes, and analysis. Again, feedback and edits were implemented. Member checks not only held me, the researcher, accountable for participants' words and narratives, they allowed for participants to form an imagined community/coalition between one another. As they do not know each other,

feedback from participants noted that they shared similar feelings and emotions to each other's experiences.

Overview of Approaches

I utilized critical rhetorical and ethnographic research methods. Such interweaving is common in critical scholarship. A critical orientation was important to the project, as it aims to understand and transform power dynamics of silencing through the *communal gaze.* The specific methods used include rhetorical analysis, ethnographic semi-structured interviewing, photovoice, and autoethnography.

Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetorical analysis is based on rhetorical theory (rhetoric), which has multiple diverse meanings, conceptual groundings and practices (Zachry, 2009). The ambiguity of rhetorical theory allows for a rhetorical analysis to take on many forms and be used in different social contexts. Rhetorical analysis draws on similar characteristics that other textual analysis methods have. A rhetorical analysis requires the person who is analyzing to think about the overall purpose of the text and how the various components within the text are contributing to the overall purpose (Zachry, 2009). An important criterion for assessing rhetorical analysis is that those who did not do the analysis themselves (e.g., future readers) can still trace the components of the text to the overall purpose of said text. Likewise, a complete rhetorical analysis will allow for the person experiencing the texts to be able to properly identify the working elements and components (Zachry, 2009). Due to the broad nature of how an analysis can be conducted, there are different categories that a rhetorical analysis can fit into.

Today, there are three theoretical perspectives that a rhetorical analysis can have, traditional, new rhetorical, and critical-postmodern (Zachry, 2009). My work uses both the new

rhetorical and critical-postmodern perspectives in the analysis of selected novels. A traditional perspective includes "ideas that precede the modern era and that have conditioned more recent thinking about the nature of rhetoric" (Zachry, 2009, p. 70). Specifically, this perspective is one from the beginning of the twentieth century like classic Greek and Roman thinkers who used and focused on analyzing the rhetorical appeals of persuasion. A new rhetorical perspective "believes that writing is a process for constructing thought, not just the 'skin' that covers thought" (Berger, 1999, p. 155). For example, instead of trying to persuade the audience like the traditional perspective, the new perspective *identifies* the unconscious ways that persuasion is happening. A critical-postmodern perspective "marks a radically different way of thinking about truth and reality from those ideas that had dominated scholarly inquiry throughout much of recorded history" (Zachry, 2009, p. 75). This perspective adds a focus on how power is rhetorically obstructed and a foregrounding of critique to rhetorical analysis (Zachry, 2009). Specifically, the systems of beliefs or ideologies emit a power that influences how one perceives the world and is therefore persuaded to see the world in different lenses (Zachry, 2009). In sum, someone who utilizes a critical-postmodern perspective analyzes and critiques the language that is being used within the text to organize and support what is *real* or the *truth* about society and through whose voices these truths are constructed.

I specifically use the new rhetorical and critical-postmodern perspectives as both can account for unconscious persuasion and help understand the importance of power in this overall thesis. The new rhetorical perspective accounts for unconscious persuasion by identifying how the *communal gaze* is unconsciously happening within the selected novels as the authors are writing to produce thoughts and conclusions from its readers. The critical-postmodern perspective acknowledges the importance of power by wielding the conclusions of readers, like

myself, and applying it to reality to form new truths and ways of thinking apart from existing

histories. Thus, with the use of these perspectives, the *communal gaze* will highlight the power

persuasion has over communities regarding vocalization of sexual violence narratives.

Ethnographic Semi-Structured Interviews

The *communal gaze* lens was conceptualized, first, through the analysis of non-fiction

texts. To refine the lens, I interviewed Black women to engage their real world narratives of the

communal gaze in action and to honor their lived experiences of sexual violence and its

aftermath. I collected data through ethnographic semi-structured interviews as it is a popular

research method that is both versatile and flexible (Kallio et al., 2016). Ethnography encourages

researchers to actively engage in a personal relationship with participants for the coproduction of

knowledge (Hampshire et al., 2012). Therefore, participants' emotions and feelings were taken

into account due to a personal relationship being formed. I ensured participants knew their

narratives were appreciated and cared for through relationship building.

Due to semi-structured interviews' versatility and flexibility, I used this method to

practice reciprocity and reflexivity. Specifically, semi-structured interviews enable reciprocity by

allowing the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on the participants' responses

(Kallio et a;., 2016). Instead of following a set script (Appendix F), improvised follow-up

questions allowed me to fully process participants' responses to gain rich data. Additionally, to

continue an ethical, feminist research practice, I was able to listen to my participants that I was

seeking knowledge from (Figueroa, 2015; TallBear, 2014). I was open to changing my

perception, perspective, and self through the use of follow-up questions. To further a rich

understanding of participants' narratives, semi-structured interviews allowed for reflexivity.

Reflexivity allows the researcher to participate in the co-construction of knowledge in specific

ways (Kovach, 2021). Like reciprocity, reflexivity allowed me to find myself in the research to stay committed to decolonial, ethical, and feminist research practices. (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011; Kovach, 2021; Pindi 2017). I was able to stay aligned with my personal motivations to do this research by sharing my own narratives of the communal gaze with participants.

PhotoVoice

The *communal gaze* can be applied to works of art and everday visual artifacts centered around sexual violence as it invokes a different form of community gazing and reactions. Examining the disconnection a woman has with her body after experiencing sexual violence, different modes of artistic pieces, such as collage, can be used to understand and process the trauma a woman has experienced. Thus, the sharing of artistic pieces is another way for communities to see these narratives of sexual violence.

When creating work, many artists find themselves thinking about the aesthetics of their personal work. One might think about their color palette and/or how a work will fit into their overall portfolio. For me and other Black female artists, an aesthetic of violence, used to emphasize what some things can not represent, is one that is seen in our work. Specifically, an aesthetic of violence is a tool used to prompt an array of responses from the audience as the acts of violence being depicted is not clear to the viewer/reader (Iones, 2019). Therefore, Black, female artists who have experienced sexual violence have used their art as a form of resilience.

As mentioned before, Black women are reluctant and hesitant to share their experience(s) of sexual violence with their community including rape crisis centers, medical providers, and police (West, 2006). There is a culture of silence within the African Diaspora. It is believed that this is a strong enough coping mechanism, but "remaining silent may leave the impression that Black women are relatively unscathed by their sexual trauma" (West, 2006, p. 6). Because of

this, visual art and expressions have become tools to share these experiences and break this "culture of silence." Providing an artistic outlet begins to break the culture of silence for Black women sharing their stories.

Photovoice is a critical healing research methodology/technique that allows participants to feel agency by granting them the opportunity to reflect upon and communicate issues of concern through the use of images (Budig et al., 2018; Duran, 2018). Participants who are often marginalized find themselves in situations where they often feel powerless. Because of this, photovoice is able to foster social change and reclaim agency. This change is done through reflecting on and discussing community issues through selected visual representations of aspects of a person's life. Agency is reclaimed as photovoice tells on and represents individual perceptions of society (Budig et al., 2018). Photovoice is often associated with discourses and practices of women's empowerment (Budig et al., 2018). Because this thesis employs feminist theories, standpoint(s) and gaze, the implementation of photovoice encouraged participants to share more about themselves outside of the semi-formal interviews. As part of the research process, I and the women I interviewed each selected and discussed with one another images we associate with ourselves before and after we experienced sexual violence.

As a feminist scholar, much of my work focuses on the written documents that discuss the impact communities have on Black women who give voice to their experience(s) of sexual violence. However, before becoming a Black woman-scholar in academia, I was an artist who created work centered around the disconnection I had with my body in the hopes to process my own experience of sexual violence. Because of my own healing journey, I wanted to give participants a space to heal and/or process their (possible) re-traumatization from the semi-

formal interview through a photovoice activity. With a similar purpose to support my healing, autoethnography was another method used to discuss and reshape this disconnection.

Autoethnography

Like photovoice, autoethnography is another critical research technique that allows the researcher to use their own experience as a source of knowledge. Autoethnography positions individuals to provide a powerful database for understanding how systems of power impact bodies (Pindi, 2017). These databases are unique to the individual themselves as bodies experience and understand the world through different lenses. Thus, scholarship does not account for every lived experience. As my lived experience was not accounted for in the scholarship used for this research, autoethnography became a part of the interviewing and analysis process. While conducting interviews, I shared with participants my own experience of sexual violence, my relationship to my body, and the imagined reactions limiting me from sharing with community members. Additionally, through the analysis of participants photovoice activity, I felt compelled to "participate" in the activity and analyze my own images. This allowed me to reflect on my own experience and draw connections between myself and participants.

While some critique autoethnography for being narcissistic, self indulgent, and too personal (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011), these critiques are misplaced, as the method focuses on critical analysis of culture and society through intimate, embodied knowledge. For activist methodologies, it is crucial for research to have an emotional impact. This is especially true in the context of this thesis. Personal experience from the researcher makes the work even more meaningful as it is handled with care. Autoethnography and any critical healing methodology humanizes both the researcher and their participants.

Research Methods

Data Collection

African Diasporic Novel Selection

My interest in conducting this research stemmed from a final research paper during my undergraduate career. In this paper, I put two novels, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, in conversation with one another, focusing on their dialogic exploration of a theme from the course. I chose to discuss the *communal gaze* which was not something I found existing sources for. Extending this first exploration, for this thesis, I wanted to develop the *communal gaze* framework as present in marginalized communities. Considering the scope of a Master's thesis and acknowledging the need for continuous development and refinement of the *communal gaze* framework, here I chose to focus solely on the African Diasporic communities, as these are also the communities I identify with. Following the analytic process I applied to Morrison's and Kingston's novels, here I put in conversation four novels that are set in various regions in the African Diaspora. In working with the novels, my research goal was to identify what themes recur in connection to Black women experiencing sexual violence and communities' response to their narratives. I explore what the recurrent themes are and how they are approached differently or similarly in each novel. Because fiction synthesizes the dramas of life, I am able to contour the *communal gaze* framework, as literature has social effects (Eberly, 2000). Instead of looking for "objectivity," I focus on identifying metaphors and/within scenes to outline the experiences of the *communal gaze*.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was the first novel chosen as I had used it to formulate my initial idea of the *communal gaze*. With help from the University of Maine's Department of Communication and Journalism's resource librarian at the time, Jen Bonnet, and the NoveList

database, I found three additional novels that situated their plots in the UK, Bahamas, and Ghana, respectively. These novels were chosen based on their settings, the characters' and authors' nationality, and the presence of plots around women's experiences of sexual violence. Buchi Emecheta's *The Family*, Jasmine Lynn Mather's *Learning to Breathe,* and Ruby Yayra Goka's *Even When Your Voice Shakes (2023)*were the three novels that would be put in conversation with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye.* Although not intentional, all novels are within the "young adult" genre. As mentioned in chapter one, young women and girls are starting to learn about their sexualities and the social codes at an early age (Harde, 2020). Thus, novels about sexual violence tailored for young girls is a chance to address gender-based violence as these novels can be a tool for activism, sexual education, and change (Osman, 2021). In order to find these themes, a rhetorical analysis was conducted.

Interviewing Process

This study sought an understanding of how a community's reaction reinforces stigma surrounding sexual violence, oppressive behaviors, and changes the relationship one has with their body. The *communal gaze* framework, developed through the analysis of four novels in conversation, was further applied to and refined through the analysis of real-life, truth-telling experiences of Black women. To do so, I conducted two rounds of interviews with three purposively selected participants. The first interview was semi-structured, and the second followed the photovoice method (Duran, 2019).

Research was conducted by interviewing self-identifying Black women within the African Diaspora who had experienced any form of sexual violence, such as harrassment, assault, rape, and/or abuse. All participants used she/her pronouns. Recruitment was conducted through a communication studies listserv (Appendix C), personal networks (Appendix B), using

a flier (Appendix D), and snowball sampling. Once potential interviewees reached out with an email stating their interest, they were sent a recruitment email with the description of the study and research (Appendix A), consent materials (Appendix E), and a request to conduct the first round of interviews. Follow up emails were sent if there was no response within one week.

A total of six interviews were conducted between three participants. There were 129 minutes, or 2.9 hours of recorded interviews. Recorded interviews ranged from 12 to 35 minutes ($M = 21.1$ minutes). With permission, interviews were video and audio recorded. Once each interview was completed, interview audio and video files were uploaded into the video password-protected cloud platform Kaltura to create transcripts. Kaltura's program provided transcripts of the interviews that were then reviewed and edited by the researcher to ensure accuracy and clarity. The transcripts were then printed and hand-coded by the researcher.

The interview period occurred from July to October of 2023 following IRB approval in June of 2023 (Appendix A-I). Once interviewees responded to the initial recruitment email, dates and times were established based on the interviewees' availability. Interviews took place over Zoom. For the first round of interviews, interviewees were asked to view a feelings chart (Wilcox, 1982) to help ground them before the interview began. Once the grounding activity was done, participants were asked a series of questions in a semi-formal interview format which discussed community reactions, sense of self, and supportive community responses (Appendix F). After the interview was completed, interviewees were once again asked to look at the previous feelings chart (Wilcox, 1982) to ground themselves again and given the prompt for the second interview. Participants were sent a follow up email (Appendix G) restating the photovoice (Duran, 2019) prompt for the second interview and a two-week timeframe to

schedule the next interview. Follow up emails were sent if there was no response within one week.

Before the second round of interviews began, interviewees were reminded of the research project, the consent materials, and the photovoice (Duran, 2019) prompt given to them after the first interview was completed. The feelings chart (Wilcox, 1982) grounding activity was then conducted. Participants were asked to provide one item and/or photograph before they decided to/or not to share their experience(s) of sexual violence and what is represented to them. They were then asked to provide one item and/or photograph after they decided to/not to share their experience(s) of sexual violence and what it represented to them.

Once the activity was done, participants were then prompted to conduct the semi-formal photovoice interview (Appendix F). Participants were asked to show their first image and/or item to the camera and asked what the image/item represented to them. Once their first image/item was shown and explained, participants were asked to show their second image and/or item to the camera and what it represented to them. This concluded the photovoice activity. However, participants were then asked if they would like their images and/or items to be included in the final draft of the research. If not, participants were told that only descriptions of images/items would be included. After the interview was completed, interviewees were once again asked to look at the previous feelings chart (Wilcox, 1982) to ground themselves again and given information about their compensation for completing both interviews. Once the interview was over, an email regarding compensation and photograph/image consent materials were sent (Appendix H and I). When participants sent back compensation details, those who chose for their images/items to be included in the final draft attached the photographs to the email.

Data Analysis/Analytical Approaches

Rhetorical Analysis of the Novels

Rhetorical analysis - a tool to analyze pieces of texts within many disciplines - was used to identify themes within the four selected novels. Rhetoric, traditionally, has been related to the linguistic techniques for gaining knowledge and understanding as it was formulated by early philosophers who used rhetoric to persuade their audiences (Herrick, 2017). However, classist George Kennedy expands and broadly defines rhetoric to be "the energy inherent in emotion and thought, transmitted through a system of signs, including language, to others to influence their decisions or actions" (Herrick, 2017, p. 6). Rhetoric is not only focused on language but on any sign that can produce an emotion and/or a response from an audience. This research uses both the new rhetorical and critical-postmodern perspectives in the analysis of selected novels.

First, to conduct the new rhetorical perspective analysis, all novels were read one after the other from February to April of 2023. While reading each novel, sticky notes were used to mark moments when the *communal gaze* was noticed. Additional themes that were seen across the four novels were marked as well. Once all novels were read, the researcher went through each sticky note and created flowcharts (Appendix J) of each novel that included the plot, setting, connections between each novel, quotes that highlighted specific themes, and additional notes to consider. These flowcharts (Appendix J) allowed the researcher to identify the unconscious ways that persuasion is happening in the novels in relation to the communities' gazesThis also allowed for two of the researcher's committee members to know what happened within the novels without reading them.

After the new rhetorical perspective analysis was completed, a critical-postmodern analysis was conducted. Although these novels are fictitious, they reveal what is *real* or the *truth*

about society, specifically within Black communities as the researcher has witnessed these truths in her personal life. Because these "truths" were seen across all novels, they were critiqued and organized into themes and threads to apply them to qualitative interviews. This allowed for clarified meanings, enactments, and impacts of the *communal gaze*.

Thematic Qualitative Analysis of the Interview Data

Interview data were analyzed using qualitative thematic approaches. Once interview transcripts were edited and printed from Kaltura, I, as the researcher, hand-coded them. In the first round, both motif and narrative coding were used. Motif coding applies "previously developed or original index codes used to classify types and elements of folktales, myths, and legends" to qualitative data (Saldaña, 2021, p. 191). Although the novels used to conduct a rhetorical analysis are not under the specific categories that Saldaña (2021) used for motif coding, the novels are still fiction. Therefore, the motifs (codes) pulled from the novels, family, the body, and nature, were used to code qualitative data from both rounds of interviews (conversational and photovoice). Narrative coding "applies the conventions of (primary) literary elements and analysis to qualitative texts most often in the forms of stories" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 195). This form of coding was used for the photovoice (Duran, 2019) interviews as participants gave stories/narratives to explain the images they chose to share.

To begin the process of motif coding, the researcher read all three semi-formal interview transcripts without making any marks or finding codes. Once this was done, an analytic memo was written to "dump [the researcher's] brain about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 58) that was seen in all three. The researcher designated specific highlighter colors for the primary themes in the four novels. These themes being family, the body, and nature. There were four initial colors making one color for miscellaneous

occurrences. The researcher began by reading each transcript from Diamond, Britney Le, and Archivist[5]. While reading Diamond's first interview, the researcher went line by line highlighting specific words and/or phrases relating to the themes/codes. When this was done, the researcher wrote an analytic memo. This process was repeated for Britney Le and Archivist's first interview.

The second interview was coded the same way as the first interview. The researcher reviewed all three photovoice interviews without highlighting specific codes or moments. After reading all three, an analytic memo was written. The researcher then read Diamond's second interview transcript making sure to highlight themes/codes and writing an analytic memo once the transcript was finished. This process was repeated for Britney Le and Archivist's second interview.

Once the first round of initial coding was completed, a second round of coding by hand was conducted. During the first round of coding, specific codes or moments were highlighted using specific highlighter colors that were assigned by the researcher. Using these colors, the researcher color-coded each transcript for the four primary themes that emerged from the novels: family, nature, and the body. To conduct the second round of coding, the researcher went through all interview transcripts focusing on one theme at a time. Within each theme, more specific codes were assigned, based on participants' words and images. For example, within the theme of family, the following codes, among others, applied to interviews: relationship with mother, structures of the community, and generational trauma. Each transcript was coded line by line (Saldaña, 2021) for these new codes and representative examples were selected. After each theme was further coded, the researcher wrote an analytic memo reflecting on the connection to

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[5] Participants' pseudonyms

novels and how it adds to the *communal gaze* framework. Code books in the form of flowcharts (Appendix J) were created for the researcher to organize these more specific codes and concrete examples to aid in writing the findings. There were 3 initial themes (codes) emerging from the novels. From those 3 themes, 4 themes (codes) emerged through interview analysis. As coding is a constant process, new codes and themes were found (Saldaña, 2021). These codes and themes being alternative community, coalition, transformation, and hope.

CHAPTER 4

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF FOUR NOVELS

As a Black woman, Toni Morrison writes her novels through the lens of her own personal experiences. Specifically, Morrison's (1970) *The Bluest Eye* centers around Black girlhood in Lorrain, Ohio, which is Morrison's hometown. Within *The Bluest Eye*, central themes are addressed such as the gaze, sexual violence, and womanhood in the respective African American community that the protagonists belong to. Because of this, Morrison's work opens up the discussion of these themes and more that are seen in different novels and communities within the African Diaspora. Buchi Emecheta's (1994) *The Family,* Janice Lynn Mather's (2019) *Learning to Breathe,* and Ruby Yayra Goka's (2023) *Even When Your Voice Shakes* are only three examples of novels written from the perspective and experiences of Black girls that have parallel themes to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye.* As cultural, rhetorical artifacts, literary texts, such as the novels chosen, have the power to reflect, critique, create, and transform societal norms and "plotlines" such as the *communal gaze*. Again, the *communal gaze* was seen in my first rhetorical analysis. It is seen frequently as awareness of cultural standards and practices are at the forefront of minority communities. If one goes against these standards and practices, the community will gaze at them in a different way (Christie, 2022).

To reiterate chapter two, these novels were carefully selected to try and encompass narratives from the African Diaspora. The protagonists that will be discussed in this section are: Pecola (*The Bluest Eye*) who represents an African American narrative, Gwendolen (*The Family*) who represents the United Kingdom as well as the Caribbean narrative, Indira (*Learning to Breathe*) who solely represents a Caribbean narrative, and Amerley (*Even When Your Voice Shakes*) who represents an African narrative, specifically western Africa. Within these four

novels, three overarching themes were present when thinking about the umbrella factors that make up the *communal gaze*: family, the body, and nature. When I first conceptualized the *communal gaze*, I was only interested in a community's immediate reaction to hearing a woman's story of being sexually assaulted. Through the rhetorical analysis of these four novels and noticing the themes of family, the body, and nature, the *communal gaze* framework unfolded to consider the responsive and relational agency of survivors in how they navigate their own changing personal and communal selves.

Rhetorical Analysis

As this thesis centers around narratives regarding sexual assault, the analysis presented below uses direct quotes from the novels regarding the violence that has happened, which includes incest and specific details of the assault protagonists faced. Specifically, the first section -- "family" -- includes content that may be experienced as particularly challenging by some readers.

Family
Relationship with Mother

Within each novel, the protagonists' relationships with their mothers are discussed. This is due to the fact that protagonists' mothers are usually the first ones to elicit the gaze as some mothers have experienced sexual violence themselves and/or are the first "gazers." Within a heteropatriarchal system, it is perceived as common for certain traits and attributes to be passed down from a mother to her daughter (Halberstam, 2011). This relationship of inheritance is seen in the comparison of protagonists to their mothers in some capacity. As it will be mentioned in "the perpetrator(s)" section, Pecola Breedlove and Gwendolen were assaulted by their fathers. Before the assaults, both men compared their daughters to their mothers. Pecola's "timid, tucked-

in look of the scratching toe – that was what [her mother] was doing the first time [her father] saw her in Kentucky" (Morrison, 1970, p. 162). Gwendolen's father thought "she looked so much like her mother, the bow legs, the bias gait, leaning to one side of her . . . [She was] the type of woman he favored, small, vulnerable, just like his [wife]" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 144). Both fathers rationalized their act of violence by comparing their daughters to their wives. It was easier to subjugate these bodies if they were not seen as their own kin. For Indira, her mother's reputation felt like a stain on her individuality. She is told by the perpetrator that she's "more like [her] ma than [he] thought. Only [she] ain all used up" (Mather, 2019, p. 60). He knew saying this would make Indira upset as her mother was emotionally distant from her life. She saw her grandmother as a mother-figure. Lastly, Amerley isn't directly compared to her mother, but is given the mother role for her three sisters. These relationships between protagonist and mother allow for a better understanding of how these girls dealt with their assaults.

Because these comparisons are not echoed by the mothers themselves, the mothers in each novel are the first instances of the *communal gaze* when protagonists' experience sexual violence. Review of research suggests that there are many complexities to what might be perceived as transmission of trauma and there are many possibilities for the mother's role in perpetuating or reshaping oppressive practices (Lange et al., 2020). Thus, the idea of generational trauma is seen within each novel. In *The Bluest Eye*, the main premise is the idea that Pecola believes she is ugly and only blue eyes will make her beautiful. This comes from Pecola's mother, Pauline (Polly), who "took the ugliness in [her] hands, threw it as a mantle over [her], and went about the world with it" (Morrison, 1970, p. 1970). The Breedlove's[6] all believed that they were ugly. And instead of reassuring and loving her daughter, Polly passes down this

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[6] The Breedloves are Pecola, her mother, father, and brother

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self-hatred onto Pecola. As this novel takes place during racial segregation, Polly uses these racist values to degrade her daughter. Here, Polly's internal hatred reinforces the community's gaze. She is using the gaze as a tool of internalized colonial oppression via the family as a site of building a dehumanizing self-hatred relationship. This is seen as Polly prefers the white family she cleans for over her own children. Polly is aware that she, and her family, are "Blackened" in the eyes of the community (Moten, 2013). She is reckoning with both white and black gazes that have made her feel like a nonbeing. Thus, she feels the need to make Pecola feel the same way. In addition to the mental abuse, Polly physically abuses Pecola. Through this act of violence of throwing a blueberry pie at Pecola and stomping on her (p. 109), Polly does not care about the pain Pecola is feeling. Instead, she is more concerned with other people's feelings and things instead of her daughter's wellbeing (Thompson, 1995). Polly's character shows the deviation from the traditional Black matriarch, which is then seen in the mother figures in the next three novels.

The Black matriarch is the mother figure that frequently appears in Black American literature that depicts Black mothers as the overarching metaphor of strength (Umeh, 2016). The characters are often very protective of their children, even sacrificing themselves to ensure the safety of their children (Umeh, 2016). The mothers in each novel go against the Black matriarch(al) trope. Polly "provides for her children without physical affection, tenderness, and concern for their well-being" (Morrison, 1970, p. 39). She lacks this warmth that is seen by Black matriarchs. Similarly, Indira, Gwendolen, and Amerley's mothers diverted from the traditional Black matriarch trope.

Indira's mother is given no name in the novel, only "Mama." However, it seems that her lack of the Black matriarchal figure is connected to generational trauma. It is hinted by Indira's

grandmother that Mama was assaulted when she was around Indira's age. Her grandmother notes that Indira "only ever knew [her mother] when she was messed up. She wasn't always so" (Mather, 2019, p. 290). As her grandmother recalls, Mama was sent out to work at a neighbor's home. However, one day she did not come home after work. When Indira's grandmother saw her daughter again, it felt "like somebody gone in her and scraped everything out . . . the joyful part that was so alive? It was gone" (p. 292). Because of this, Indira's mother did not care about the same thing happening to her daughter. It is assumed that one of Mama's boyfriends had assaulted Indira before she moved to Nassau. Her matriarchal role was not present as one would have protected their daughters from experiencing the same pain.

Gwendolen's mother, Sonia, blamed her daughter for her own misfortunes. Sonia believed "that daughter of hers was evil. Since they brought her from Jamaica, she'd been evil" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 198). This statement is made after Sonia returns from Jamaica to visit her "sick" mother who had died before she had arrived and after learning her husband had died at work. Expecting she'll get more money from her husband's death, Sonia asks herself "why did I bring [that devil], proper satan to [my] home? . . . She more share of [my husband's] money than me. Me kill her, you know. She not my pikney[7]" (p. 229). When it comes time for Sonia to visit her daughter, she is set on killing her as she puts a knife in her bag. She knows something happened when she was gone in Jamaica, but does not suspect it to be her husband assaulting her daughter. When Sonia "went towards the cot and was transfixed. She opened her mouth and closed it several times as if she was drowning . . . [Her husband], the baby, the baby, [her husband], in rotation. Sonia held on tightly to the edge of the basket to stop her feet from buckling under her" (p. 235). It is only then does Sonia realize that her husband was the reason

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[7] Jamaican slang meaning child

for her misfortunes. However, instead of comforting Gwendolen, she leaves the flat, and buries the knife. It is up to the reader's interpretation if Sonia begins to care for her daughter or not.

Finally, Amerley's mother echoes the lack of a Black matriarch. Their relationship in the beginning of the novel was nonexistent as her mother was bed ridden from being depressed. As Amerley was the only one trying to make ends meet, she felt like if she didn't step up, her and her sisters would end up in the streets. This was due to her mother seeming to not care about her daughters. Amerley wished she could ignore their problems like her mother did and pretend that nothing was happening to them. Amerley felt hopeless due to her mother's carelessness and inability to care for her children. This results in Amerley being sent to work for one of her mother's rich friends, Auntie Rosina. However, Amerley's mother unknowingly sends her daughter into danger as she is later assaulted by someone who lives in Auntie Rosina's home.

Because each protagonists' mothers did not uphold the Black matriarchal trope, it seems this opened a "gateway" to them being assaulted. Although sexual violence occurs in any situation, for these four novels the root of the cause is the same. These relationships, or lack of, removed the traits, attributes, and even knowledge that these mothers should have passed down to their daughters regarding their safety within a patriarchal world (Halberstam, 2011). Thus, protagonists lacked comfort from their mothers after their assaults happened. These mothers' gazes show how the *communal gaze* typically starts from the positive and/or negative responses mothers give to their daughters. In regards to the Black matriarchal trope, the *communal gaze* is about keeping intact the social mores and behaviors. There are ways in which this trope can serve a community's and its members' survival - i.e., via the Black matriarch who watches over, so when colonial violence acts in such a way as to diminish the Black matriarch. This also opens the doors for a more insidious form of the *communal gaze,* one that is rooted in internalized

oppression as seen from Polly and her hatred of being "Blackened" by her community (Moten, 2013). Eliminating the Black matriarch through generational trauma is a tool of coloniality that acts through the family. If these mothers cared for their daughters, their assaults would have been avoidable[8]. It is because of this that one of the factors of the perpetrators are them being members of and/or close to the family.

Perpetrator(s)

Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's assault is hinted at. The narrator, Pecola's foster sister Claudia, states, "Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt . . . What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth . . . The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too" (Morrison, 1970, p. 6). Similarly, Gwendolen was assaulted by her father and became pregnant. However she did not lose the baby. Overall, each protagonist from the chosen novels was assaulted by someone within and/or close to their family. Indira was assaulted by her "cousin" and Amerley was assaulted by someone within the household. Because communities hold women more accountable for their "actions," their clothing, sexuality, etc., men and boys find themselves being able to get away with violence. This is due to the community's gaze focusing on women and girls more than on the perpetrators who commit acts of violence.

Because these men believe their actions do not have any consequences, women and girls are subjected to the violence. Here, we see two of the three dominant approaches to narratives about sexual violence. The idea that male sexuality is at fault for what happens to women/girls and the superior position of men prompting women to be subordinate allows for perpetrators to enact (white) possessive masculinity over victims (Harde, 2020; Osman, 2021). Throughout

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[8] Of course, as these are novels, it is the authors' choice.

these novels, perpetrators used sexual violence as a way to intimidate and subjugate. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's father, Cholly, was already abusive. From a young age, Cholly hated women; as he was humiliated while trying to have sex with a woman, "he cultivated [a] hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters" (p. 150). This hatred grew into abusing his wife in order to control her and then inflicting that abuse onto his daughter by assaulting her. Similarly, *The Family*'s Gwendolen is assaulted by her own father. Winston, "was not drunk. He just went into her, hoping she would fight him off like any other woman. Because she was like any other woman to him . . ." (p. 144). Both Winston and Cholly were supposed to protect and love their daughters. However, instead of guaranteeing the welfare of their daughters, they manifested the roles of colonizers when victimizing and sexually violating their own daughters (Selvakumar, 2021). Not to excuse both fathers' acts of violence, it is important to note the influence of the colonizer on these men.

During colonialism and today, white, privileged men differentiated between Black and white bodies to push racist agendas that uphold power (Ayisi, 2018). During the 19th century, enslaved Black men saw their white enslavers as the standard of manhood (Pierre et al., 2001). Although enslaved Black men were aspiring to achieve white masculinity and the power that came with it, they were still Blackened and "nonbeings" in the eyes of the colonizers (Broek-Sallah, 2018; Moten, 2013). The gender and race politics at the time denied Black men the freedom to act as per the definition of "man" set by white norms (hooks, 1992). However, this notion of manhood did become a standard used to measure Black men's progress. If one finds himself not able to uphold the expectations of Black masculinity, a psychological effect happens (Pierre et al., 2001). A regaining of power, control, and masculinity that is based on subjugating

others and reducing their humanity reflects white-oppressive legacies of invading Black spaces. One form of this "re/claiming" is sexual violence.

As mentioned above, Cholly felt humiliated by white men when he was forced to have sex with Darlene as they watched. Likewise, when Winston immigrated to the United Kingdom, white gazes made it known that he and his family were out of place. These instances transferred into wanting to gain a sense of control. Thus, enabling them to commit a heinous act against their own daughters who they knew wouldn't have "fought" back. This also echoes their values, culturally and personally, that makes them insensitive to women (Selvakumar, 2021). However, experiencing racial trauma is not the only reason one commits sexual violence.

Gwendolen was also abused by a family friend, Uncle Johnny, in Jamaica when she was six-years old. As Uncle Johnny was close with Gwendolen's family, she trusted him. When she was assaulted, "fear and shock froze all her emotions. [She questioned] was this man with the grip over her mouth the same Uncle Johnny who used to bring her [and her friend] sweets and lemonade drinks at Christmas . . . What was the matter with Uncle Johnny tonight?" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 22). This violence comes after Gwendolen's parents have left Jamaica and moved to England. She already feels abandoned by her parents and this assault furthers her lack of security and stability. Of course, all four protagonists felt abandoned from their families (as mentioned in the above section about their relationships with their mothers). Like Gwendolen, Indira and Amerley were solely assaulted by someone who they shared a home with, but no blood relation.

As mentioned prior, Indira was assaulted by her mother's boyfriend when she still lived with her. Since the beginning of the novel, Indira's main perpetrator was Gary, her aunt's stepson who she lived with. When asked by a teacher if there is trouble at home, Indira questions "what am I going to say? Gary the charmer did something awful to me for weeks, for months,

from the time I first reached Nassau, and I can't hide what happened anymore? Who would she

believe – him or me?" (Mather, 2019, p. 122). When living with these perpetrators, the

protagonists' movements were always watched. They were constantly gazed at. This is clear for

Amerley who's assault happens approaching the end of the novel, like Pecola. At one point,

when Amerley awoke from a nap, "General was sitting in [a] chair . . . His eyes were

expressionless as he stared at [her]. The hairs on [her] arms and the back of [her] neck stood up.

He continued staring even when [she] sat up and straightened [her] clothes. [She] didn't know

what he wanted" (Goka, 2023, p. 141). A gaze like the one General gave to Amerley only began

to foreshadow the violence that would happen.

It is clear that the perpetrators were able to commit their acts of violence because they

knew the power they held in the community. The community allows perpetrators to commit acts

of violence because they do not hold men in the community accountable. This means that the

communal gaze given to perpetrators is far different from the ones given to victims. The

communities in these novels either dismissed the girls, chose not believe what happened, or

didn't even see it as a crime. Of course, this meant that if the community was not going to have

supportive reactions to victims, the girls would have to find that support elsewhere.

Alternative Community

In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia is narrating the novel through a child's gaze. Morrison

intentionally made this a child's retelling to "focus attention on the consciousness of black

children, characters whom readers are not disposed to take seriously" (Portales, 1986, p. 499).

Here, hooks' (2015) oppositional gaze is apparent. As mentioned in chapter one, the oppositional

gaze was hooks' way of rebelling against the dominant gazes of the adults in her community

(hooks, 2015). Claudia and Freida are wielding hooks' oppositional gaze throughout *The Bluest*

Eye and especially at the ending of the novel. After overhearing adults in the community gossiping about Pecola's assault and pregnancy, ultimately victim blaming and shaming, Claudia "believed [her and her sister's] sorrow was more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story . . . [Her and Frieda] looked for eyes creased with concern, but only saw veils" (Morrison, 1970), p. 190). Both hooks (2015) and Morrison (1970) understood the power that children wield. For Morrison (1970) having *The Bluest Eye* be in a child's perspective showed the lack of compassion and understanding from the adults of Lorrain, Ohio. It is only through Claudia and Frieda that readers see Pecola for the girl she is. Claudia is the opposite of Pecola as she "survives all the forces that tragically destroy Pecola because she is nonetheless able to analyze her world to garner and develop what strength she can" (Portales, 1986, p. 498). Claudia has love and support from her family which allows her to love someone who has never been loved before. Claudia was fond of Pecola which goes against the way the community sees her.

Similarly, after Gwendolen's first assault was made known to the community, only a few people continued to speak to her. One being her neighbor Cocoa who was the same age as her. However, Cocoa's friendship was limited because "Gwendolen did not know why Cocoa had to look this way and that before talking to her in this low breathless way. But Gwendolen needed her friendship. She could not bear it when people started avoiding her and looking at her with the corner of her eyes" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 35-36). It's clear that both girls did not understand why they had to be cautious when talking to each other. After this brief conversation, Cocoa's mother calls her to come inside as "curiosity kills the cat. [But] Gwendolen would have liked to talk to her friends more about her ordeal" (p. 36). Gwendolen's community had made it clear to the children that trying to understand one's assault or even speak to the person who experienced it

was forbidden or taboo. The idea that Cocoa had to look over her shoulder to make sure no one saw her talking to Gwendolen illustrates the power adults have in controlling a child's gaze. However, this furthers the isolation and loneliness one feels.

Because Pecola and Gwendolen were around the same age when they were assaulted, 11-years old, their need for friendship and solidarity was stronger as they couldn't fully grasp what had happened to them. However, Indira and Amerley knew the effects of their communities' gazes and preferred not to build coalitions in case they also had a negative gaze as they were both 16-years old during the novels. While Amerley was watching a show with the other "servants," a rape scene was shown. The men commented that it wasn't real rape as the woman was flirting with the man and rape is only when a stranger does it (Yayra Goka, 2023). For Amerley, the men she worked with held similar views to those in her community. Her male friend, Nii Okai's, views surprised her the most as:

> Even though he was a city boy, and supposedly enlightened, his thoughts mirrored those of people, like [her] father, who blamed all their woes on women. The girls in [her] neighborhood who had been raped quietly disappeared to other places. People used to point at them and warn children about what staying out late and drinking and smoking would lead to (p. 131-132).

It is evident that the community has a major role in the way women who experience sexual violence are viewed. Either the gazes are direct or avoided. However, the control and domination of oppressive tendencies is still present.

Because this was Nii Okai and many's feelings of sexual violence, when Amerley was assaulted, she chose not to share it with anyone. It isn't until the end of the novel that Amerley's

mother, her coworker Pricilla, Nii Okai, and Auntie Fanny[9] formed a community. Bypassing the ignorance of Auntie Rosina and her husband, Amerley was sent to a hospital where her wounds from General were treated. Eventually Auntie Fanny, a lawyer, convinced Amerley to testify against the perpetrator. Her story had appeared in the news, which allowed for other girls "not just other maids who served in the [same home as her] . . . had come out of the woodwork to accuse their rapists and abusers. They had been too scared to speak . . . but in finding my voice, I'd given them a voice too" (Yayra Goka, 2023, p. 214). In this case, Amerley was able to encourage other women to share their stories after having a positive and supportive alternative community. This signifies the protagonists are aware of the power and importance of community, they are not giving up on communal practices because they have been let down in prior experiences. Instead, they craft their own kinship of support, which is consistent with a Black feminist standpoint (Collins, 1989). Furthermore, it is revealed in the epilogue that Amerley applies for law school wanting to provide justice for other women. Survivors' silence with the community does not have to be subjugation, it can be a resistance response, so that these other worlds/communities are made possible.

Indira found an alternative community with those who worked at the yoga retreat. Knowing Indira was trying to escape "something," the retreat allowed her to stay there and work for them. When the perpetrator tried to assault his own sister thinking it was Indira, it was then she told the owner of the retreat what had happened to her. Quick to action, the police were called and Indira is encouraged to tell the police everything Gary did to her. It is assumed that the perpetrator is arrested and Indira also testifies against him as she was given contact information for a lawyer.

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[9] Auntie Fanny was a friend of Auntie Rosina and family. At a party, Amerley was able to calm down Auntie Fanny's toddler which allowed Amerley to become a part-time nanny for Auntie Fanny.

It is within these alternative communities that Black women feel secure. Their "home" communities furthered their choice to not share their narratives. Additionally, these communities would rather protect the reputations of the perpetrators. These coalitions allowed characters to feel safe, find justice, and/or just have someone to talk to in order to unpack their trauma. The building of these alternative communities produces an alternative gaze which is more supportive than the initial *communal gaz*e. This coalition formation, or "coalitional politics," reclaims Black protectiveness in a healthy way, through families of choice where the protective function can be enacted, not to secure coloniality, but instead to guard the spiritual and embodied sovereignty of the survivor.

The Body

Physical Body

The act of sexual violence invades and alters one's physical body. The novels reflect this, as for each protagonist, the physicality of the violences enacted on their bodies were discussed. Pecola "appeared to have fainted [after her assault] . . . when she regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs" (Morrison, 1970, p. 163). Here, Pecola's physical body experienced trauma that it has not before. Even after gaining consciousness, she could not put the pieces together, not only of why she was in pain, but the metaphorical pieces of her body. This (re)piecing of Pecola's body and consciousness is the experience of dis/embodiment (Bray & Colebrook, 1998; Connolly, 2017). Likewise, Amerley "felt someone on top of [her] . . . [She] turned [her] head and saw Zaed[10] standing by [the perpetrator's] side and watching [them] before she passed out . . . [She] felt like her insides had been ripped open . . . [she] passed out again" (Yayra Goka, 2021, p. 177). When

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[10] Auntie Rosina's biological son

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Amerley woke up from her second time passing out, she found herself back in her bed, her body naked with nothing covering her up. Therefore, she covered herself up and huddled close to the wall. Both Pecola and Amerley's bodies were exposed and later covered. This indicates that, although the assaults violated the girls, the act of being left naked exposes them, further deepening the trauma of what they just experienced. The exposition of Pecola and Amerley's bodies humiliated them, bringing forth shame. Shame, being linked to both humiliation and disgust, was now internalized by both girls (Connolly, 2017). The anticipation of a *dominant communal gaze* produces a dehumanizing effect of dis/connecting with one's closest space.

Like the similarities between Pecola and Amerley, Gwendolen and Indira both "froze" during their assaults. In the first instance of violence towards Gwendolen, "she wanted very much to ask [her perpetrator] what he was doing, but she could not; his hand was firmly over her mouth and she could not struggle because her body was frozen" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 22). As she was six-years old when this happened, Gwendolen's child-like curiosity wanted to know why she was going through this. Instead, she couldn't as the shock had set in and the perpetrator limited her from saying anything. Evidently, when Indira "[tried] to scream, [the perpetrator's] hand covers [her] mouth . . . [she] can't call out, [she] can't move, [she] can only think of how [she's] letting it happen, letting someone take advantage . . . and all [she wants] is for it to stop" (Mather, 2019, p. 11). As it shows, both perpetrators knew the girls would say something if they had the ability to. Perpetrators were able to inflict both physical and mental damage on protagonists. However, when Gwendolen was assaulted by her father, "cries of fear escaped from her mouth" waking up her siblings and her father left her room (p. 145). From this scenario, one begins to assume what the narratives would have looked like if all protagonists had access to their physical bodies.

Although protagonists' physical bodies were discussed in relation to the violence their bodies endured, these bodies relate to "family," specifically the gazes on the bodies themselves. The *communal gaze* views these bodies positively or negatively in terms of age, clothing, and having "sex."[11] Additionally, perpetrators knew the power they had over the girls because of the power given to them by their communities thus allowing them to gaze at these girls as objects with no agency. Because of this, protagonists gaze at themselves based on community and perpetrator gazes which is not the oppositional gaze as it is akin to the sentiments the community and perpetrators feel. Therefore, after their assaults, protagonists blame themselves and believe they no longer have agency.

It is clear that protagonists immediately felt disembodied after they experienced sexual violence. Because of this, disembodiment becomes an analytical frame that links the *dominant communal gaze* to one's relationship with their own body. The humiliation created when perpetrators treat victims as objects (abjection) can lead to paralyzing, psychological outcomes that cause disconnection (Connolly, 2017). As mentioned prior, shame becomes internalized producing a vicious cycle: trauma to shame (self disgust), shame to disembodiment, disembodiment to nonbeing, nonbeing to abject. The continued feeling of shame "freezes" time where women are solely experiencing abjection (Connolly, 2017). Victim shaming from *dominant communal gazes* continues the experience of abjection (Connolly, 2017). Additionally, disembodiment is aligned with alienation (Bray & Colebrook, 1998). This means alternative community building and coalition is necessary for women to be drawn from abjection. Therefore, the *communal gaze* can be a dis/embodying experience.

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[11] Sexual violence is not sex

Childbirth

In addition to various other complex experiences in their physical bodies, some protagonists found themselves giving birth by the end of the novel. Because Pecola had a miscarriage by the end of *The Bluest Eye*, her pregnancy will not be highlighted in this section. Gwendolen and Indira gave birth to daughters at the end of their narratives. As mentioned in "family," Gwendolen and Indira's mothers did not uphold the literary archetype Black mothers tend to have in novels. Instead, their mothers chose to put them in harm's way as both girls become pregnant by the perpetrators. It seems that these births signify the promise of rewriting of the Black matriarchal role/stereotype.

Because of her relationship with her mother, Gwendolen wants to ensure her daughter never feels the way she did. After giving birth to her daughter, Gwendolen "experienced what millions of women have felt for years and years . . . The bundle in her arms could grow to be another disappointment; she could grow to be a princess or just another ordinary woman; but in that moment when a baby first appears in the world, the heart of any new mother warms to the new flesh of her flesh and blood" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 209). Gwendolen was scared that her daughter would become "another disappointment" as her own mother made Gwendolen feel like she was one. However, it did not matter what her daughter would grow up to be. Gwendolen knew she would give her the love she, herself, deserved. Because of this, Gwendolen wants "a name that will show that this baby is [her] friend, [her] mother, [her] sister, [her] hope, all in one" (p. 210). Gwendolen sees her daughter, Iyamide, to be her saving grace.

Although Gwednolen knew she was going to keep her baby, Indira had thought about her other options. It is known throughout the novel that Indira feels disconnected to her body because she is pregnant. In order to not feel this disconnection much longer, Indira finds herself

at a woman's health clinic. There her mother's words echo to "*do what you gotta do*." Indira starts to believe that if the perpetrator saw that she was pregnant, maybe it would protect her. If she were to get an abortion, there would no longer be "protection." Indira feels like she's made a mistake as it was her friend, Churchy, who, after finding out she was pregnant, "called his sister, got the number for the doctor, made the appointment, [and] borrowed a car" (Mather, 2019, p. 238). Indira felt pressured to undergo an abortion. If she had more time to think things over, she might have gotten one. Eventually, Indira decides she wants to go through with her pregnancy. The epilogue notes that Indira is still living at the yoga retreat with her daughter.

A critique that I, as the researcher and reader, have is the pregnancy trope in these novels. As *The Family* presumably takes place between the 1960s and 1980s, it makes sense as to why Gwendolen would go through with her pregnancy with no thoughts of an abortion. However, *Learning to Breathe* happens within the time frame of the late 2010s to early 2020s where reproductive rights and justice are more widely acknowledged. Because of this, I think it would have been interesting to see Indira's narrative if she did choose an abortion as it would highlight the complexities of pregnancy, especially as a result of sexual violence. Indira's narrative, however, gives light to reproductive justice movements within the Black community.

Both Black Lives Matter and reproductive justice movements push towards total liberation and justice for Black people (Norwood, 2021). Yet, there is still a grasp on Black bodies, specifically female bodies. Anti abortion rhetoric within Black communities believes pro-life means protecting Black lives such as using statements like "unborn Black lives matter" and "all Black lives matter, born and unborn" (Norwood, 2021, p. 717). Black, anti-abortion rhetoric is another dominant communal gaze discourse, as it produces submissive silence rather than a resistive one. This discourse ignores the trauma of becoming pregnant due to sexual

violence and seemingly does not extend the protection of Black lives to the girls and women who experience sexual violence.

This protection of Black girls and women leads me into another critique of the pregnancy trope within both novels. It is assumed that these children came to save their mothers after their experience(s) of violence. Yet, it is not the responsibility of the next generation to heal, as pro-natality and "next generation" discourses, which in themselves support patriarchal norms and colonial ideas of individualism, do not work to transform oppressive structures (Windels et al., 2021). Gwendolen and Indira's own mothers were responsible for their daughters' protection and safety, but failed to do so. Although the children were able to "save" and "protect" their mothers in the novels, it is not realistic to apply this idea to every real life situation of pregnancy resulting from sexual violence.

Calls like "unborn Black Lives Matter" and "all Black lives matter, born and unborn" reflect the *communal gaze* as it reinforces the power communities hold over women (Norwood, 2021, p. 717). One example of this gaze was a 1970s Black movement surrounding power and agency within Black communities and policy making. During this movement, a Black woman's body autonomy was being controlled due to the use of contraception where Black men believed birth control was the "white man's" ploy to contain the Black population (Caron, 1998). This is a similar sentiment regarding pro-life within the Black community. If one were to get an abortion it would go against the cultural norm of never letting the "white man" win and eliciting a negative gaze. While writing their novels, Mather (2019) and Emecheta (1994) might have been keeping this in mind, but this is just a speculation. However, pro-choice is (somewhat) seen in *Even When Your Voice Shakes (2023)* as Amerley did not get pregnant. The *dominant communal*

gaze in Black communities are fundamentally patriarchal, whereas, the *oppositional communal gaze* is feminist resistance.

Mental Health

Protagonists' narratives discuss how sexual assault can affect one's mental health. In minority communities, mental health is gazed upon as something that shouldn't be spoken about. Black women have historically been denied access to appropriate mental health care and treatment (Wilson, 2001). Reletedly, protagonists found themselves struggling with their mental health after they experienced sexual violence as there was a lack of resources and/or care. When Pecola is introduced to readers, it is evident that her mental health was not at its best. Much of this comes from the constant abuse and degradation from her family and community members. She already had a negative perception of herself believing she was ugly and unlovable. Pecola believes that the only thing that can fix this is to have blue eyes, as mentioned in the section above, and seeks this from Soaphead[12]. However, Soaphead tells Pecola that he can not change her eyes, furthering her into a psychotic break.

After Pecola's baby dies, she has a mental breakdown leading her to talk to an imaginary friend. It is this imaginary friend who mentions the assault to Pecola, retriggering her. The imaginary friend, who is ultimately Pecola's subconscious (italicized), interrogates her about her assault saying:

> *Cholly could make anybody do anything.* He could not. *He made you, didn't he?* Shut up! *I was only teasing.* Shut up! *O.K, O,K.* He just tried, see? He didn't do anything. You hear me . . . Who told you about that anyway? . . . *You did.* I did not. *You did. You said he*

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[12] Soaphead is a man later introduced in *The Bluest Eye* who claims her can help people who are "overcome with troubles and conditions that are not natural" and can remove them (p. 173).

tried to do it to you when you were sleeping on the couch. See there! You don't even

know what you're talking about. It was when I was washing the dishes (p. 199).

It is clear that Pecola is still coming to terms with what happened to her. Her subconscious wants

to face reality, but her conscious self would rather live in a false reality. This means she'd prefer

to believe she has blue eyes and that the community gazes at her because they are jealous of her

eyes and not because they see her as the "grotesque Messiah" (Byerman, 1982). This is an

attempt at an oppositional gaze. Pecola is attempting to redirect/cope with the *dominant*

communal gaze by believing that community members are not speaking about her assault.

Instead her "blue eyes" are the focus of community gazes. Likewise, Pecola does not want to

think about the violence she experienced. The disembodiment she is feeling has led her to

believe she has blue eyes. Additionally, Pecola's mother plays a major role in her mental

breakdown.

Pecola's subconscious asks "*Why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove?*" To which Pecola

replies, "She wouldn't have believed me then" (p. 200). As mentioned in "family," Polly does

not adhere to the Black matriarch role. Polly was the primary participant in enabling Pecola's

destruction. Polly joins in with the community to isolate Pecola (Thompson, 1995). Society

failed Pecola and her mental health plummeted because of it.

Similarly, our other three protagonists struggled with their mental health after their

assaults. Both physical and mental, Amerley found herself not speaking a week after

experiencing violence. She notes that "it wasn't that [she] consciously decided not to speak

again, [she] just shut down. Not all of [her], only [her] voice box or voice container or whatever

is in [her] throat where the words are produced" (Yayra Goka, 2021, p. 179). It seems that

Amerley felt that not speaking would be the best way to deal with this act of violence. Amerley

remembered the perpetrator's words "*if you tell, I'll say you lied. I'll say this wasn't our first time. I'll say you agreed to it. And no one will believe you – you're just the maid*" (p. 186). Thus, her unconscious decision to stop talking is also rooted in the threats from the perpetrator. Even if she spoke, her voice wouldn't be heard. She'd much rather not say anything at all. Silence is a form of "escape" and a refusal to participate in an unsupportive community by their norms and expectations; when the perpetrators and community's anticipated reaction produce abjection, a person can reclaim their subjectivity by controlling their bodies, including vocal expression - when everything else is out of her control, silence is not.

Both Gwendolen and Indira's responses to their assaults were to leave. Gwendolen found herself running away after she experienced assault both times. Once to her paternal grandmother's home in Jamaica and then to the streets of London after her pregnancy was revealed to her community. While in the streets of London, Gwendolen "felt like tearing her soul away from her body. She wished her mind could run away from her body so that [everyone] would not see her again. But her body refused to let her mind go. They were together, body and mind" (p. 175). Gwendolen wanted to detach her mind from her body due to the physical violence it had endured. Like Pecola, Gwendolen found herself remembering what had happened to her. Because both girls are the youngest out of the four, they had a harder time understanding what happened to them was wrong. Thus, their mental breakdowns are worse than Amerley and Indira.

After these realizations catch up to her, Gwendolen can not keep it in anymore. Finding herself in a police station because she is a child roaming the streets of London, Gwendolen "screamed. Something that had been bottled inside her for so long seemed to escape, and her mouth gave vent to a jumble of Jamaican patois and London school cockney . . . Her mind

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became clear enough to feel shame. It could not control her body" (p. 176). Gwendolen's body could no longer contain the pain and trauma she had felt since she was six-years old. The mixture of Jamaican patois and London cockney illustrates the traumatic tie between both places. After this, Gwendolen is institutionalized. It is there that she begins to feel some weight lifted off of her.

Indira's mental health journey was not as drastic as the other three protagonists. Luckily, Indira had a more positive support system at the yoga retreat where she was able to deal with her trauma through the use of yoga. There is a common thread between minority women not receiving proper care for their mental health. With the added pressure of cultural norms and tradition, it's no surprise that these gazes and violence led all girls having to deal with their mental health in some capacity.

Nature

When one first begins to read *The Bluest Eye,* they are met with the ending of the novel that discusses nature in terms of the sowing and reaping of seeds:

> Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941 . . . A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year . . . It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds (p. 5).

While some might believe that Morrison (1970) is "spoiling" her own novel's ending, it seems that this was intentional. Because *The Bluest Eye* is a retelling from Claudia's childhood, it makes sense to open the book with Claudia's thoughts. In this same "spoiler," Claudia notes that "for years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault" thus stating to the reader that the story

that is about to be told happened years prior (p. 5). Of course by the end of the novel, it is

revealed that Pecola had found herself pregnant, but had a miscarriage.

Although it finds itself as its own separate factor, the representation and actual body of

the main protagonists' relate to the theme of nature. Morrison's (1970) use of a nature metaphor

as an analogy to discuss Pecola's pregnancy and miscarriage highlights the unpredictability of

the situation. Additionally, *The Bluest Eye* is divided into the four seasons. It begins in autumn,

goes through winter and spring, then ends in summer. These cycles seem to show the discomfort

and misery that Pecola is/was experiencing. For Indira and Gwendolen, nature was one way they

were able to deal with the trauma of their assaults.

As mentioned above, Indira is pregnant throughout the entire novel. When readers are

introduced to her, the weight of her pregnancy is too much. In order to find some sort of relief,

Indira remembers how her grandmother would say that ocean water cleanses. As she stands at

the dock to the ocean, Indira feels the need to "not feel dirty. [She] needs to be clean. [Thus, she]

jump[s]" into the ocean below her (p. 11). While in the water, Indira:

> Swim[s] . . . The water holds [her] up, even [her] heavy breasts and expanding belly;
>
> moving easily through the sea, [she] feel[s] almost like [herself] . . . [She] is alone . . .
>
> What if [she] really could be free? Pretend there's nothing going on, pretend Gary never
>
> happened and [she's] a normal sixteen-year-old taking a swim? (p. 12).

For Indira, nature has always been a place she can go to and find healing within. Additionally,

she finds herself escaping from her aunt's home and having refuge at a yoga retreat. When Indira

does a yoga routine, she is "under a sapodilly tree by the parking lot. [She's] thankful for the

breeze coming in off the ocean and between the buildings, finding its way to [her]" (p. 211).

During the routine, Indira is holding her breath symbolizing her anxiety and state of uncertainty

after experiencing sexual violence and trauma. When told to not hold her breath from the instructor, Indira sees the "ocean before [her]. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in [she thinks to herself]. . . Breathing, standing steady, staying strong. It's like being perfectly anchored and, at the same time, flying free" (p. 213). For the first time since leaving her grandmother's home, Indira feels free. Nature and the connection to nature (yoga) has allowed her to feel some kind of comfort.

However, nature was not solely a metaphor and/or relief from pregnancy. For Gwendolen, specifically her father Winston, nature was his demise. As Gwendolen's father was the second person to assault her, his death was a form of "justice" for his acts. Because death is natural, akin to nature, nature brings about said justice. Winston's death was foreshadowed by his coworker. During a conversation with one another, Winston asked his coworker, Ilochina, if people in Ibo culture married their own daughters. Of course, Winston asks this as he has begun to view his daughter in an inappropriate gaze. Ilochina remembers a "moonlight" story that he used to hear as a boy. The tale goes:

> The man of the story had committed an incest with his daughter and, according to the
> culture of the land, the women of the village executed the man. And if the man had not
> been caught, he would have been killed by thunder. And when the women took a hold of
> his penis and were about to chop it off, he burst into a song of agony . . . but the women
> were merciless, because it was a sin against the Earth (p. 143).

Eventually the women of the village killed the man. Winston is noticeably uncomfortable with Ilochina which proves his guilt. Ilochina further explains that the meaning of the "'Earth' [is] that the land is the soul and life-blood of a community. That the land never belonged to the individual . . . that to offend the land or Earth was to offend something greater than one's soul.

And a father who had any sexual urge towards his daughter has offended the Earth" (p. 143). Of course, this warning from Ilochina did not affect Winston's decision to assault and violate his daughter. Soon enough, it is revealed to characters and readers that Winston had died.

An "accidental" death at work, a colleague said "they had told [Winston] to wait until the gas had been tested, but he said he would go and test it himself. 'Just as if he wanted to die" (p. 198). Winston had died from a gas explosion and fell into a drum of tar. As gas is a natural element, Winston had died from the Earth due to offending it. Similarly, Pecola's father, Cholly, dies at the end of *The Bluest Eye*. Because the perspective is from children, all readers know is that he died in a workhouse. Connecting Gwendolen and Pecola's story, the perpetrators in both novels went against nature and the Earth by abusing and assaulting their daughters. Their demise and death were their sins catching up to them as both girls did not deserve to experience sexual violence and the gazes brought onto them.

Similar to alternative community building, protagonists found solace and healing within nature, specifically Indira. This may be due to the idea within nature we all have a role to play, so it offers us an ultimate acceptance. For a moment, there is no one actively looking and blaming her for the violence she experienced. Additionally, nature "deals with" the negative gazes and perpetrators in its own way. Metaphorically speaking, nature heals as well as atones for the awful crimes that were done to these girls. Racist colonial patriarchy seeks and represents control - over both land and bodies as sexual violence mimics the worst traits of colonization, its attack on the body, invasion of physical boundaries, and disregard for humanity (Mack & Na'Puti, 2021). Therefore, resistive Black feminism relinquishes control and exploitation and is attuned to earthly rhythms. This relinquishment of control through Black feminism shows how

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the relationship with nature may re-work the relationship with the mother or the family, the Black matriarch. There is a greater power than these earthly bonds forced upon the protagonists.

Conclusion

The analysis of the four novels helped name and contour the *communal gaze* as a straining dialogic site of re/configuring relationships with/in the family, the embodied self, and the natural world. I had started my conceptualization of the *communal gaze* (Christie, 2022) as simply the linear, most likely negative and negating, response one may receive from a community they affiliate with when sharing an experience of sexual violence. This further analysis, however, outlines a much more complex and interactional understanding. As a dialogic site, the *communal gaze* could be, on one hand, a space of/for the reproduction of oppressive racism and patriarchy. This would represent a *dominant communal gaze* - one that is controlling of women and silences their experiences, including those of sexual assault, so as to secure and perpetuate subjugating power relations. An expectation of this *dominant communal gaze*, the negative judgment and exclusion that comes with it, is what has also kept me from sharing my personal story with my family. On the other hand, however, the rhetorical analysis of the novels shows that within this relational space, there is also an *oppositional communal gaze* as a location for agency and resistance, most notably through the building of alternative communities. Silence echoes in this *oppositional communal gaze* as well, but here it is a choice, a tactic of reshaping how one connects to others, themselves, and the natural world. Articulating the *communal gaze* as a site of tension highlights its relationality (Fassett & Warren, 2007), which makes clear that the experience of sexual violence is never really entirely private, even when the story is not shared. Therefore, future research and interventions should cultivate much more culturally-centered approaches informed by systems theory.

A critical postmodern perspective introduced more specific factors that make up the communal gaze: relationship(s) with mother, the perpetrator(s), alternative community, physical body, pregnancy, and mental health. These themes were common amongst all four protagonists. Thus, there is a strong possibility that these fictional depictions can be applied to real experiences of sexual violence vocalized by Black women in the African Diaspora. Chapters four and five apply these factors to interviews conducted with Black women storytellers.

CHAPTER 5

INTERVIEW DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Semi-Structured Interviews

Exploring research questions two and three, the purpose of the interviews was to engage storytellers in collaborative sense-making to understand how a community's reaction, or one's anticipation of it, can reinforce stigma surrounding sexual violence, re/produce oppressive behaviors, and change the relationship a woman has with her body. Because the oral and photovoice interviews each spoke to the research questions in their own way, the results and discussion of each are presented in separate chapters. This chapter discusses findings from the semi-structured interviews, and the next one - those from the photovoice. The four major themes that emerged in the semi-structured interviews were 1) complex layers, 2) mental and physical health, 3) space and place, and 4) coalition.

Complex Layers

Although storytellers were all women of color from the African Diaspora who had experienced sexual violence, each narrative was unique to the person who was sharing. This uniqueness brought forth different elements that prevented all three storytellers from sharing their experiences of sexual violence with their immediate family.[13] It is important to understand the complexities of choosing whether to or not to share, when, and with whom. Such understanding refines the relational lens of the *communal gaze*, as it interrogates cultural, familial, and experiential norms that are active in storytellers' lives. In their interviews,

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[13] Immediate family is defined within this research as parents/guardians, siblings, aunts/uncles, grandparents, and/or cousins. Additionally, storytellers had their own interpretations of what they consider to be immediate family.

storytellers named layers of complexities impacting their decision, including: the perpetrator and the family's relational system, implicit norms of silence, generational trauma, expectations of women, community rules and norms, and age/agency.

To begin, the perpetrator is a complex layer that all three women discussed, and was similarly named in the rhetorical analysis of the novels (chapter 4). Archivist noted that, the imagined reaction from her family, would "feel like they would kind of dismiss it, especially if [the perpetrator] was a family member." As mentioned by Britney Le, she was assaulted by someone in her family. She didn't share her assault with family members to not ruin the relationship her family had with the perpetrator. This meant she had to deal with her experience alone. Similarly, one of the people who assaulted Diamond was her step father. This further complicated Diamond's relationship with her mother. She was unable to share with her mother her experience of violence since the person was in the same home as her. Within the legal, social, and familial systems, silence is the way of being for Black survivors (Bakari, 2019), which might be rooted in and perpetuating colonial oppressive practices of objection (Moten, 2013; Sharpe, 2016; Spillers, 2000). There is no support within these systems that enable Black women to want to share their experiences of sexual violence. The expectation of silence enables violence within the family, as the perpetrators know and/or expect they won't be accused.

Family structures are part of the *communal gaze*, as "silencing" is a mechanism used in Black communities that perpetrators exploit. As seen in chapter four, all four protagonists of the novels were assaulted by members of their families and were expected to continue living with them. Because of this, all protagonists were written as choosing not to share their narratives with members of their immediate family (others in the household), which is a clear parallel between fictional women and storytellers. Both literary and lived narratives reflect this theme of relational

silencing which speaks to its cultural significance within Black diasporic communities (Fordham, 1993; Macías, 2015) and calls it out as something that needs attention. Specifically, loyalty and obligations to the community creates a barrier for survivors to share their narratives (Bakari, 2019; Buggs, 2016). Familial ties within Black diasporic communities emerged from ancestral group loyalty. The obligation of African diasporic community members is to be loyal. Thus, the vocalization of violence done by community members is seen as disloyalty (Bakari, 2019). This induces the culture of silence, shaming, and internalizing blame in Black communities.

In addition to perpetrators being family members or within a close circle of friends, being in a household of immigrants added another layer limiting sharing one's truth with regards to sexual violence. Identifying herself as a Sierra Leonean and American woman, Archivist decided to not share her experience(s) of sexual violence because, again, she felt that her family "would kind of dismiss it and coming from an immigrant family, they go through a lot of stuff. They're resilient." For Archivist, she felt expected to be strong and resilient because members in her family were. This meant that she needed to deal with the pain and trauma of her assaults alone. If she were to vocalize what had happened to her, then she would no longer be a "strong" woman. Additionally, Archivist believes that other women in her family have experienced sexual violence, like Indira[14] and her mother. However, Archivist "wouldn't know because it's not something that is talked about . . . it's not something that you share," therefore, she feels she has to move past sharing her experiences with others to avoid retriggering someone else.

Similarly, as a Jamaican immigrant, I relate to Archivist's sentiments regarding not sharing. Not only am I expected to be a strong woman like my mother or other relatives, as a scholar, more pressure is focused on my studies. Because my mother immigrated from Jamaica

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[14] Indira is the main protagonist of *Learning to Breathe* by Jasmine Lynn Mathers

to build a better life for my brother and I, my family expects me to succeed in the United States. Topics of sexual violence are rarely discussed in my community. When it is discussed, the language used often leans toward victim blaming and/or shaming. As Archivist theorizes that members in her family might have experienced sexual violence, I personally know of a member who shared her experience right after it happened. Phone calls from Jamaica reached the U.S. detailing the ordeal and everyone had something to say. None supportive. All wondering what she did for it to happen. Therefore, it is easier for me to not share in order to maintain a certain "image" that I have. The *communal gaze* has the power to force a specific image/identity onto someone in the community. Because of the politics brought forth by enslavement and racialized power relations, the strategy of domination and control used by adults casts fear (hooks, 2015). Thus, the victim blaming my family member received for her assault produced fear within me to the point I can not share my experience.

Another complex layer that was discussed during these interviews was generational connections. Specifically, generational trauma[15] is a "secondary form of trauma that results from the transfer of traumatic experiences from parents to their children" (Doucet & Rovers, 2010). When thinking about generational connections, understanding the relationships between storytellers and their mothers are important. Diamond and Archivist discuss their relationships with their mothers in both interviews. Britney Le does not speak about this specific relationship. Like the Black matriarchal trope, within a heteropatriarchal system, it is perceived as common for knowledge, including one that subjugates and oppresses, to be passed down from a mother to her daughter (Halberstam, 2011). Women are often the ones who store the information they have gained from experiencing the world and transmit that knowledge onto their children, and,

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[15] In relation to this thesis, generational trauma also goes beyond parental figures into ancestral trauma like enslavement.

through the reproduction in their children, continue the social mores (Halberstam, 2011). However, review of research suggests that there are many complexities to what might be perceived as transmission of trauma and there are many possibilities for the mother's role in perpetuating or reshaping oppressive practices like secrecy and silence (Lange et al., 2020; LaReux, 2015). A mother herself, Diamond acknowledges her role. When asked how she would navigate a conversation with her daughter if she were to experience sexual violence, Diamond stated that:

> I'm not going to cry in front of her, but I probably would cry . . . In front of her, [I would] console her [saying] 'it's okay.' [Of course] it's not okay, but it's okay. 'I'm here.' I'd ask who [did it]. I don't want to pry too much . . . I wouldn't want to overwhelm her, make her feel like it happened because of her or it's her fault . . . I don't want how I feel to happen to her to make her feel like she can't talk to anybody. [To] make her feel like she's not heard, not understood, since I especially went through it. I feel like it[16] should be easier. It should be way easier.

Because Diamond didn't share her experience of sexual violence due to the fear of the reactions, she is already preparing to provide a positive reaction if her daughter were to experience sexual violence. In this preparation and desire to change how responses to sexual violence are handled, Diamond is using her own narrative to resist the *dominant communal gaze*. Diamond's lived experience will inform the way she continues to raise and support her daughter. The meaning-making from Diamond's narrative combats the dominant, cultural meta-narratives (Gómez et al., 2019). Rooted in misogyny and racism, dominant meta-narratives deny Black women the opportunity to recognize their strength. Through disembodiment and abjection, sexual violence

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[16] "It" refers to the the imagined scenario of Diamond's daughter experiencing sexual violence. Of course, we do not want Diamond's daughter to experience any form of trauma and violence.

further reduces Black women to questioning there strengths (Bray & Colebrook, 1998; Connolly, 2010; Fanon, 1967; Spillers, 2000). If dominant meta-narratives dismiss Black womens' strengths, then storytellers believe their weakness caused violence. Diamond's immediate desire to want to help her daughter if she experiences sexual violence, is her demonstration of resilience (Crann & Barata, 2019). Diamond notes that "I'm a woman . . . I feel like as a woman, we should be able to connect, . . . but I'll just try to make it easier for her." Like Diamond, storytellers and myself find the sharing of our narratives in this thesis an act of resilience. We each believe this research begins to address issues in our communities to help other girls and women who have experienced the *communal gaze.*

Diamond's preparation not only comes from her experience of sexual violence, but her own relationship with her mother. Diamond believes that if she had told her mother, she would have shamed her. When she lived with her mother, Diamond felt like her mother was "trying to make it seem like it's going to be my fault if something [were] to happen." Additionally, when Diamond would be struggling with her mental health after these occurrences, her mother would "flick a switch . . . She [would say] 'you're not doing anything. You need to get up." To Diamond, her mother was completely dismissing her mental health. This draws back to being in an immigrant household as one's mental health is often dismissed and not taken seriously (Wilson, 2001).

Archivist discusses the ways in which Black women should "break" generational curses. When asked what she hopes to see in Black communities as supportive responses to narratives, Archivist notes that "generational trauma is real. We often go through the same things our mothers went through alone . . . I'd like to see emotional healing throughout the generations and that happens by breaking those curses and being open and affectionate with our daughters, with

our mothers, with our family in general." Archivist is affirming the power in her gaze and her standpoint to shape a different narrative. Like Diamond, Archivist is resisting the *dominant communal gaze* by wanting to see more support from women in Black, diasporic communities. Diamond is already doing this by hoping to break generational trauma and curses by being a better mother than the one she had. Archivist has found her own oppositional gaze and finds emotional healing through generational connections (hooks, 2015). This oppositional gaze is needed for the other layers that structure communities.

Another complex layer is formed by the structures that make up survivors' communities. As this research focuses on women in the African Diaspora, structures within these communities play an important role when it comes to vocalizing sexual violence. In order to maintain structure in the community, rules and norms have to be abided by, especially if you are a woman (Khumalo et al., 2020). For women in Archivist's community the "cultural norms around women [are to be] submissive. When a man wants sex, give it to them. No questions asked." Women in Archivist's community are deemed "strong" when they adhere to the stated norms. In order to not be an "outcast," you are expected to follow these unspoken 'rules.' When discussing how she was raised, Diamond notes:

> We're taught [that] you need to make sure you're covered up . . . In our culture, you need to make sure you're acting your age . . . You need to make sure you're being a lady. I feel like the way I was brought up, you just need to make sure you're covered up, being respectful to your body. Then if something like [sexual violence] happens, it's going to be seen as, 'okay, well, you did something that wasn't following the set of 'rules.'

Similarly to Archivist, it seems these rules and norms are not verbally stated but implied. This may be accomplished through community expectations for girls to know how to do housework as

opposed to boys, or telling a girl to change her clothing because the "weird" uncle is coming over (as mentioned by Britney Le).

These rules and norms are more than just the expectations of women in these communities. A common norm that was discussed in each storyteller's interview was the ignorance shared by community members. Britney Le notes that her family keeps their "head[s] in the sand about certain things. They just don't want to know . . . [They want to live in] blissful ignorance." Ignorance is another facet of a complex layer that limits one wanting to share their narrative with immediate family. Within these communities, families are aware of situations that are happening outside of the home. However, when something happens within the home, they choose to turn a blind eye. Yet, if one were to vocalize about a person in the overall community, they may still choose to not believe it. As stated by Britney Le "when you talk about wanting to protect yourself against sexual violence, it's like you're attacking the community. [They'd say] 'oh, well, ["perpetrators"] wouldn't do that and these people know better. Why are you accusing these people by wanting to protect yourself?'" Here, oppressive colonialist norms are being perpetuated. This "protect the community" discourse is/was a survival mechanism in the face of oppression; it's a value that is the result of oppression, yet it also functions in oppressive ways (Bakari, 2019; Buggs, 2016; Lange et al., 2020; LaReux, 2015). Additionally, communities will know that someone has or will commit violence, but still put the blame on victims, as mentioned above when discussing clothing. This highlights the ways in which communities would rather blame victims than the perpetrators.

In the one instant that Archivist chose to share her experience of sexual violence with a family member, she "thinks they just kind of felt bad, [but] I also got the energy like, 'why did you put yourself in that position?'" As years went by, Archivist felt inclined to tell her father of

another experience. Hoping to have a supportive reaction, Archivist "didn't really feel reassured." She feels that this is because of the cultural differences based on the way her parents speak and communicate their love.

Much of the reluctance to share these experiences depends on the community's perception of one's age. Within Black communities, the sentiment of "grown" is casted upon Black girls. Although a girl can be 10 or 11, once they begin to mature, they are deemed to be "grown" allowing them to be blamed for any violence that they may experience. Diamond notes that:

> As a kid, that's your innocence. As an adult . . . you're grown now. [And if you tell the community, they'll ask] 'So what did you do? Did you do things to avoid it? Did you do things to try and stop it? How did you react?' [The community will] make you feel like you're the reason why it happened, rather than if I was younger and I [told them] they'd be like 'Oh my gosh, why didn't you say something? What are you going to do?'

For Diamond, if she had vocalized her assault at a younger age, she believes it would have been positively received and supported than if she told of an assault at an older age. However Britney Le notes that her community would have said that she's too young to understand what had happened. The imagined reactions from adults in Britney Le's childhood would have rejected the validity of knowledge based on her age. Her community is reproducing oppressive tendencies as they wanted to continue enforcing control to dismiss and silence her experience (hooks, 2015). Community members/the *communal gaze* reinscribes power relations. Britney Le chose not to share with her community at the time because she didn't have the vocabulary to express how she was feeling and could have been easily dismissed.

It's clear that the structures in these communities are complicated and, again, have complex impacts. Community members pick and choose who should be blamed. They define survivors in terms of age, regardless of objective facts or the person's own self-definition. This lack of self-determination is oppressive due to dominant meta-narratives dismissing Black womens' strengths and agency (Gómez et al., 2019). Much of the time, the perpetrators, who are often boys and men, are not punished. Britney Le notes that her community continues the "boys will be boys" sentiment. Likewise, Archivist questions "why don't boys and men get the same talk? It's like [girls and women] have to dim ourselves just because some men . . . don't have self control." Again, the community expects girls and women to be submissive, abide by the unspoken rules, control themselves, and monitor their bodies. Because of this, storytellers find themselves breaking away from their community in order to find healing. This means storytellers must find a new sense of space and place as well as an "alternative community."

Depending on the woman who is sharing, the complex layers (perpetrators, immigrant households, generational connections, structures of the community, rules and/or norms) can be "stacked" on top of, in conversation with, or intersected between one another. Complexities vary from person to person. Additionally, these complex layers can be found in the remaining three themes.[17] There isn't one definitive way on how someone decides whether or not to vocalize their experience(s). One can have none of these complexities and still decide to not share with their community. On the other hand, one can have all of these complexities and choose to share. However, it is important to acknowledge that these layers are present.

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[17] mental and physical health, space and place, and coalition

Mental and Physical Health

Storytellers' health, both mental and physical, were discussed during the interviews. As mentioned in chapter two, storytellers were prompted to look at a feelings chart (Wilcox, 1982) before interviews began and after they were completed. Not only was this intended to ground the storytellers to name their feelings, as these interviews can be draining, it allowed the interviewer to gauge how storytellers were feeling and to keep that in mind. Besides the naming of feelings using the chart, other connections to mental health were mentioned throughout the interviews.

To begin, all storytellers noted that their mental health was not at its best when they had experienced sexual violence. For example, Archivist noted that she was "depressed for a while after" the assault(s) had happened, and Britney Le discussed feeling retraumatized since the assault happened in the home she still resides in. Additionally, storytellers, and myself, recalled not remembering the specific details of the assaults, which is a common response to trauma (McNally, 2020). Diamond noted that she doesn't "remember stuff well. It's almost like my body blurs out the stuff and I can't remember it . . . I can't remember certain things . . . when things happen, it's just like it's cut out [and] I don't remember things within that time frame." Britney Le shared: "I'm so different mentally and physically from that moment I'd almost never stopped to think about what really happened back then and how that really changed me going forward." Similarly, I shared my own experience of not remembering my assault. I mentioned to Diamond that "it comes in bits and pieces. I don't remember [the] day to day. I don't even remember how I ended up being forced into having sex . . ." It's evident that trauma shapes one's memories. Because sexual violence is a terrifying experience, it triggers the release of stress hormones and neurotransmitters that affect the formation of coherent memories (McNally,

2020). This is clear in storytellers' recollections of their assaults as it is fragmented and not usually chronological.

Although Archivist did not blatantly state that she struggled with remembering moments in the past, she discussed her consciousness and its effects on her mind and body. When asked if she remembers changing her appearance, Archivist said that she didn't think she was changing her appearance consciously, but "I remember binge eating[18] a lot." Eating became a mechanism of control for Archivist. Other factors in her life, specifically her experience of violence, was out of her control. Here, the vicious cycle is seen: trauma to shame (self disgust), shame to disembodiment, disembodiment to nonbeing, nonbeing to abject (Connolly, 2017). Binge eating was Archivist's way of trying to feel embodied again. Because her appearance was not being changed consciously, Archivist notes that this can stem from "not feeling beautiful, not caring about yourself, but losing yourself." Similarly, Britney Le discussed her changing appearance. Because she experienced sexual violence at a younger age compared to Diamond and Archivist, Britney Le states that she's "not sure I was consciously thinking like, 'oh, I need to change something about myself,' but I was definitely doing that." Mental health and physical health intersected with one another for storytellers. This intersection being storytellers' perceptions of themselves leading to perceptions from others in their community.

In relation to one's physical and mental health, storytellers discussed their overall perceptions of themselves before and after their experiences of sexual violence. In chapter one, literature acknowledged the disconnect that happens after one experiences sexual violence (Hartman, 1997; Towns, 2016)). Storytellers became hyper critical of themselves after their experiences. Most storytellers in this project did not want to recognize who they were before

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[18] Binge eating disorder is a "behavioral disorder characterized by chronic, compulsive overeating" (Cleveland Clinic). Although she used this language, Archivist is not diagnosed with a binge eating disorder.

and/or during their experiences of sexual violence. Diamond notes that "sometimes you look in the mirror [and] you're just like, 'what the heck?' . . . I look at pictures of my body before [giving birth thinking] 'oh, that was really my body' and it's almost like my head couldn't see that that was my body."

Although storytellers were aware of their bodies and how they perceived themselves, much of this perception reflects that of the community (*communal gaze*). Like protagonists in the novels, storytellers' communities judged these women based on their clothing, age, and sexuality. Diamond recalls being told by the perpetrator that she was big and needed to lose weight. This prompted Diamond to question her own sense of self. She "shut off [how I looked] at my body and as I got older, I [was] wearing clothes to cover up." The perpetrator made her question herself and her body which lead her to think her body is the reason she continued to experience sexual violence. Likewise, Archivist felt that the perception from her community was for all their women to be the "strong, Black woman." Thus, the vocalization of experiencing assault would allow the community to perceive (gaze) at Archivist to be weak. This stereotype of the "Strong Black Woman" (SBW), or the Black matriarch, is harmful and reproduces violent, white colonialist power relations (Umeh, 2016). Like Black masculinity, the SBW stereotype roots back to colonialism. This stereotype feeds on Black women's ancestral resilience, where her own existence has been constructed to endure the stress, pain, weight, and effects of society's oppressive systems (Steward, 2017). This sentiment has become normalized and rooted in Black communities.

The stereotype has become a tool used by Black women to navigate oppressive systems without being a "liability" to the system (Steward, 2017). This system has primed Black women to believe the "struggles" are what makes them "stronger" as the trauma from enslavement

forced Black families to build a survival response (Hartman, 1997; Steward, 2017). However, generational connections/traumas have transformed. Today, Black women no longer find themselves enslaved. Instead, they must grapple with intersectional stressors of racialized sexism and gendered racism (Crenshaw, 1991; Steward, 2017). This is unlike her counterparts who are not experiencing both racialized sexism and gendered racism. Rather, they are deemed dainty and pure (Bareket et al., 2018). For Archivist and other Black women, the violence seems to be warranted due to the SBW stereotype removing Black women's humanity. This removal causes Black women to be on guard emotionally and invulnerable to those around her. Showing signs of stress and emotions paints Black women as weak, needy, and/or in search of attention (Steward, 2017). Thus, Black women are unwilling to share an emotional and traumatic experience with community members. The sole purpose of the SBW stereotype, and the perpetuation of it, was to serve as a justification for white people's violence against Black women (Hartman, 1997; Steward, 2017). Therefore, the *dominant communal gaze* utilizes the SBW stereotype to prime Black women to not share narratives of violence in fear of being seen as weak and/or needy.

Space and Place

As seen in all the novels, some protagonists found themselves in nature to find healing and/or relief from their trauma. Additionally, nature motifs, like colors and creatures, were used to explain the grief they were experiencing. As it is further examined in the next chapter, Archivist is the only storyteller that deliberately discussed nature within her healing journey. Like Indira, nature has played a big role for Archivist as "just being in nature in general is a big healer." Nature and mental health relate to one another for Archivist. For Indigenous communities, the reconnection to the Earth brings about spirituality and healing as (McIlmoyle, 2020). Many who experience sexual violence, or any form of violence, immerse themselves in

nature to produce some form of healing. In the context of this research, nature is a healing space. Healing is not equivalent to curing. Instead, healing is the navigation towards psychological emotional, physical, social, and spiritual wellbeing (Mitten, 2009). Being in the healing space of nature prompts this navigation. Often, women find nature healing as it enables a sense of space and place (Mitten, 2009). This sense of space and place allows for Black women to feel grounded. Because abjection is a state of nonbeing, consciousness is not grounded in reality. Nature brings one back to reality by having something stable underneath them. This also connects to body geographies as nature is a location.

As mentioned in chapter one, the colonization of Black bodies furthers the complicated relationship one has with their body as black geographies "are geographic contests over discourses of ownership" (McKittrick, 2006, p. 3). For storytellers the ownership of their bodies was determined by the community they are/were a part of. When Diamond was living with her mother, she felt as though she couldn't move around freely. As previously mentioned, her clothing and habits were monitored. Similarly, Britney Le was "hyper aware of what I do, as not to cause feelings with other people. That kind of rhetoric, I really internalized that." These communities are continuing to reinforce whiteness and colonialism by controlling the movement of specific bodies. In order to have a sense of control, women and girls' bodies are surveillanced more often than the boys and men. After realizing that their community would not allow them to move their bodies freely, storytellers found themselves "leaving" these communities. Diamond physically left her mother's home in order to move more freely. She notes that "when I left my mom's house, I'm not depressed. I'm going out more . . . I thought I was shy, but I'm learning, I'm not shy." Similarly, Britney Le feels "more comfortable dressing how I want to, just being the person that I want to . . . I kind of grew out of [being scared of my environment] naturally

once I just felt safer." Like Indira who found safety at the yoga retreat, storytellers began to make a home that was comfortable for themselves.

As the body is a type of rhetorical space, one can find a home within themselves or feel dis/placed. For many narratives that discuss sexual violence, home is a common sentiment when thinking about one's body (Mulla, 2008). As mentioned in Boylorn's (2016) autoethnography, "our physical house, like [her] physical home (body), has experienced transformations and renovations over the years, embellishments and decorations on the outside to hide what is on the inside" (p. 51). As mentioned before, storytellers found themselves changing their physical bodies/homes as part of their ongoing experience of relating to the sexual violence their lived through and the community's anticipated responses to it. Whether that is eating more green foods or wearing more green clothing, as mentioned by Archivist, this transformation is often unconscious, yet intentional. Diamond had a "renovation" within her body that changed her perspective on her outer appearance similar to Boylorn's (2016) autoethnography. Diamond discusses her body being a "home" to her daughter. She notes that "my body is different. I still accept it and I'm more appreciative now because that was somebody's home, I grew somebody inside of me." Diamond has rebuilt her relationship to her body because it was a home and space for her daughter. Of course, it is important to note that space and place for Black women still need to be made.

Coalitions and Alternate Communities

In addition to acknowledging generational trauma, Archivist notes that we need to "know our history, . . . [we] have to talk about our past, even down to slavery" and that the work I am doing is "making space for people to open up and talk about [their experiences of sexual violence]." Similarly, Britney Le and Diamond expressed the same sentiments about the research

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they are participating in. Britney Le mentioned that "me and you sitting here having this conversation just means that there's two less people that are going to perpetuate these narratives of 'head in the sand' behavior." Diamond echoes Archivist and Britney Le stating "it's easier for me to talk to you because we have the same cultural background and we understand why we don't say anything or why we didn't say anything." For these three women and myself, we have begun to build space for Black women to discuss their experiences. This is faithful witnessing and truth telling. Storytellers and myself "affirmed [our] voices and [our] lived experiences" (Hall, 2020) in order to combat our individual communities that dismiss our narratives. In addition to coalition being formed between researcher and storytellers, coalition was formed between storytellers on their own.

Within feminist theory, coalition politics allows women of color to feel empowered (hooks, 1997; Maye et al., 2022). Through a Black feminist standpoint, which allows for the act of vocalizing to elicit Black women to stimulate acts of resistance (Collins, 1989; Allen, 1996), coalition politics builds a sisterhood amongst Black women to share their narratives (Maye et al., 2022). This enables agency to be valued in coalitions as faithful witnessing is key. As faithful witnessing is a strategy and tool through which oppressed groups form communities in order to combat multiple, systemic, and intersectional oppressions (Figueroa, 2015), Black women can stand with one another to build communities resisting *dominant communal gazes* as as difference and self determination is valued in coalition. Of course, the #MeToo movemovent was/is an attempt to scale up this version of community building for Black survivors of sexual violence that does not conform to cultural norms of silence and shaming. The #MeToo Movement, in itself, already suggests coalition, both in the use of "too" and "me". Additionally, "me" witnesses

the differences of narratives. This is clear in the coalitions built by Diamond, Britney Le, and Archivist.

A common thread found in the novels was the coalition building each protagonist formed. Interview storytellers found themselves sharing their narratives with people outside of their immediate community to build a coalition. Diamond notes that "the only person [who knew about her experience at the time] was my girl . . . and boy best friend . . . They both were accepting [and said] 'I'm here for you." When Britney Le went to college she became "comfortable and able enough to tell [her friends] about my experience of sexual violence." Archivist found "new community members that have helped me and have guided me through these experiences, also making me feel safe [about] sharing my experiences." For storytellers, it was important to build a coalition as it provided them support to acknowledge their trauma and want to heal from it.

Conclusion

The *communal gaze* and/or its anticipation is a silencing mechanism within Black women's immediate and extended familial structures. Silencing happens at both the relational and the cultural level, perpetuating traumatic generational responses. However, storytellers also articulated themselves as responsible for and capable of changing these norms. They related the knowledge and anticipation of the communal gaze to their mental and physical health, as well as their overall sense of self "in the universe" and in coalitional relationships. Taken together, this means that what is at stake in transforming the oppressive influence of the *communal gaze* is both individual and cultural health. Transformation suggested by storytellers is in taking charge of the communication with human and non-human entities around them (children, nature, the body, friendships).

CHAPTER 6

PHOTOVOICE INTERVIEW INTERPRETATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The second chapter of this thesis discusses the methodology that this research used. There were two rounds of interviewing during this research. The first method was a semi-structured interview and the second was a photovoice interview. The photovoice activity asked storytellers to provide two items and/or images that represented themselves 1) before they decided to/not to share their experience(s) of sexual violence and 2) after they decided to/not to share their experience(s) of sexual violence (Appendix F).

This chapter first gives a summary of each storytellers' photovoice interviews and how they relate to the four major themes that were found after the second round of coding. An analysis of the interviews is, then, discussed. Amongst the storytellers' photovoice interview is the researcher's own narrative as a form of autoethnographic research.

Before beginning this discussion and analysis, I want to, again, thank all three of my interview participants for their bravery and courage to share their experiences with myself and to those who read this document. As storytellers' faces are included in this project, they wish to remain anonymous.

Britney Le

As all the interviews began and ended with a grounding exercise, Britney Le noted that she "never thought of a way to physically represent myself before and after [and] these are the first pictures that came to mind." Britney Le chose to include photographs of herself before and after her decision to not share her experience of sexual violence with her immediate family. Britney Le's first photograph was her 2018 high school senior photo (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Britney Le's First PhotoVoice Image

Britney Le's perception of herself and the structure of her community were discussed. As

Britney Le is half Black and half Asian, the structure of her community was somewhat altered.

She thought she couldn't adhere to one half of her community and/or culture because she was

disconnected from it based on her perception of self. Britney Le notes that she "felt disconnected

from all aspects of my culture even to the point where I felt disconnected from my hair, which is

something that's very important to Black women." Additionally, Britney Le mentions that in the

photograph her hair was ruined and that she was "really light compared to my actual skin tone."

Because Britney Le felt more connected to her Black culture, her perception of herself was not

only affected due to her physical identity not "adhering" to Black cultural practices, but also not

having much of her Vietnamese culture seen.

Britney Le's second photograph is her with her frat brother[19]s in 2019 (Figure 2).

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[19] Frat brothers are referred to in this way by Britney Le as she was part of the Delta Sigma Pi fraternity that was a professional fraternity for those majoring in business at her undergraduate institution. Britney Le notes that "joining really gave me a sense of purpose and belonging at the university."

Figure 2. Britney Le's Second PhotoVoice Image

Unlike her first photograph, Britney Le discusses coalition and alternative community building. In the photograph is Britney Le's friend who was the first person she told about her experience with sexual violence. Britney Le described the first photograph to represent the "first time I really found community in people again . . . I was comfortable enough to to tell them about my experience of sexual violence." As Britney Le had mentioned in her first photograph, she found herself disconnected from her Asian culture. She was able to tell her friend about her experience because she also shared the same cultural background as Britney Le. Britney Le "felt like I could allow myself to reconnect with the heritage that I had lost." Additionally, Britney Le's perception of herself was also discussed in relation to her second photograph.

Britney Le mentioned that the second photograph was a funny photo. Before, she "never wanted to make a funny face, or just be included in . . . merrymaking [and] happiness. It was something that I felt like I always had to exclude myself from, [but this photograph] was just like merrymaking essentially." Britney Le was not familiar with wanting to be "happy" or creating joy. However, a new community that she found in college brought that out of her. As Britney Le's experience of sexual violence happened before the two photographs were taken, Britney Le noted that "between the first photo and now, I probably gained 50 pounds, [but college made her

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take a moment and reflect that she's] completely fine the way that I am." For Britney Le, going through "second puberty" has made her feel like a different person. Additionally, surrounding herself with people she is comfortable with, this alternative community, has helped her have a positive perception of herself.

Diamond

Diamond's photovoice interview was similar to Britney Le's as she also chose to include photographs of herself before and after her decision to not share her experiences of sexual violence. Additionally, during the first grounding exercise, Diamond noted how the first interview made her feel good to vocalize her experience to someone. Unlike Britney Le, Diamond's first photograph are two images of her as a baby/toddler (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

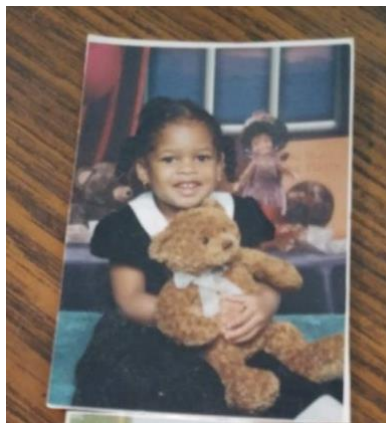*Figure 3. Diamond's First PhotoVoice Image (answering first prompt)*

Figure 4. Diamond's Second PhotoVoice Image (answering first prompt)

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Immediately, Diamond's perception of herself is discussed. She chose the first set of

photographs as it represented her innocence before she experienced sexual violence. As

mentioned in the semi-structured interviews, all three storytellers discussed their ages when they

first experienced sexual violence. Diamond does not dive into her first photographs as much as

Britney Le and Archivist does. However, her second photograph provides a fruitful

understanding of how sexual violence changed aspects of her life.

Diamond's second photograph is of her today (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Diamond's Third PhotoVoice Image (answering second prompt)

While discussing why Diamond chose her second photograph as the representation of choosing

to not share her experience(s) of sexual violence, her perception of herself and perception from

others was specified. Out of the three storytellers, Diamond is the only mother. Diamond notes

that "a lot of me accepting the way I am now is because I had my baby. I feel like if I didn't have

her, then I . . . would still be looking at myself the [way she looked at herself after her

assault(s)]." After her first experience of sexual violence, Diamond immediately felt

disconnected to her body. The perpetrator would tell Diamond that she was too big and needed to lose weight. This caused her to question her body and relationship with it. She recalls asking herself "am I too big or is my body fine? [Are] my boobs [and stomach] too big?" As more instances of sexual violence occurred, Diamond began to shut herself off from the world. As she got older she wore "clothes to cover up because, even though I wasn't really showing my body when it first happened, [. . .] it was still happening." She felt disgusting and didn't like the way her body felt to her. Diamond imagines that if she never experienced sexual violence then she would have been "flaunting" her body more and feel freer. Not only was Diamond hyper aware of her body and clothing, so was the community she was a part of.

The structures within Diamond's community further complicated her relationship with her body. As mentioned in chapter four, Diamond's relationship with her mother permanently changed her perception of self. When Diamond lived with her mother, she could wear anything "in my room, but when I stepped out of my room, I had to be wearing something else." Her mother would question what she was wearing around the house as one of the people who assaulted Diamond was her stepfather. It would have been easier for Diamond's mother and community to feign ignorance and place blame on the victim instead of the perpetrator because of the clothing she would be wearing. Diamond felt conditioned by her mother to feel the way she does about her body. Today, she does not have a relationship with her mother.

Archivist

Archivist's photovoice interview used a different approach than that of Britney Le and Diamond's photovoice interviews. As Britney Le and Diamond chose photographs of themselves before and after their decisions to not share their experiences of sexual violence, Archivist created two digital collages that represented herself before and after deciding both to share and

not to share[20] her experiences of sexual violence. Collaging refers to "a genre of art . . . and refers to the process of cutting and sticking . . . materials on a flat surface" (Yuen, 2016, p. 340-341). However, collaging is both a method of analysis and representation that has been able to promote healing for those who chose to do it (Yuen, 2016). Archivist chose not to include physical images of her collages in this research project; thus, descriptions of her collages will be included.

Archivist's first collage contained five photographs, one photograph in the middle and the other four on each corner of the overall collage. The background of this collage was a black and white spiral. Each photograph was of Archivist by herself. However, the photo in the middle was Archivist and her mother. Immediately, Archivist's relationship with her mother was the focal point. Complex layers, specifically structures of the community, are seen in this first collage as Archivist notes that she didn't share her experiences of assault with her mother and that the photo represented their relationship at the time. For Archivist, her mom is "a very strong woman. The women in my family, when they go through stuff, they don't really tell people." This is what defines "strength" for Archivist. Archivist's relationship with her mother, and overall community, hindered her comfortability in sharing with her immediate family.

Like Britney Le and Diamond, Archivist's mental and physical health was discussed in her first collage. Including the photograph of Archivist and her mother, the other four images represented a "younger self." These images included Archivist 1) taking a photograph in a store mirror wearing a bralette, 2) rolling a blunt, 3) posed lounging in a chair, and 4) smoking a cigarette outside by a pool. Both her mental and physical health, as well as her perception of self, were brought up. Archivist notes that she was "very hypersexual, showing my body a lot and

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[20] Although Archivist told her cousin after one assault happened, she did not share her other experiences with family members.

also numbing what I was feeling." She also noted that these photographs "represent some type of non-physical closeness." This is an example of abjection. Archivist felt lost within herself and "felt like I wasn't really going anywhere . . . [and] expressed myself in a really dark manner and how I saw myself as a dark person" which is why she chose the black and white spiral for the background. As we know, abjection leads someone to be in a state of nonbeing (Fanon, 1967; Sharpe, 2016). Archivist's body, or flesh, is "cut off from the human, from the self-possessed possessor of the world and its things" (Broek-Sallah, 2018, p. 13). She is trying to further explore who she is as a person in this abjectional state as "there was so much hidden below the surface that I hadn't started to explore yet." Much of the work that Archivist is doing to heal from her trauma is within a state of nonbeing as she is doing it internally which is seen in her second collage.

Archivist's second collage is vastly different from her first collage. This collage contained, again, five photographs. There is one photograph in the middle and the other four are in each corner of the overall collage. The background of this collage is sage green. As her first collage was solely photographs of her, one including her mother, the second collage only includes two photographs of her, but none are solo. One photograph is her and her mother and the other is her with a masculine presenting person. Unlike the first collage, the photograph with her mother is not in the middle. Instead, the photograph with her and the masculine presenting person is centered. The other three photographs are 1) a moth on a concrete background, 2) a bee (and what I assume to be) a moth perched on yellow flowers outside with green leaves in the background, and 3) a bee perched on purple flowers with grass in the background. This collage had more nature motifs and a green color scheme. For this portion of the photovoice interview, Archivist discussed her relationship with her mother and perception of self, especially

surrounding her spirituality and practices. When asked why she chose not to put the photograph of her mother in the middle like the first collage, Archivist stated that she didn't "think it was a conscious decision." However, the photograph represents her growing relationship with her mother. Due to healing in a state of nonbeing, Archivist's perception of herself has changed. Now, she "[feels] more soft. I feel more feminine now that I have [begun to] share. I learned how to manage my emotions better." Instead of the perception/expectations of her community to be a "strong, Black woman," Archivist has become more vulnerable. Much of this femininity and vulnerability is tied to her growing spirituality and practices.

As the common motif and scheme of her second collage is nature and green, I wanted to ask about her intentionality behind it. Archivist says that "green is the heart chakra." Archivist notes that "something about the heart and green . . . makes you feel lighter." For her, it "represents the constant work of releasing things that I was holding in my heart space and things that are in my heart space currently." Additionally, bees are a symbol of Oshun, a Yoruba deity that represents motherhood, honey, and healing that is another aspect of Archivist's spiritual practices. Archivist mentions that "[Oshun] came to me and helped me, through all of [her experiences and trauma]." Likewise, the bees and moths in Archivist's second collage are representations of transformation. For Archivist, feeling more feminine and soft now, opposed to dark and "angsty" when she was younger, is her own kind of transformation. Her mental and physical health is changing and evolving as "we're all becoming our best selves, our higher selves." Like Britney Le and Diamond, Archivist comments on her younger and present body. In her first collage, Archivist was "super skinny." However, she's learned to love her womanly body.

Brianna

As mentioned in chapter two, my positionality statement discusses my own experience of sexual violence. During each photovoice interview, I found myself participating in the activity to continue building community and coalition with the Black women who shared similar experiences and stories with me. Not only did I choose to share photographs of myself with storytellers to further their comfortability with me, but these interviews also made me want to be vulnerable. The specific photographs I shared with Britney Le, Diamond, and Archivist will not be included here due to picking them on the spot and not having enough time to think about the specific prompt given. If I were to be interviewed for this study, my first photo would be similar to Diamond's first photograph (Figure 3) when thinking about me before my decision to not share my experience of sexual violence.

Figure 6. Brianna's First PhotoVoice Image

For me, this photograph represents, not only my innocence, but the person that I am doing this work for. Within Caribbean culture, specifically Jamaican culture, professional photographs were taken in the United States to send back to family. As you can see in the above image (Figure 6), this photograph was taken during the time of my first-third birthday (I am not sure how old I was). I think much of the person I am today can be analyzed using this photograph. I

am directed to pose for the camera and emit a smile. Of course, this is expected when going to Sears or JCPenney to take photographs. However, looking at it now, I am experiencing new emotions viewing it.

The second photograph (Figure 7) represents me after I decided to not share my experience of sexual violence with my immediate family.

Figure 7. Brianna's Second PhotoVoice Image

My second photograph was taken in August 2023 during a beach trip with undergraduate friends, two women who I have shared my narrative with. Similar to Britney Le, I've shared my experience with a community that I was not appointed at birth but cultivated. I chose this photograph as it is the opposite of the first one. Like my storytellers, I chose a photograph of myself now, more mature, and healing from the trauma I experienced after my assault happened. Instead of being in a professional studio or being told to "smile," I am in control of the camera and perspective that is being given to me. My smile is genuine. Those who have seen this photograph comment on my smile and I agree that I look to be in a better mindset as opposed to photographs I have taken in the past. Like Britney Le who found herself purposefully enjoying merrymaking, I have finally learned to not let my experience define the person that I am. To reiterate Britney Le, Diamond, and Archivist, my relationship with my body has changed multiple times since my assault. During the photovoice interviews, I found myself saying "it's

just so weird to see my womanhood and who I've become throughout the years. [I'm] really honing in, or like taking back my own body and even changing my body." As someone who is constantly growing and changing while I write this thesis and do the work, I reflect on these daily phases of my life. I am "the person that I'm doing this for, even though that's a lot, [much] of this work is very much my core. It's my soul."

Interpretation

When analyzing the storytellers' photovoice interviews, there are specific moments that add to the construction of the *communal gaze*. As mentioned above, all storytellers chose not to share their experiences of sexual violence with their immediate family when the assault had happened. However, as mentioned in chapter four, storytellers eventually told people outside of their familial community about their experience(s). It is important to note that the community that storytellers are referencing are parent(s)/guardian(s), grandparent(s), aunt(s)/uncle(s), cousin(s), brother(s)/sister(s). This is a result of the culture in majority African Diasporic communities. Familial ties within Black diasporic communities emerged from ancestral group loyalty (Bakari, 2019). The obligation of African diasporic community members is to be loyal. Thus, the vocalization of violence done by community members is seen as disloyalty (Bakari, 2019) However, this is not the case when all storytellers, including myself, have chosen to "betray" the community and find comfort and trust elsewhere. My research is a "betrayal" as my immediate family may or may not read my own narrative.

Next, Britney Le and Diamond chose professional photographs for their representations of self before deciding not to share their experiences of sexual violence. Because Diamond is a Jamaican woman, professional photographs like hers are the cultural norm. Much of these photographs are taken for the person's first birthday, as the backdrop would also suggest (Figure

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3 and Figure 6) and sent to family back in the Caribbean. Although she chose those photographs to represent her innocence at the time, Diamond notes that these are the few photographs that she still has from her childhood. Her mother, who Diamond does not have a relationship with, threw away many photographs from her childhood. These photographs not only represent her innocence at the time, but the remnants of memories she can look back to. Additionally, a mother herself, Diamond aims to break the cycle of trauma by being a supportive mother to her daughter. This includes the vast number of photographs that she takes of her daughter as keepsakes.

Diamond is a real-life representation of the characters Indira and Gwendolen[21]. As mentioned in chapter three, Indira and Gwendolen do not have a positive relationship with their mothers. However, after becoming pregnant and choosing to raise their daughters, they begin to break the cycle of letting their children experience their personal traumas. Instead, they want to be better mothers than their own. Diamond is only one example of someone in the "real world" who is living these moments found in fictional texts.

Like Diamond and I, Britney Le chose her first photo to be a professionally taken image. As I mentioned in my own photovoice section, being posed by a photographer, and told to "smile" can mask what someone is going through or allow one to remember that they are not the person in the photograph anymore. Britney Le mentioned that many of her high school peers did their senior portraits with their immediate family. However, she chose to do hers solo. Britney Le experienced sexual violence before her first photovoice image was taken. Throughout the years leading up to her senior portraits, Britney Le did not have a good relationship with her immediate family to the point where she broke the "norms" of her high school and did her portraits alone.

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[21] Indira is the main protagonist of *Learning to Breathe* by Jasmine Lynn Mathers and Gwendolen is the main protagonist of *The Family* by Buchi Emecheta

This speak to the centrality of family dynamics - what those are may be different and have different impacts, but they are significant in shaping one's communicative response to having experienced sexual violence and (not) shared about this experience. Britney Le, as well as Diamond and Archivist, seem to find themselves in a state of self-possession to reclaim the person they might have lost after their experiences.

Self-possession is the ownership someone has over an object (Ye & Gawronski, 2016). When looking at Diamond's second photograph (Figure 5), one can assume that she is in her own car, with freshly done eyebrows, lip gloss, and a bright smile. Again, Britney Le's second photograph (Figure 2) shows her adorning a smile amongst friends. Both photographs in Archivist's second collage of herself with her mother and the masculine presenting person, shows her with a smile on her face and glowing, clear skin. There seems to be a time in all storytellers' lives that they have become calm, confident, and in control of their own emotions. As mentioned in chapter one, Black women have found themselves feeling as though they do not have a right to their own bodies. This is due to the enslavement of Black bodies and, presently, generational trauma. As sexual violence can further the disconnection a Black woman has with her body, abjection, self-possession is the reclaiming of body, mind, and soul.

During each photovoice interview, each woman discussed the journey that they are on now. Diamond states that "it's funny that I don't have hair. I had a baby and I'm more happier than when I didn't have a baby [. . .] I felt more self-conscious when I had hair than now. It's [. . .] weird." Britney Le notes that "I'm so different mentally and physically from that moment that I'd almost never stop to think about what really happened back then and how that really changed me going forward." Likewise, Archivist notes that "we're all changing. We're all evolving. We're all becoming our best selves, our higher selves." For storytellers, they are coming back

into themselves after experiencing amounts of trauma, or a transformation. They have been able to reflect on their experiences, find coalitions of support, and share their narratives to become, who they believe to be, their best selves.

Transformation

As the interpretation has pointed out, a new "code" has emerged from the photovoice activity that was not initially found in the first and second round of coding. This new code is "*transformation*". The symbolism in Archivist's second collage is one of transformation. Archivist discusses motifs surrounding nature that are linked to her spirituality and growth as a woman. Likewise, Britney Le and Diamond consider themselves to be the total opposite of who they were after they were assaulted. All women no longer have long periods of negative self-perceptions or lasting battles with their mental and physical health. Additionally, storytellers discussed their age in relation to this transformation. As they are no longer children or teenagers, their transition into womanhood was a transformation. Furthermore, transformation was not only seen in physical and mental attributes. As the *communal gaze* was intended to highlight the negative gazes that are given to Black women who vocalize their assaults, it's been brought to light that storytellers can transform the gaze.

Conclusion

Before this research began, the *communal gaze* had one, concrete definition. It was my goal to conduct research that allowed this definition to make sense and be applied to multiple scenarios and experiences. However, through the process of interviewing, coding, and analysis, the *communal gaze* no longer has one, concrete definition. The *communal gaze* is a communicative situation where the communicators shape what this gaze is. The *communal gaze* is different for everyone. Taking Britney Le, Diamond, Archivist, and my own narratives into

consideration, we all have unique stories where the outcome of the *communal gaze* is different. For example, Diamond has no relationship with her mother. Yet, Archivist has cultivated a stronger relationship with her mother from one that was dwindling. However, my relationship with my mother has been very positive throughout my life. Still, none of us have told our mothers what happened to us. The *communal gaze* is made up of multiple elements where one can choose what relates to their experience. The *communal gaze* is a lens to help us understand experiences of sharing or not sharing experiences of sexual violence and how those become meaningful to the person, how it shapes them, and helps them navigate the world.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

When this project started, the *communal gaze* aimed to examine the community's culture-shaping reaction after a woman within that community vocalized their experience(s) of sexual violence and assault. Although this was examined and identified, the *communal gaze* has evolved to become a fluid lens, defined by key, dynamic and flexible components, the specifics of which change with specific contexts.

The three research questions investigated were:

RQ1: How does literature authored by Black women of the African diaspora construct experiences of the *communal gaze*, following knowledge of sexual assault perpetrated against Black women?

RQ2: How does sharing/narrating experiences of sexual violence with community members change meanings of the body for Black women?

RQ3: How do performances of the *communal gaze* relate to colonial and white oppressive legacies of invading Black spaces?

To answer these questions, critical qualitative research methods were the most appropriate, as they allowed me to engage and honor Black women's knowledge of the *communal gaze*. I utilized rhetorical analysis of literature, ethnographic interviewing, photovoice, and autoethnographic methods to triangulate and explore the nuances of experience.

The first research question was answered using a rhetorical analysis, specifically the new rhetorical and critical postmodern perspectives (Zachry, 2009). As I read the novels, I marked moments where the gaze and relating themes were evident. This analysis identified the conscious ways each author was persuading and educating the readers about Black women's experiences of

sexual violence and community, through the themes of *family, the body, and nature*. Once this was done, a critical postmodern perspective was used to analyze and critique the language that was being used to reveal what is *real* and *true* about society through the voices of the protagonists. Through the analysis of literary works, the communicative contexts of considerations/awareness of the *communal gaze* arise: relationship(s) with mothers, the perpetrator(s), an alternate community, physical body, pregnancy, mental health, and nature. Additionally, the Black matriarch trope was introduced to where the *communal gaze* may start from the protagonists' mother's gaze.

From the protagonists' perspectives, the community reaction -- whether real or anticipated -- is a key factor in shaping how they relate and respond to having experienced sexual violence. Community responses are depicted as producing a consideration of one's familial or close bonds and a desire for alternative communities. They are imagined as related to natural forces and as fostering a reflective relationship with nature for survivors. Finally, (the knowledge of) community responses as told through the protagonists are embodied - the relations to oneself, other humans, and the natural world are known and changed through the body of the survivor as a phenomenological instrument. Community responses to Black women's narratives of sexual violence are not just one-directional judgments passed on to survivors; rather they are depicted in the novels as lived through, made and re-made meaningful through the body as both a contentious site and as a mechanism for agency.

Noticing these depictions matters because it acknowledges the present relationships that shape and are shaped by (literary) experiences and narratives of sexual violence. The *communal gaze* does not function without the exchanges happening in the community. For the gaze to be a site where control, agency, and/or resistance is possible, ties between bodies and the environment

determine a positive or negative gaze. Existing scholarship addresses the impact familial dynamics have on Black women. Stemming from enslavement, Black families built survival techniques, specifically for Black girls and women to navigate oppressive systems (Fordham, 1993; Macías, 2015; Steward, 2017). This navigation makes a Black woman hyper aware of her body and its movement in the community (environment). Thus, if the movement is the vocalizing of sexual violence, it elicits a *communal gaze.*

The second and third research questions were answered using two qualitative interviewing methods, semi-structured and photovoice, the latter of which also included some autoethnographic elements. The semi-structured interviews opened the discussion about the dynamic relationships participants have with their bodies in relation to experiences of sexual assault, in both the physical and mental realms. As relating to the Black matriarch trope and mother-daughter relationship(s) in the novels, interview findings spoke to generational trauma as an element of the *communal gaze*. Analysis of the photovoice activity continued the discussion of participants' relationships with their bodies. This introduced a new theme of transformation where, after the real or imagined reactions happen from community members, relationships with their bodies still underwent a kind of change.

Experiencing sexual violence changes meanings of the body. Black women find themselves wanting to turn to their communities after the assaults in hopes for a supportive reaction to help them feel like who they were before they experienced violence. However, the sharing/narrating of sexual violence with community members, real or imagined, changed meanings of the body for Black women in negative ways instead, furthering disconnection and disembodiment. The power the community holds over women and girls allows the (imagined) negative reactions to remove agency allowing for "thingification" (Snorton, 2017). Therefore, by

wielding the power of the gaze, communities control girls and women from a young age like the colonial and white oppressive legacies of authority (Mack & Na'Puti, 2019). The *communal gaze* uses girl's and/or women's clothing and age to regulate their bodies and movement. This subjugates women and girls allowing men in and out of the community to use their privilege to "invade" these rhetorical spaces without fear of the repercussions. The direction of gazes is controlled. Yet, there is a tension of hoping for support from the community. Within this tension, Black women start to define who they want to be without their community. They reclaim their agency of looking - e.g., through alternative communities. Again, this is the oppositional gaze as those who experienced sexual violence define themselves as an act of resistance.

In sum, the use of rhetorical analysis and qualitative research methods has "defined" the *communal gaze* as a relational, communicative situation where the communicators, those who choose to/not to share their experience(s) of sexual violence with their community, shape what the gaze is. It is made up of multiple elements, the relevance of which changes in different contexts, experiences, and survivors' narratives. Naming the specific multiple elements relevant to a situation requires consideration of the following: 1) complex cultural layers, like generational trauma, social norms, and rules in the community regarding talk, gender, and/or age, 2) mental and physical health, like perception of self and/or perception from others, and 3) space and place, like nature and/or body geographies.

Additionally, expansions of the *communal gaze* were noticed: the *dominant communal gaze* and the *oppositional communal gaze*. The *dominant communal gaze* is one that controls women by silencing their experiences, including those of sexual assault, to secure and perpetuate subjugating power relations. However, the *oppositional communal gaze* is a location for agency

and resistance, most notably through the building of alternative communities where silence is a tactic of reshaping how one connects to others, themselves, and the natural world.

Having addressed the three research questions through a multi-method analysis, I am offering a model for the *communal gaze* lens (Figure 8). The model accounts for the considerations and impacts that (anticipated) community responses to Black women's stories of sexual violence have. It contributes to feminist theorizing because it adds a new tool of analysis to critique dominant power structures. It can inform practitioners by acknowledging the multiple layers that Black women face after experiencing sexual violence. Thus, the creation of new infrastructures will better support narratives and address layered trauma. It is helpful to communities as it gives a visual of how "the family" plays the largest role in evoking the gaze. Hopeful that communities start to recognize the role they play, Black girls and women can begin to feel safe 1) to share and vocalize their experience(s) of violence with community members and 2) be provided supportive responses and resources.
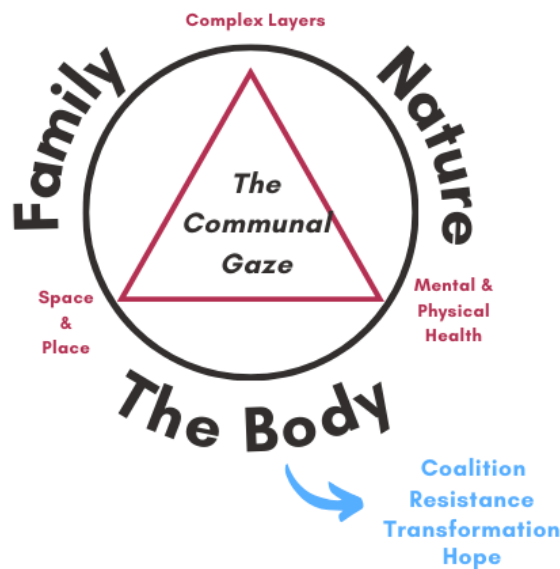

Figure 8. Communal Gaze Lens

The *communal gaze* is a lens to help us understand experiences of sharing or not sharing about having lived through sexual violence, and how those become meaningful to the person, how it shapes them, and helps them navigate the world through transformation, coalition, hope, and resistance. One does not have to be subjected to the *communal gaze* but can react to it and reshape it. This being the *oppositional communal gaze*. The *communal gaze* offers a communication lens to a complex social experience like sexual assault and its disclosure. The relational focus of the lens shows how the meaning of the experience is made in processes of negotiating/reshaping relationships with the self/body, the family and community, and the world (natural, spiritual, social etc.)

Contributions to Theory

From the literature review, it was made clear that gaze theory's foundation was grounded in film studies, specifically the gazes casted upon actresses from white directors, male co-stars, and audience members positioned in such a vantage point. Despite its close attention to creating power relations via the camera, gaze theory was short-sighted when it came to incorporating intersectional feminism (Columpar, 2002; Mulvey, 1975; Sisco King, 2020). Because of this, there was a gap when thinking about gazes within communities of color when sexual violence is the reason one is "looking." This opened the need for the *communal gaze* and how it can be examined to fit into feminist studies' considerations of narrative, be it in the media, in literature, or in lived experiences.

As a relational framework, the *communal gaze* supports critical examination of race/ism and sex/ism. Specifically, the framework allows people to notice that communities of color can enact oppressions that have been and are targeted against them. This relates back to the gaze as a theory of power relations. Gaze theory focuses on how the gaze is used by those in power like

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white men. Rooted in being a tool to colonize, the white gaze is also used to dominate and subjugate (Stehle, 2020). The *communal gaze,* specifically the *dominant communal gaze*, reproduces oppressive tendencies by silencing Black women from sharing their narratives through the power the community has. Therefore, the (dominant) *communal gaze* is another "rendition" of the gaze, focusing on Black community dynamics, which contributes to the theory's failed account for the key factors that social locations and intersectional positionalities play into the gaze. However, the *oppositional communal gaze* draws on hooks' (2015) oppositional gaze. hooks' (2015) gaze demanded we "look back." Therefore, the *oppositional communal gaze* names the instances Black women have looked back. This is seen in sharing their narratives despite the complex layers they may face, the transformation they experienced, and the coalitions they built.

Because Black women "looked back," this work also contributes to Black feminist theorizing as liberatory and healing (hooks, 1994) . Unlike the *dominant communal gaze*, the *oppositional communal gaze* utilizes a Black woman's standpoint to oppose the gaze given to her by the community. As feminist standpoint theory aims to destabilize systems of power (Allen, 1996) and Black feminist stance argues that Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression (Collins, 1989), the *oppositional communal gaze* is another standpoint Black women can take. A location for agency and resistance, the *oppositional communal gaze* encourages Black women to vocalize their lived experiences, find their voices, and resist dominant-narratives given to them (Allen, 1996; Gómez et al., 2019). Taking an *oppositional communal gaze* stance also opens the possibility for more narratives about sexual violence to be written and to reconsider which stories we acknowledge as stories of sexual violence. Of course,

lived experiences, vocalization, and resistance comes through the body. Therefore, the *communal gaze* also contributes to aesthetic and rhetorical theory.

Reflected in chapter four, a rhetorical analysis, a tool used in rhetorical theory, allowed for the foundational understanding of the *communal gaze* (Zachry, 2009). Likewise, the communal gaze further contributes to aesthetic theory as the relationship between space, embodiment, and abjection is seen. A rhetorical space, the body serves as a place for public and/or private memories that contain "residues" from history (Bruce, 2016). Therefore, the impact of sexual violence is stored by the body, specifically, sexual trauma. Seeing that the body stores this trauma, embodied experiences do not allow one to separate themselves from their trauma prompting them into abjection (Kristeva & Lechte, 1982). Additionally, being a Black woman creates a layered aesthetic experience as they are unmistakably abjected because of their constant exposure to gendered and racial violence (Crenshaw, 1991; Fanon, 1967; Hartman, 1997; Sharpe, 2016). Due to these aesthetic experiences happening altogether, the (dominant) *communal gaze* has its own cycle like Connolly's (2017) cycle of shame.[22] This cycle being: body to trauma, trauma to (dis)embodiment, (dis)embodiment to abjection. The lack of a supportive community repeats the cycle.

Looking at these theoretical contributions together, it becomes clear that as a lens the communal gaze amplifies Black women, our stories, bodies, and voices as knowledge creators. I see my thesis as growing from and honoring the roots of Black feminist knowledge as a necessary, transformative, and hopeful intervention in a complex world.

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[22] trauma to shame (self disgust), shame to disembodiment, disembodiment to nonbeing, nonbeing to abject

Limitations

The barriers that were faced during the research process were limited, but still present. First, the selection of the novels excluded narratives from older Black women. Using the NoveList database produced novels primarily in the "young adult" genre. The only narratives from older Black women were the maternal figures' implied experiences of assault. Having clearer narratives from older Black women would allow for future research to show how the communal gaze impacts long-term effects of choosing to/not to share and how it might be related to different socio-historical contexts.

Next, interviewee recruitment fell short. I had originally intended to interview 10-15 people. I adjusted the interviewee recruitment goal to five seeing that the recruitment momentum was falling short. Three participants agreed to both rounds of interviews. Out of the three participants, only one preferred to not have her photovoice (Duran, 2019) images included in this document. Permission to have written descriptions of the images was obtained. One participant completed the first interview but did not complete the second interview. Their story is not included.

Recruitment was challenging because of the pushback from organizations to share fliers. Specifically, I chose to reach out to the top historically Black institution, Howard University's Black clubs and organizations asking to share fliers with club members to raise recruitment numbers. Out of the three organizations I reached out to, two agreed that they would share fliers on their social media platforms, but they did not. The other organization completely said no to sharing the fliers as they stated my research did not go with their club values. As the club had members solely from my own Caribbean community, I was disheartened that they concluded that my research did not uphold the values they had and led me to wonder what those values were.

After these instances, it is evident that research surrounding sexual violence in Black communities is a limitation due to the stigma and discomfort folx still feel, especially when sharing materials to provide spaces for Black women to talk about their experience(s). As the researcher, I chose to focus on the interviewees that I was able to gather myself. This meant there were only three participants for the interview data and analysis. Still, their collaboration in theorizing the *communal gaze* through their stories is invaluable.

Future Research

As mentioned in the introduction to this research, the *communal gaze* stemmed from a final paper during my last semester while an undergraduate student. Again, this paper put *The Bluest Eye* and *No Name Woman* in conversation with one another to develop the foundation of the *communal gaze* and the passion to pursue clarifying the lens further. At the beginning of this graduate thesis, I wanted to use narratives from every minority community, this being Black, Asian, Hispanic, Indigenous, etc. narratives. However, this was not plausible. Instead, I chose to focus on the African Diaspora as 1) it was the community I also belonged to and 2) I'd be able to have a more thorough analysis of these experiences. Because of this, I imagine, with the publication of this thesis, future researchers will apply the *communal gaze* framework to other womxn of colors narratives of sexual violence. Communities of color have different cultural norms and ways of knowing. Thus, future research would have the ability to identify the cultural similarities and differences of the *communal gaze*. I'd like to believe the *communal gaze* is a universal experience for women of color, but its particularities are context- and situation-dependant, as this thesis suggests.

Additionally, I would like for this research to contribute to the necessary supportive work for Black women who have experienced sexual violence. Instead of isolating this research in

communication studies, the effects of the *communal gaze* can allow for other fields within the social sciences to develop resources for more supportive reactions and interventions. Not only this but starting to build more supportive communities where girls and women can openly share their experiences. Specifically, when considering how a survivor may be experiencing the *communal gaze*, practitioners should inquire into a survivor's relations to family, their body, and nature. Then in relation to each of these and in relation to their interconnections, practitioners should listen for cultural layers, notions of health, and shifting dis/locations. Practitioners can use the *communal gaze* to "stand with" their clients to listen and witness.

A Sonnet to Leave You

This is about me.

Is this my recovery?

Giving voice to those with no choice.

The gaze eliciting a haze

My eyes have cleared to see.

This "recovery" comes from an alternate community.

I've dared to look like bell hooks

Poured myself into this work

Calling for a supportive Black society.

Standing in abjection above the body that was

Scattered across the floor of a freshman dorm.

This cycle ends with me. My words.

My decision to sing the yellows

While calling out the blues.

Take this work and put it to use - Brianna Christie, 2024

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APPENDIX A: INITIAL RECRUITMENT EMAIL

For Distribution to Female-Identified Populations in the African Diaspora

Hello,

You are invited to participate in a research project exploring how one's community responds to personal experience(s) of sexual violence. This study further seeks to understand how a community's reaction reinforces stigma surrounding sexual violence, oppressive behaviors, and changes the relationship one has with their body. Your contact information was obtained through providing your email address via your response to a message indicating your interest in the project.

The research is led by Brianna Christie, a Communication Studies graduate student at the University of Maine, to inform her Master's thesis. The faculty advisor for the project is Dr. Liliana Herakova, Associate Professor in Communication at the University of Maine. To participate, you must be a Black woman from varying nationalities and backgrounds within the African diaspora, have experienced sexual violence, currently reside in the U.S, be at least 18 years of age, and speak English.

Participation involves one 60-90 minute interview and one follow-up 30 minute interview via Zoom. The interviews are not focused on the experience of sexual violence itself, but on the community reactions and effects after. To ensure confidentiality, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym for yourself before the interviews begin. After the first interview, you will receive an email providing the prompt and more detailed information for the second interview, in which you will be asked to share and discuss two photos/items representing your experiences before and after your decision to share/not to share with your community about your experience with sexual violence. Should you volunteer for this study, the lead researcher will meet with you over Zoom at a time convenient to you to conduct each interview. The second interview will occur within two weeks of the first interview. You must agree to video and audio recording to participate.

If you participate in the interviews, you will receive a bonnet of your choice from Scotch Bonnets by Dani worth up to $20 as compensation for your time. You must participate in both interviews to receive compensation.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please view the consent information below and respond to this email with your availability for participation. Interviews will be conducted during the months of July through December 2023.

Regards,

(*Name & department affiliation of the researcher*)

[ATTACH APPENDIX E]

APPENDIX B: INITIAL RECRUITMENT PRIVATE MESSAGE

For Face-to-Face or Personal Message Distribution to Individuals Identified by PIs Personal and Professional Networks

Hey [NAME],

I know that in the past you have spoken to me about your experience with sexual violence and I am reaching out to you today to see if you are interested in participated in a research study for my graduate thesis on this topic. The purpose of this study is to explore how one's community responds to personal experience(s) of sexual violence. If you'd like to learn more and/or participate, please email me at brianna.christie@maine.edu where I can send you more information about the study. To participate, you must be a Black woman from the African diaspora, have experienced sexual violence, currently reside in the U.S, be at least 18 years of age, and speak English. Also, I've included the flier for this study that has a few more details about what your participation would look like.

Thank you!

[ATTACH APPENDIX D]

APPENDIX C: INITIAL RECRUITMENT through the NATIONAL COMMUNICATION

ASSOCIATION (NCA) LISTSERV

For to those Subscribed to the NCA Listserv

"Seeking Research Participants for Study on Sexual Violence within Black Communities"

Brianna Christie, brianna.christie@maine.edu

You are invited to participate in a research project exploring how one's community responds to personal experience(s) of sexual violence. This study further seeks to understand how a community's reaction reinforces stigma surrounding sexual violence, oppressive behaviors, and changes the relationship one has with their body. The research is led by Brianna Christie, a Communication Studies graduate student at the University of Maine, to inform her Master's thesis. The faculty advisor for the project is Dr. Liliana Herakova, Associate Professor in Communication at the University of Maine.

Participation in this study involves two rounds of interviews conducted via Zoom. The first interview is approximately 60-90 minutes long and the second interview is approximately 30 minutes long. To ensure confidentiality, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym for yourself before the interviews begin. The second interview will occur within two weeks of the first interview. If you participate in the interviews, you will receive a bonnet of your choice from Scotch Bonnets by Dani worth up to $20 as compensation for your time. You must participate in both interviews to receive compensation.

Interviews will be conducted during the months of July through December 2023.

Eligibility to Participate:
- Identify as a Black woman from varying nationalities and backgrounds within the African Diaspora
- Have experienced sexual violence
- Currently residing in the United States
- Be at least 18 years of age
- Fluent in English.

If you meet the eligibility requirements outlined above and you are interested in participating in the study, please email Brianna Christie at brianna.christie@maine.edu. You will then receive an email with the information and consent materials enclosed. You can also contact Brianna with any questions or concerns.

For Distribution to Campus Communities Identified by PIs Personal and Professional Networks

This is a University of Maine research study

Are you a Black woman who has experienced sexual violence?

"THE COMMUNAL GAZE: HOW THE COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO THE STORIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE TOLD BY BLACK WOMEN"

Looking for study participants

To participate, you must be a Black woman from the African Diaspora, have experienced sexual violence, currently reside in the U.S., be at least 18 years old, and be fluent in English

- two confidential, video recorded interviews held via Zoom between July and Dec., 2023
- time commitment is 90-120 minutes total (both interviews)
- compensation for your time is a bonnet of your choice from Scotch Bonnets by Dani

If you are interested and would like to learn more, please contact Brianna Christie at brianna.christie@maine.edu

THE COMMUNAL GAZE: HOW THE COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO THE STORIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE TOLD BY BLACK WOMEN

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Brianna Christie and faculty sponsor Dr. Liliana Herakova, Ph.D at the University of Maine department of Communication and Journalism. This research is being conducted for Brianna Christie's graduate thesis. The purpose of this study seeks to understand how a community's reaction reinforces stigma surrounding sexual violence, oppressive behaviors, and changes the relationship one has with their body. The interviews, themselves, are not focused on the violence itself, but the community reactions and effects after. To participate, you must be a Black woman from the African diaspora, have experienced sexual violence, currently reside in the U.S, be at least 18 years of age, and speak English.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?
- If you decide to participate, you will be asked to engage in two video and audio recorded interviews via Zoom that will allow you the opportunity to share insights regarding your experiences with thinking about:
  - Sexual violence
  - Your community
  - Your relationship with your body
- For the second interview, you will be asked to share photographs and/or items. The first photograph/item should represent your sense of self and community BEFORE you shared or considered sharing the story of the sexual violence you experienced. The second photograph/item should represent your sense of self and community AFTER you shared or considered sharing the story of the sexual violence you experienced. Additionally, you will be asked to discuss the meaning of these photographs and/or items with the researcher for later analysis. Note: you will be asked for verbal consent if you'd like for your items/photographs to be included in the final publication or descriptions of the items/photographs.
- The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. You must consent to recording prior to participation. The first interview should take roughly 60-90 minutes of participation time and you will be asked to give a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The second interview will last approximately 30 minutes. The second interview will occur within two weeks of the first interview.
- Before and after each round of interviews, you will be asked to view a feelings chart to have a reflective moment, as the interviews could bring forth charged feelings that you may want to acknowledge.
- Some sample questions you may be asked include: how did your community respond to you after you shared your sexual violence experience, and did you feel disconnected from your community after you shared your experience?

Risks
The risk for participating in this research study is the potential of emotional distress as you may still be healing from trauma surrounding your experience of sexual violence. You will have the

option of not answering any questions that may make you uncomfortable or excuse yourself from participation at any time. Interview protocols have been designed with care in mind, to ease you into the conversation and to allow reflection, emotion processing, and centering at the end. Every attempt will be made to protect your identity with the use of a pseudonym. Time and inconvenience are the other risks associated with this research study. You will be made aware of support resources.

If you become upset in the first interview, the interview will be halted for you to recover. If you continue to be upset, the interview will be stopped completely and postponed for another session. The PI will reach out to you to inquire if you are still interested in participating in the research. If you are, a new interview will be conducted where it begins at the question the initial interview was postponed at. If you are not interested in continuing the interview, the interview will not be coded and transcribed for the final research paper, but a thank you letter will still be given.

If you become upset in the second photovoice interview, the interview will be halted for you to recover. If you continue to be upset, the interview will be stopped completely and postponed for another session. Counseling resources will be provided. The PI will reach out to you to inquire if you are still interested in participating in the research. If you are, a new interview will be conducted where it begins at the question the initial interview was postponed at. If you are not interested in continuing the interview, only the first interview will be coded and transcribed for the final research paper, but not the photovoice portion. Compensation of a thank you letter and bonnet will still be given as you made it to the second interview.

You may receive support from your own counselor or therapist. If you do not have access to a private counselor or therapist, you may receive support from the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline at 800-656-4673 or by visiting their website at rainn.org.

Benefits
There are no direct benefits to you. However, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your own experiences with regards to the communication of sexual violence. The overall benefits of the project include the opportunity to contribute your story to allow for more research surrounding community responses about sexual violence, inform future researchers, and open up a larger conversation on how sexual violence should be handled in marginalized communities.

Compensation
You will receive a bonnet of your choice from Scotch Bonnets by Dani worth up to $20 for your participation in this study and a thank you card. You must participate in both interviews to receive compensation for a bonnet of your choice. Packages will be mailed to you. After you have participated in both interviews, Brianna will follow up with a thank you email, requesting you to provide your mailing address. This email will also contain an opportunity for you to "opt-out" of your photos/items (provided in interview 2) to be shared in results reporting.

Confidentiality
Your identity will be protected by keeping interview data confidential and by providing you with a pseudonym. Data collection will include open-ended semi-structured individual conversations that will be recorded with your permission. Zoom will be utilized to video record, and transcribe conversations. Video recording will enable the interviewers and interviewees to build rapport as the interviews are conducted on Zoom. Additionally, for analysis purposes, video recording will be helpful, as nonverbal communicative behaviors (such as hesitations, or shifting gaze) will be analyzed to better understand your experience with discussing sexual violence.

Interview recordings will first be uploaded to the cloud via Zoom's recording service, but will immediately be downloaded on a password-protected computer and deleted from the cloud within 48 hours. The recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer. All collected data will be contained within the recordings. The audio and video files will be transcribed by the end of December 2023, after which they will be deleted. The recordings will be transcribed by the PI with transcription files stored on the PIs' password-protected computer. Transcripts will be kept indefinitely.

Transcripts will be stored indefinitely on the password protected computer of the PI. Photographs will be stored indefinitely on the PI's password protected computer. Select items may be shared in results reporting related to this research, provided you have agreed to that following interview 2, as described above. Contact information will be stored on the password-protected computer of the PI and will be deleted no later than December 2023, after confirming receipt of compensation.

For Zoom conversations, meetings will be password protected and connection information will be emailed to you. In that email, as well as at the start of the interviews (before recording begins), you will be reminded to protect your privacy by completing activities in a private and quiet space, to ensure conversations are not overheard and ensure that there are minimal interruptions.

At the start of the interviews, the researcher will establish ground rules, including no taking screenshots, no recording on personal devices, and no sharing information outside of the interviews. Before the video and audio recording begins, you will be asked to provide your pseudonym and to change your Zoom name to your chosen pseudonym to protect your identity. The Zoom recording will be saved on the cloud to ensure Zoom generates an automatic transcription. The recording and transcript will be downloaded and saved on a password protected computer as soon as they are available. The cloud recording will be deleted immediately after download.

An excel document will be used as a key to connect the two interviews and your pseudonym to protect confidentiality. The key will be stored on a password protected computer with software that provides additional security on the PI's password protected computer and will be destroyed no later than December 2023.

Voluntary Participation
Participation is voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. However, if you participate in only the first interview, you will not receive compensation. To receive compensation, you must participate in both interviews.

Contact Information
If you have any questions about this study, please contact the lead researcher at the information listed below:

Brianna Christie
Graduate Student, Department of Communication and Journalism,
University of Maine

(207) 360-1831
brianna.christie@maine.edu

Dr. Liliana Herakova
Faculty Advisor, Department of Communication and Journalism,
University of Maine
(413) 230-4840
liliana.herakova@maine.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, (207) 581-2657 (or email umric@maine.edu).

Your participation indicates your consent. Thank you!

APPENDIX F: CONVERSATION FACILITATION GUIDE

THE COMMUNAL GAZE: HOW THE COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO THE STORIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE TOLD BY BLACK WOMEN

CONVERSATION FACILITATION GUIDE

Interview 1

Opening Script: Thank you for participating in this research project. The purpose of this project is to seek an understanding of how a community's reaction reinforces stigma surrounding sexual violence, oppressive behaviors, and changes the relationship one has with their body. The interviews, themselves, are not focused on the violence you experienced, but the community reactions and effects after.

Aside from your time and inconvenience, you may become uncomfortable as the primary risk to you in participating in this study is potential adverse emotional effects to the questions asked. Please remember that participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. **Your participation indicates your consent.**

This conversation will be recorded, but your identity will be protected through confidential handling of data. You will need to provide the pseudonym you'd like to use for this interview to ensure confidentiality. Before the video and audio recording begins, please change your Zoom name to the pseudonym you have chosen.

OPENING QUESTION
1. Looking at the chart (Appendix J), how are you feeling as we begin this interview?

CORE QUESTIONS: *The focus of this interview is to gather your narrative about your experience before and after undergoing sexual violence. Your narratives will help inform my graduate thesis where what you say in this interview is more than appreciated.*
1. When thinking about your experience with sexual violence, did you tell someone in your community, for example your parents/guardians, siblings, relatives, right after it happened?
   → IF THEY SAY "YES": What made you want to tell someone in your community?
   → IF THEY SAY "NO": Why didn't you want to tell someone in your community?
2. If you told members of your community, how would you describe their reactions? If you didn't tell anyone, what do you imagine the reactions might have been if you told them?
3. What cultural norms do you see that shaped these (imagined) reactions?
4. How did sharing/deciding not to share change how you felt about yourself?
   → Followup 1: Did you find yourself trying to change your physical appearance and/or behaviors?

→ Followup 2: What about changes in activities related to spirituality?

5. What would you like to see in yourself/community as supportive responses to narratives of experiencing sexual violence?

→ Followup 1: How do you envision getting there?

CLOSING QUESTION

1. Looking at the chart (Appendix J), how are you feeling now that the interview is over?

Closing script: Thank you for talking with me! Remember that the consent materials include links to therapeutic resources? Would you like me to re-send those to you? Also, I will be in touch over email to schedule the next interview.

In preparation for our next conversation, please bring and be ready to talk about two photographs or items. The first one should represent your sense of self and community BEFORE you shared or considered sharing the story of the sexual violence you experienced. The second item should represent your sense of self and community AFTER you shared or considered sharing the story of the sexual violence you experienced. The images and/or items can be direct representations (e.g., a family photo) or more abstract (e.g., a drawing of feelings or places) - and whatever you choose, you will be able to talk about that choice and its meanings to you during our follow-up conversation. My followup email will include more information about this interview.

<center>**Interview 2**</center>

Opening Script: A reminder that your participation is voluntary. Aside from your time and inconvenience, you may become uncomfortable as the primary risk to you in participating in this study is potential adverse emotional effects to the questions asked. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. **Your participation indicates your consent.**

Before the video and audio recording begins, please change your Zoom name to the pseudonym you have chosen from the first interview.

Introduction: Thank you for meeting with me again. For this portion of the project you were asked to share two photographs/items. The prompt you were given was as follows: Think about your decision to share or not to share about your experience with sexual violence with your community. Please provide one photograph/item that represents you before your decision and one photograph/item after your decision. Note: this does not have to be images of you, but a representation, such as a book, drawing, a place, an everyday item, etc.

OPENING QUESTION

1. Looking at the chart (Appendix J), how are you feeling as we begin this interview?

CORE QUESTIONS

1. Please show your first item or photograph to the camera. What does your first item/photograph represent to you?
2. Please show your second item or photograph to the camera. What does your second item/photograph represent to you?

CLOSING QUESTION

1. Would you like your photographs and/or items to be shared in the final draft of this research study? If not, only descriptions of the photographs and/or items will be included.

2. Looking at the chart (Appendix J), how are you feeling now that the interview is over?

Thank you for talking with me! I will be reaching out to you regarding your compensation for your time. Remember that the consent materials include links to therapeutic resources. Would you like me to re-send those to you?

APPENDIX G: SECOND INTERVIEW REQUEST EMAIL

For Distribution to Participants Who Have Completed Interview 1

Hello,

Thank you for participating in the first interview for "The Communal Gaze: How the Collective Community Responds to the Stories of Sexual Violence told by Black Women." The second interview will take place within two weeks. Please send me a time that you are available to conduct the second interview during the weeks of [INCLUDE SPECIFIC WEEK/DAY].

The second interview asks you to provide two photographs and/or items that answer the following prompt: Think about your decision to share or not to share about your experience with sexual violence with your community. The first photograph/item should represent your sense of self and community BEFORE you shared or considered sharing the story of the sexual violence you experienced. The second photograph/item should represent your sense of self and community AFTER you shared or considered sharing the story of the sexual violence you experienced. The images and/or items can be direct representations (e.g., a family photo) or more abstract (e.g., a drawing of feelings or places) - and whatever you choose, you will be able to talk about that choice and its meanings to you during our follow-up conversation.

In preparation for your second interview, please have these photographs/items ready to share. Note: you have the option for your items/photographs to be included in the final publication or descriptions of the items/photographs.

This second interview should be approximately 30 minutes. After the participation of the second interview, you will be sent another email regarding your compensation.

Regards,

(*Name & department affiliation of the researcher*)

APPENDIX H: PACKAGE ACCEPTANCE EMAIL

For Distribution to Participants Who Said "Yes" to Sharing Images

Hello,

Thank you for participating in the University of Maine's research study titled "The Communal Gaze: How the Collective Community Responds to the Stories of Sexual Violence told by Black Women." As mentioned in the consent form, you may receive support from your own counselor or therapist if this research study brought you emotional distress. If you do not have access to a private counselor or therapist, you may receive support from the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline at 800-656-4673 or by visiting their website at rainn.org.

This is a followup email confirming that you agreed for the images of your photograph/items to be displayed in the final research project, anonymously. If not, only written descriptions of these photographs/items will be included instead. You may "opt out" if you would NOT like to share your photographs/items as part of results reporting. If you do not respond to this email, the assumption will be that you agree to sharing these images as you have stated at the end of interview 2. If you'd like to opt out, please confirm your decision by [Date 1 week after email is sent].

Because you have participated in both interviews, you will now receive your compensation. In order for you to receive your complimentary bonnet from Scotch Bonnets by Dani (click the company name to access the web site), you will need to fill out the information below within a week from receiving this email. You may also provide this information in an email to Brianna Christie at brianna.christie@maine.edu.

First and Last Name _____

Mailing Address _____

_____

Link to the Bonnet You'd Like: _____

Due to the bonnets being made by hand, please expect to receive your bonnet in 3-4 weeks.

Regards,

(*Name & department affiliation of the researcher*)

APPENDIX I: PACKAGE ACCEPTANCE EMAIL

For Distribution to Participants Who Said "No" to Sharing Images

Hello,

Thank you for participating in the University of Maine's research study titled "The Communal Gaze: How the Collective Community Responds to the Stories of Sexual Violence told by Black Women." As mentioned in the consent form, you may receive support from your own counselor or therapist if this research study brought you emotional distress. If you do not have access to a private counselor or therapist, you may receive support from the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline at 800-656-4673 or by visiting their website at rainn.org.

This is a followup email confirming that you did not agree for the images of your photograph/items to be displayed in the final research project, anonymously. Because you did not agree, only written descriptions of your photograph/items will be included in the final research project.

Because you have participated in both interviews, you will now receive your compensation. In order for you to receive your complimentary bonnet from Scotch Bonnets by Dani (click the company name to access the web site), you will need to fill out the information below within a week from receiving this email. You may also provide this information in an email to Brianna Christie at brianna.christie@maine.edu.

First and Last Name _____

Mailing Address _____

_____

Link to the Bonnet You'd Like: _____

Due to the bonnets being made by hand, please expect to receive your bonnet in 3-4 weeks.

Regards,

(*Name & department affiliation of the researcher*)

The Bluest Eye

Character

PECOLA

11 Y/O

LORAIN, OHIO

Plot

One day during the spring of 1941, Cholly returns home drunk and finds Pecola washing dishes. He experiences a fury of emotions as he watches her. At first, he feels tenderness and hatred fueled by guilt. He knows he is unable to care for her, and hates her for loving him. He rapes Pecola, and leaves her on the kitchen floor. Afterward, Mrs. Breedlove beats Pecola when she learns of the rape. Pecola has been impregnated by her father. Pecola's baby dies. Pecola goes mad. The community disowns her, and from then on she lives isolated in her own world.

Pregnant?

YES

Kept? Lost?

LOST

Reactions

- The community disowned and shunned her
- Only Claudia and Freida saw her differently (child's innocent gaze)

Themes of Body

- Hated herself due to the way the community perceived her
  - Believed she was ugly and unloveable
- Had a mental breakdown
  - Believed she had blue eyes

Who She Told?

- Her mother? - I think her mother found out on her own

Notes:
- Pecola and Gwendolen raped by their fathers
- Theme of "nature" - the sowing of seeds
- Reproduction of oppressive forces - generational trauma
  - Mother time concept
  - Is something made possible by the othering?
  - Alternate community

The Family

Character

GWENDOLEN

6-16 Y/O

JAMAICA TO UK

Plot

When her mother joins her father in London, Gwendolen is left behind in Jamaica, where she is sexually abused by a male friend of her grandmother; disclosure of her crime only brings the child resentment and ridicule. Eventually, Gwendolen's parents send for her, and she arrives in the "Moder Kontry" to care for her younger siblings and receive an education. But school is a hardshipFurther humiliations follow when Gwendolen's father molests her, rages when he learns he is not the first to do so, and eventually impregnates her.

Pregnant?

YES

Kept? Lost?

KEPT

Reactions

- The community disowned and shunned the assaulter in JA at first
  - Community began to forget what happened
  - Her grandma started blaming her for their money troubles and shaming her
  - Her friend still wanted to talk and play with her
- Assault in UK - her mother thought her daughter was evil
  - Mother was sickly jelaous of her daughter for being raped by her husband
  - Everyone in the church knew what her father did to her but didn't say anything - looked at her negatively

Themes of Body

- pg 174
  - her mind attached to her body
  - wanting to escape her body
- Had a mental breakdown after each incident
  - 1st ran away
  - 2nd went to a mental facility

Who She Told?

- Her grandmother
- Her childhood friend in JA?
- Her mother

Notes:
- Gwendolen and Pecola raped by their fathers
- Parallel to Bluest Eye in the child's gaze
- Theme of "nature" - African storytelling of nature destroying bad things - her father falling and dying from a gas leak that blew up

Learning to Breathe

Character
INDIRA

16 Y/O **BAHAMAS**

Plot

In Learning to Breathe, sixteen-year-old Indy is trapped and trying to find any sense of freedom and identity she can. She thought being seen as the continuation of her mother's reputation would have stopped once she was shipped off to her aunt and uncle in Nassau, but it only got worse. Her cousin Gary only sees Indy's body as his for the taking, and now Indy is pregnant. Indy tries to hide her growing belly as best she can. She can't confide in her family, she doesn't have any friends, and she's too busy being scared of Gary to think about much else. It's hard to run from someone who lives in the same home as you.

Pregnant?
YES

Kept? Lost?
KEPT

Reactions

- Everyone at the yoga retreat believed her and wanted justice for her
- Her aunt did not belive her and began to shame her
  - Her cousin said told her aunt that the asaaulted was going to assault her too
  - That is when her aunt belived her stepson did what he did
- He gets arrested for what he has done

Themes of Body

- Swims to escape her body (p. 11-13)
- Begins doing yoga at the retreat to feel one with herself

Who She Told?

- Everyone at the yoga retreat
- Her grandmother
- Her aunt
- Her girl cousin

Notes:
- Her mother was also assaulted (p. 293)
- Theme of nature - the ocean, "breathe" like breeze
- Some healing

Even When Your Voice Shakes

Character
AMERLEY

16 Y/O **GHANA**

Plot

Sixteen-year-old Amerley has dropped out of school and assumed the role of caretaker for her younger sisters. The family is on the verge of eviction, and Amerley's sewing skills bring in some income. Rosina, her mother's wealthy friend, offers to give Amerley a domestic position in her household. Despite Amerley's reluctance to leave home, her mother is insistent. Rosina's gated luxurious dwelling is unlike anything Amerley has ever experienced, but the opulence masks serious family issues—and she is raped by a member of the family. Against overwhelming pressure to keep silent, Amerley testifies in court.

Pregnant?
NO

Kept? Lost?

Reactions

- Other son -Zaed was in the room when it happened but didn't say anything to anyone
- Assaulter emits physical violence to the point she cant stay conscious
  - Another person tells the aunt to take her to the hospital - she says no
- Aunt tells her not to tell anyone as it will ruin her husband's business
- Others believed her and convinced her to testify against her assaulter

Themes of Body

- stopped speaking after it happened (p. 179)
- (p. 217) felt "spoiled"

Who She Told?

- The lady whose daughter she is babysitting
- Her "aunt" (the lady she is working for
- Court

Notes:
- Assaulter has done this before to other women who worked for his step mom
- Gets justice like Indira
- Seems that the max age of these girls are 16-years old

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Brianna Christie was born in St. Anns Bay, Jamaica on June 27, 2000. Soon after, her mother and brother immigrated to the United States where she was raised in Kissimmee, Florida for the first 16 years of her life. In 2016, she moved to Wells, Maine receiving her high school diploma from Wells High School in 2018. She attended Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and graduated in 2022 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Communication. She returned to Maine and entered the Communication graduate program at the University of Maine in the fall of 2022. Brianna is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in Communication from the University of Maine in May 2024.