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Shades of Brown: I am Because We Are

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ABSTRACT

Sexual assault is an epidemic that disproportionately affects Black women. Yet, despite this reality, on a systemic level, healing after experiencing sexual assault is an issue of racial equity. Many scholars take a race-evasive, individualized, and psychological approach to healing that silence and eclipse the lived experiences of Black women. Therefore, this study acts as a counterstory to talk back to the narrative of "sameness" that pushes a White women pattern of healing and promotes the erasure of students who identify as Black ciswomen in the literature. The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore how Black college cis women engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault. The inquiry and data were approached and analyzed from a critical theoretical framework, specifically, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and Black Feminist Thought. Findings can inform scholars and education professionals to consider and center the healing needs of Black cis women.

Keywords: healing, Black women, higher education, sexual assault, trauma, Black feminist thought, intersectionality, critical methodologies

Sexual assault is an epidemic that disproportionately affects Black women. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2013), Black cis women experience greater rates of sexual assault than any other race. Despite this reality, literature examining sexual assault and healing underrepresents Black women. As a result, many researchers and practitioners base avenues of healing on the experiences of predominantly White cis women samples. For instance, existing research suggests that disclosure is critical for one to experience healing. Specifically, when there is a positive social reaction, disclosure reduces the presence of psychological symptoms (e.g., PTSD or depression symptoms; Ahrens et al., 2010; Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; Burt & Katz, 1988; Cohen & Roth,1987; Jacques Tiura et al., 2010). As a result, scholars have focused on addressing barriers to disclosure for Black women (Lindquist et al., 2016). However, this push for disclosure is problematic because the research is primarily grounded on

the experiences of White women and the assumption that healing looks the same for all women despite race (Ahrens et al., 2001; Ahrens et al., 2010; Borja et al., 2006; Bryant-Davis et. al., 2015; Cohen & Roth, 1987; Skinner, 2009; Ullman & Siegel, 1995).

Thus, the literature fails to consider how healing is nested within our social and cultural systems of privilege and oppression for marginalized humans, particularly Black cis women. For instance, researchers have found that Black women are less likely than their White counterparts to disclose their victimization to anyone (Pollard-Terry, 2004). In fact, for every Black woman who reports her sexual assault, at least 15 do not report it (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). Many Black women choose not to disclose because of historical and community pressures, hypersexualized and racial images, communal protectiveness of Black men, and White dominated crisis and professional support services, to name a few (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1990; Washington, 2001; West, 2006; Wyatt, 1992). The reality cited previously consists of gendered racist attitudes and behaviors that often lead to the victimization and revictimization of Black women survivors who disclose to others.

Thus, how do we shatter this master narrative that overlooks the impact of systems of power and instead demands space for Black women to tell us how they engage in healing without being measured by the ruler of White women's experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)? This study uplifts six counterstories to talk back to the narrative of "sameness" that pushes a White woman's pattern of healing and elevates the erasure of Black cisgender women in the literature (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterstories challenge master narratives and tell the stories of those often silenced (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As a result, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how Black college cis women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault at a private Predominately White Research institution (PWI) in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States of America. The study aimed to answer the question, "*How does healing occur among Black undergraduate cis women at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city after experiences with sexual assault? For those women who do not believe they have entered a process of healing, how do they conceptualize what healing would look like?"* This study aimed to create space for the women to define for themselves what "sexual assault" and healing mean so that a definition that centers the voices of Black women could emerge from this work. Yet, to recruit participants, definitions from limited studies on Black women were adapted to create a broad boundary for sexual assault, "any unwanted sexual contact to include but not limited to forcible touching or penetration through the use of sexual, physical, emotional, economic, or psychological coercion."

In response to the dearth of literature on Black cis women who are college students, I contextualize this study within higher education, because Black women ages 18-54 have the highest enrollment rates compared to 37% for White men, 31% for Black men, and 30% for Hispanic men (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Further, the limited literature that explores the sexual assault and healing experiences of Black college women disregards the within-group heterogeneity that impacts how Black cis women experience sexual assault and healing. As a result, this study uses Black as an umbrella term that encompasses various ethnicities (e.g., Nigerian, Jamaican, etc.) and provides participants the opportunity to explicitly define

what being Black means for them. This study not only introduces a novel sample but also intentionally creates space to examine the nuances of being a Black cis woman, highlighting how social location (e.g., intersections of identities and social domains/physical places such as family or university), shapes the experiences of race and healing across Black cis women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This work builds upon the existing scholarship on healing post-sexual assault, particularly for women. In this section, I will review the literature on healing pathways of survivors of sexual assault and highlight non-Westernized studies that suggest unique healing pathways for Black women. I will lean on the terms used in the literature, but want to emphasize that overall, this body of research overlooks the cultural and ethnic heterogeneity among Black women at the expense of comparing them to their racial counterparts (Collins, 1989).

Healing

Researchers often center literature on healing around determining factors related to an individual's psychological negative and/or positive change (Draucker et al., 2009). Therefore, identifying social support (e.g., positive or negative social reactions) and psychological (e.g., expressing or suppressing emotions or disclosure) factors associated with negative or positive change has shaped our understanding of healing from sexual assault (Draucker et al., 2009). For example, in a meta-synthesis study of 55 qualitative studies on the essence of healing from sexual violence, majority use disclosure as a measure to capture the nuance and complexity of healing from sexual assault (Draucker et al., 2009). Therefore, next, I will highlight research examining disclosure as a pathway to healing.

Disclosure as a Pathway to Healing

Disclosure and support from family and/or friends have been found to mitigate the negative effects of sexual assault and facilitate healing (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010; Ullman, Foynes, & Tang, 2010). More specifically, research shows that women survivors disclose experiences of sexual victimization at higher rates to informal support systems (e.g., friends, romantic partners) compared to formal sources (law enforcement, sexual assault crisis) (Borja, et al., 2006; Fisher et al., 2003; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Orchowski et al., 2009; Palmer & Vil, 2018). Yet, the usefulness of disclosure in healing is dependent on the social reaction of the support person (Ullman, 1999). When there is a positive reaction to disclosure in the form of tangible support (e.g., advice, resources) and emotional support (e.g., empathy and kindness), disclosure is seen as healing (Ahrens et al., 2007; Borja et al., 2006; Ullman & Siegel, 1995). For instance, many survivors express that disclosing to peers who provide a supportive space to process their emotions related to the assault helps validate their experiences (Draucker et al., 2009; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). While others who choose to seek mental health support and receive a positive response, report renewed

feelings of worthiness and decreased negative psychological symptoms (Hanson et al., 2001; Hassija & Turchik, 2016; Kunst et al., 2010; Skinner, 2009).

Yet, Caron & Mitchell (2022) found that some college survivors perceive they will receive negative responses like blame from others, humiliation, or risk their safety, thus deciding not to tell anyone about their experiences. While for other survivors who choose to disclose and receive negative reactions, they experience a heightened negative affect, sense of isolation, self-blame, and experiences with psychological trauma (Campbell et al., 2001; Ullman, 1996). The literature suggests that African American women who decide to disclose are more likely to receive negative responses from formal and informal networks compared to their White counterparts (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010). For instance, Jacques-Tiura et al., (2010) found that African American survivors received significantly more disregard (e.g., made to feel like you acted inappropriately, did something wrong, etc.) than did Caucasian survivors when they disclosed. Researchers have found that negative responses from others impact well-being more strongly than positive responses (Borja et al., 2006; Helgeson et al., 2004; Ullman, 1999; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Thus, when Black women disclose, they are more likely to receive reactions that are detrimental to their healing. The former data emphasizes how viewing disclosure as critical to healing can erase the lived experiences of Black women. Hence, this section further informed my search of the literature, and as a result, the next section will explore the silencing effect of community and sociopolitical pressures on Black women.

Black Women and (Non) Disclosure

Black women receive more negative reactions when they engage in disclosure due to experiences of gendered racism, community pressures to protect Black men, and historical and modern stereotypes (Donovan & Williams, 2002; Wallace et al., 2024; West, 2006; Wyatt, 1992; Washington, 2001). Thus, for Black women, sexual assault often functions under the space of patriarchy, discrimination, and violence based on race and gender. Even though the anti-violence movement was founded by Black women during their historical fight against racism and sexism, women who now dominate the prevention and response field are racially different and their approaches often harmful to Black women (Crenshaw, 1990). For example, Washington's (2001) study on Black women found that the majority of the participants who sought support from White dominated organizations (e.g., rape crisis agencies, shelters, etc.) were revictimized, either they were laughed at while having their bodies assessed or they overheard jokes rooted in the historical reproductive abuse of Black women.

In addition to White dominated organizations, the Black community often has a silencing effect on Black women. Over the years, a vast degree of research has expanded knowledge that identifies the impact of Black culture on sexual assault disclosure patterns of Black women. For instance, there is a collective mandate within the Black community to protect Black men, that inhibits Black survivors' disclosure (Crenshaw, 1990; Neville & Pugh, 1997; Pollard-Terry, 2004; Tillman et al., 2010; Washington, 2001). Thus, given that 85% of sexual assaults within the Black

community are intra-racial, many Black women survivors find that reporting is more harmful and would not protect Black men (Tillman et al., 2010).

On one hand, the structural racism of slavery roots this protectiveness, as Black men were falsely accused of raping White women to rationalize systematic violence against them (Crenshaw, 1990; Flood, 2005; Simmons, 2008). As a result, people often use protectiveness as a defense for Black men accused of sexual assault, even when the survivor is a Black woman (Crenshaw, 1990). Thus, Black women who disclose their experiences with sexual assault are often overlooked or ostracized by their communities (Crenshaw, 1990). On the other hand, the systemic racism laced within the legal system causes Black women to protect Black men. For instance, Black women survivors have shared that they would not want to add to "bringing the Black man down" in that he is already more likely to be incarcerated or killed by law enforcement (Washington, 2001). For other Black women survivors, such protectiveness also extends to their families. They worry that disclosing through a formal reporting process would negatively impact their families and invite more policy scrutiny (Wallace, et al., 2024).

In addition to community pressures to protect Black men and families, societal stereotypes that paint Black women as unrapable and indestructible also pose barriers to disclosure. Since slavery in the U.S., society has viewed Black women as Jezebels (modern-day portrayed as hoodrats or hoes), a stereotype that paints Black women as sexually promiscuous and was designed to legitimize and legalize their sexual assault by White men (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1990). For instance, in Wallace's et al., (2024) study, a Black cis woman survivor recounted a time when she "wore a regular shirt but didn't have a bra on. . ." When she met up with a friend in the library, he "grabbed my breasts. . .he thought just because I wasn't wearing a bra that I just wanted everyone to see my breasts or something, but it wasn't true" (Wallace, et al., 2024). The former example demonstrates, how past and present Jezebel stereotypes socialize society to view Black women as sexually available which conflicts with the dominant culture's norms of women's sexuality, which is to be modest and docile. As a result, Black women's reports of sexual assault are discredited (Crenshaw, 1990). In addition, Black women have also been stereotyped as "Strong Black Women." The matriarch stereotype originates back to the 1960s when the government reported that slavery destroyed the Black family with the reversal of gender roles (Tillman et. al., 2010). Many Black girls are socialized across generations to view themselves as indomitable – leading Black women to engage in nondisclosure because they see it as their responsibility to manage the impact of sexual assault on their own (Washington, 2001). For instance, in McMahon & Seabrook's (2020) study, 80% of the Black/African American survivors did not disclose sexual violence because they did not think what happened was serious enough to talk about, 100% believed it was a private matter to deal with on their own, and 55.6% did not want others to worry about them.

Healing Experiences of Black Women

In a review of literature on the healing experiences of women post-sexual assault, the voices and experiences of Black women are absent. In consequence, I looked to

scholarship outside of research on sexual assault and beyond the Westernized scope and understanding of research. To begin, scholars found that in place of disclosure, Black women find healing through testimonies and reclamation of one's body. Despite the silencing effect of sociopolitical factors and systems of power on the healing experiences of Black women, they engage in narrative forms of resistance through "talking back" (Taylor, 2002). hooks (1989) coined, "talking back," as "the expression of our [marginalized individuals'] movement from object to subject-the liberated voice" (p.9). With origins dating back to slavery, it is through testimony that African American women assert themselves as important parts of the world by sharing pieces of their lives that are silenced (Cody, 2001; Gates, 1991; West, 1999). Taylor (2002) found that before giving their testimony, African American survivors of domestic violence expressed feelings of shame and sadness, but after sharing their stories they felt a sense of release and freedom, that the violence no longer had power over them. Hua's (2014) article that examined feminist postcolonial texts, such as Angelou's (1970) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing,* Walker's (1982) *The Color Purple,* Mootoo's (1996) *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Danticat's (1994) *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, further demonstrated how women use written text (e.g., poetry, movies, etc.) to facilitate self-healing post sexual assault.

In addition to utilizing creative art to "talk back" and experience healing, re-claiming one's body is also a vehicle by which Black women heal. Postcolonial authors illustrate in their written texts the importance of compassionate touching of oneself to counter abusive touching and provide healing (Hua, 2014; Taylor, 1993). Self-sensual touching such as hugging and kissing oneself allows Black women the opportunity to reclaim the goodness of and gain power and control over one's body (Hua, 2014). Further, in my search for scholarship outside of research on sexual assault, I found a psychological framework created by French et al., (2020) called "radical healing" from racial trauma for People of Color and Indigenous individuals (POCI) in the United States. French et al., (2020) argues that radical healing involves critical consciousness, radical hope, strength and resistance, cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, and collectivism. They suggest that healing takes place when POCI gain heightened critical consciousness of oppressive systems which allows them to imagine better possibilities and foster hope. It is through strength, resistance, and cultural authenticity that gives and sustains POCI's hope in the face of oppression. Differently from research on healing post-sexual assault, French et al.'s (2020) argues that healing for POCI require the power of connection to one's community, in that our individual and "ethnic-specific liberation is tied between and within each other" (p.25).

Overall, a survey of the literature reveals that majority of research on sexual assault and healing involves majority White woman participants. The limited body of research that centers on the experiences of Black women fails to present their findings separately by ethnic groups, so we are unable to examine how those differences shape the ways Black women experience healing. Therefore, there remains a necessity for research on Black cis women's experiences with sexual assault and healing in college that is not measured by this "normative" process of healing that disproportionately represents the experiences of White women. In building upon the existing literature, this study utilizes a college sample of Black cis women to explore how race and

gender inform healing and to talk back to this normative narrative that all women heal the same by allowing Black cis women to tell us how they engage in healing. Further, I identify the ethnic heterogeneity of experiences among Black cis women within my data analysis and present thematic commonalities and differences with the creation of multiple counterstories.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A critical paradigm rooted in the history of the Frankfurt School serves as the lens through which this study was designed and how data was analyzed (Crotty, 1998). A critical paradigm examines societal power structures and the ways they marginalize and oppress humans (Crotty, 1998). This study rejects the objective view of healing and instead acknowledges the historical and social contexts that shape the lived experiences of Black cisgender college women. A critical epistemology serves to disrupt the master narrative that pushes disclosure as the way to heal (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). More specifically, I employed a theoretical framework that combines Critical Race Theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1990), and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1989, 2000) to guide this study.

Critical Race Theory

As a result of critical inquiry's goal to transform and emancipate all social structures that bring about oppression, many critical theories developed in connection with such movements, such as the critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado, 1995). One salient theme of CRT is the notion that racism is not a series of isolated events yet; racism is normal and permanent in America because it is deeply entrenched in the fabric of our social order (Solórzano & Delgado, 2001; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Thus, CRT scholars assert that White privilege and domination are so "ingrained in political, legal, and education structures that they are almost unrecognizable" (Taylor, 2006, p.73-74). Delgado (1989) coined the word "master narratives" to depict the placement and normalization of the dominant group's (Whiteness) reality above racially subordinated communities. In the context of education, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) CRT is guided by five tenets: 1) The centrality and intersection of race and racism 2) A challenge to dominant ideology 3) The integration of experiential knowledge 4) Transdisciplinary analyses, and 5) A commitment to social justice.

Intersectionality

One of the goals of critical race theory is to examine the relationships between race and other axes of domination. As a result, intersectionality rose as a criticism of antiracist and contemporary feminist discourses. In 1989, activist and critical legal scholar, Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as a prism by which to understand how multiple systems of subordination compound themselves to create obstacles that are often not considered within traditional ways of thinking such as antiracism and contemporary feminism (Crenshaw, 1990). Thus, Crenshaw (1990) argued that

discourses such as antiracism and feminism are inadequate in that they do not capture the intersections of patriarchy and racism.

Black Feminist Thought

In 1989, Collins introduced, Black feminist thought (BFT), which draws upon Crenshaw's (1989) prism of intersectionality. The work of African American activists such as Sojourner Truth and Ida Wells Barnett illustrated to Collins (1989) that African American women were resisting the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class subjugation and had a shared "standpoint" about the meaning of oppression. Therefore, the establishment of Black feminist thought serves three purposes: 1) Counters the dominant perspective by demonstrating that Black women hold independent and valid knowledge 2) Provides Black women a different view of themselves and the world around them 3) Empowers Black women to use their voices as tools of resistance to the compounded subordinations they experience. Lastly, Collins (2000) recognized that though historically African American women hold common experiences, their consciousness among their experiences might not be expressed in the same ways. While there are commonalities amongst Black women, there too are differences such as sexual orientation, age, and class (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) postulates that one overarching structure, called the matrix of domination, situates these different systems of oppression and comprises disciplinary, structural, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power.

METHODS

In 2020, for approximately five months, participants for this study were recruited from a private institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States using purposeful and snowball recruitment methods (Creswell, 2013). The recruitment methods included sharing the recruitment flyer digitally through listservs, university-wide newsletters, social media postings on Black and advocacy-related student organization accounts, word of mouth, and more.

I conducted two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant and collected creative documents and materials (Rose,1994). The first interview focused on the way participants make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault and encouraged reflection on their identities and culture and the second focused on their healing processes and journeys. In the first interview, students were asked to create an identity map, which is a tool that allows participants to illustrate and reflect on their social identities to conceptualize the ways they shape and inform how they make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). In the second interview, participants responded to a prompt about their healing experiences using creative art of their choice. The scholarship outlined that some Black women engage in healing by using creative art, to talk back or to help other Black women, thus the use of art as a data collection method honored this potential reality (Taylor, 2002). Further, the artistic method allowed participants to engage in storytelling, which honors the tenets of CRT because it allowed the

ciswomen to challenge the master narrative of meaning-making and healing (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In addition, each student had the option to keep a journal throughout the study to help them keep track of any thoughts or emotions that arose as they reflected on their experiences and participation in the study. To empower and create trust, participants were encouraged to generate a Black pseudonym that allowed them to name their stories and to counter the norm that often dehumanizes and overlooks Black women and their heterogeneity (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Positionality

Due to the collaborative nature of this research, reflexivity was critical; thus, I acknowledge my standpoint as a Black woman, victim advocate, and survivor of childhood sexual assault. My background cultivated space for the study participants to feel comfortable participating in the study and sharing in unapologetic ways, they felt would best express their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, my lived experiences also positioned me to take steps to ensure the study was sensitive, supportive, and human-centered (e.g., empowered them to choose the best virtual platform for them, invited to engage in breathing techniques or any techniques they use to ground themselves, provided a list of campus, local, and national resources, etc.). As a result of my positionality, I made sure to engage in heavy reflexivity, memoing, and included thick descriptions of data as counterstories to help me make meaning of and honor the testimonies of the Black women.

Participants

During the recruitment process, our world was amid a pandemic within a pandemic, where there was a global spread of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and publicized and increased incidents of anti-Black violence and racism. Therefore, many participants may have been holding and experiencing multiple forms of trauma and virtual meeting burnout as the study's site transitioned to remote learning during the time of this study. Nonetheless, six remarkable women enrolled in this study, and through vignettes taken from interviews, identity maps, and member checks with each participant, this section will introduce each of them. Some details about the women were reimagined such as majors, interests, and family members. The vignettes serve as introductions to the six counter stories that honor their humanity and their individuality.

Mama Africa

A senior in college, she is the oldest and only daughter of immigrants from a country in West Africa. As a first-generation immigrant, she grew up in a traditional West African home where, as the only girl, she was expected to take care of her loved ones, part of which included an expectation to cook for her little brothers. She embraced this responsibility and taking care of them brought her a sense of worth and happiness. In addition, Mama Africa's family prioritized marrying a rich man and

getting an education in the health, STEM, or legal fields. Thus, Mama Africa declared a major in the health field with hopes of helping others feel and look more beautiful.

Europa

She selected the pseudonym Europa to honor the African woman after whom Europe was named. Europa was raised by her mother and grandma in a mixed-lineal family structure. While in the military academy before transferring, Europa began noticing firsthand gender differences. As one of the few Black women in her academy, she faced several challenges and hardships rooted in her race and gender. Proceeding her time in the military, Europa enrolled in a private institution to study linguistic languages, human behavior, culture, and societies. Hence, Europa is intentional about the language she uses and resists the use of societal identifiers such as Black or woman and instead refers to herself using words like carbonated wombman or umelanated wombman. Thus, anytime I mention Europa's race or gender, I will center the words she uses to describe herself.

Imani

She identifies as a mixed-race Black girl from the Midwest. As a child raised by a single guardian, she and her siblings needed places to go after school, so they went to church. Imani's spiritual foundation as a Christian continues to shape her morals and values. In her hometown, she quickly learned that everyone is attracted to White women, but with Black women, they hold preconceived judgements. As a result, she is intentional about her words and actions as to not perpetuate or fit the harmful stereotypes of Black women. For example, Imani expressed that Black women are viewed as aggressive, thus when describing herself, she likes to say she is a Black girl to distance herself from the connotations associated with "Black women." Whenever I mention Imani's race or gender, I will use "mixed-race Black girl" as that is how she described herself.

Ebony Rose

A senior majoring in creative design, who compares herself to glitter, in that there are so many different sparkles and components that make her who she is. She was raised by her mother in a traditional Southern home where financially, things never came easy. However, through hard times, Ebony Rose and her mother continue to stick together. Yet inside and outside of the home, Ebony Rose expressed repeated and routine experiences where her body was controlled, policed, and surveilled, starting from being a young girl to present day. However, Ebony Rose has blossomed into a bold, brave, and funny old soul who is exploring her queerness and no longer cares what others think. Every day she gets closer to loving herself, more and more.

Alicia

She is a deep thinker and a feeler who values her spirituality. To know her is to know her beautiful, small mixed-race family including her father, mother, older

brother, nephew, and family dog. Alicia grew up far away from her extended family in the upper Midwest region of the United States. Despite the physical distance, Alicia greatly valued her family and culture and held a great sense of pride being Black and [Native American]. In knowing and coming to terms with the history of harm her community faced, Alicia described the importance of her coming to terms with the reality of how she would be treated due to her identities. Alicia finds fulfillment in helping people experience a healthy mind and body. As a senior majoring in exercise science, she aspires to improve health systems and outcomes for marginalized communities.

Angela

She is the youngest participant in this study and, as a first-generation immigrant who because of COVID-19, resided in her home country in Southern Africa at the time of the study. As immigrants from a country in East Africa, Angela's parents often moved around a lot. However, despite the varied physical homes, Angela's family is a central part of who she is, thus she finds happiness wherever they are. Though family is important to her, Angela and her traditional parents view gender roles differently, particularly as it relates to what it means to be a daughter and woman. Nonetheless, while her family expects her to be a safe space, Angela rarely experienced a safe environment, especially at her high school. As one of the few Black students in her predominantly White high school, she detailed being treated "horribly." Hence, she expressed looking forward to a new environment where she can engage in more self-exploration and build new relationships.

Data Analysis

Data was obtained from this study through individual interviews, identity maps, images of creative work, field notes, and brief analytic memos which were analyzed by extracting themes told by participants (thematic analysis) and an examination of how stories were crafted and performed (dialogue analysis) (Creswell, 2013). Data was analyzed using etic coding (e.g., Talking Back, Reclamation of One's Body, Nurturer) derived from the theoretical framework and concepts found in literature and emic coding which brought to the forefront Black cis women's meaning and experiences as described through their own words (e.g., *All Black Everything, I Got to Understand the Systems)* (Creswell, 2013). After these processes were completed, I used thematic analysis and dialogue analysis to identify themes and examine the ways participants crafted and discussed their experiences (Glesne, 2016).

FINDINGS

This section along with the final discussion, answers the research question: *How does healing occur among Black undergraduate cis women at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city after experiences with sexual assault? For those women who do not believe they have entered a process of healing, how do they conceptualize what healing would look like?* Throughout this study, I remained in collaboration and solidarity with the participants, both in dialogue, knowledge production, and

resistance; thus, in the following sections, I will use the collective "we" instead of "I." The cis women used a variety of labels for their experiences, so the first time their experiences of sexual assault are mentioned, I will include a footnote that will highlight the specifics.

Healing Definitions

This study empowered Black cis women to share how they define and engage in healing post-sexual assault. While the cis women's definitions manifested in unique ways, they centered on reaching a state of peace and self-acceptance where they validated themselves, their experiences, and/or decisions. For example, Alicia shared that peace was, "being able to see it [her experience] for what it is and not what it was in your head." As someone socialized to think that as a mixed Black cis woman, she did not have the right to a safe relationship and love was supposed to hurt; peace looked like affirming that what she experienced was wrong. Therefore, healing for Alicia was a state of peace that involved unlearning those internalized racist notions and engaging in self-validation that what she experienced was wrong.

Alicia's sentiments were echoed by both Mama Africa and Angela, who went further to add that peace was also recognizing their worth and value as Black cis women. Mama Africa specifically described healing as "I see healing as moving on. . .So I feel like I would accept like, yeah this happened. This is not a reflection on me." Throughout our time together, Mama Africa detailed being a Black cis woman who was socialized in her home to be a nurturer, as a result, she internalized that any wrongdoing of others was indicative of her failure to uphold her role as a Black woman. Consequently, when she experienced sexual assault at the hands of her roommate and her roommate's boyfriend, she viewed it as a deficiency in her and blamed herself for their actions. When defining healing, she viewed it as understanding that while she can uphold and take care of her community, they are still responsible for the decisions they make, irrespective of her care or lack thereof.

Instead of defining healing from a place of experience, Angela conceptualized it as "I think healing would bring me a peace of mind and I guess less care about how I'm being perceived by others and just kind of letting myself do my own thing. . .I think also being comfortable in my body again." On one hand, Angela was socialized in her home to be responsible for her purity, and in school was socialized to believe that White women are attractive and Black women are not, so White women experience sexual assault and Black women do not. Consequently, after her experience with sexual assault, she recounted how she criticized all aspects of herself using a ruler of Whiteness and patriarchy, which resulted in self-hatred and feelings of inferiority. Hence, as Angela conceptualized what healing looked like, she viewed it as a place of authenticity, self-love, and racial self-realization where she no longer lived under the White patriarchal gaze and instead embraced her Blackness, as defined by her. As demonstrated in this section, healing for many of the women in this study was not solely associated with the impact of sexual assault, but the impact of harm on a societal level where they are devalued, erased, and unseen. Healing involved existing in a world as their authentic selves, unapologetically without the control of external standards and gendered racial norms.

Healing Pathways

We found many, often intertwined healing methods utilized by Black cis women in this study, for example, community with Black women and body-based practices.

"Protection and Validation" (Community with Black Women)

In this study, many of the Black cis women expressed that communities with other Black women like therapists, advocates, and sorority sisters, were critical to their healing journeys. We found that collective spaces with other Black women provided an opportunity for them to reflect and analyze their experience critically and offered them an opportunity to help other Black women. For instance, Imani stated, "I'm a person who heals through talking and staff. . . I did need to be told that "I was not alone" . . .I know that she said that she faced something similar and that she had this similar process so I'm not a crazy person, I'm not by myself." Hearing her advocate, who was a Black woman, explain that she had a similar experience helped Imani position her trauma as a collective experience, which allowed her to shift the blame from her to the structural source.

Ebony Rose echoed Imani's sentiments and used a collection of pictures to illustrate her healing journey as she shared,

> I think what you can or can't see is like the way I'm approaching femininity is slightly different... I think I'm open to considering different forms of femininity, and that how you express femininity is not the same like it doesn't need to be to this White like standard. . .in the first image (Figure 1), I'm dressed up more like pearls, more really feminine.

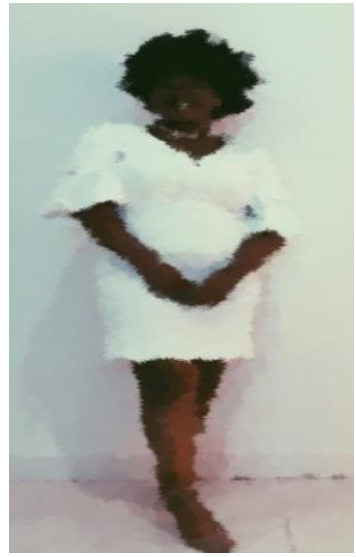

Figure 1. Picture from Ebony Rose's Collage

She went further to describe how in reality and visually she did not look into the camera and was "awkward" and "did not know what to do." Yet, when she entered therapy with a Black woman,

> I loved her so much that she was dark-skinned and super nice. And I think that's important because when I was bawling in her office every single week, I just felt warmth and like protection and just validation. Even though she didn't say anything directly. . .I just felt as a Black woman you might have gone through or had a friend. . . And that's important because I was able to open up more and to say things that I probably wouldn't say to a White therapist. . .I know that having that person to help me navigate my thoughts in a constructive way and just being vulnerable helped me get here. And without that person, I don't know if I would be able to do this, take that picture.

The collective safe space with a Black woman therapist provided her a frame of reference to not only analyze the root causes of sexual assault but also the social conditioning she internalized regarding her Black womanness. As a Black, woman, curvy, queer, and dark-skinned, having a Black therapist who was also dark-skinned was crucial to her healing as it provided her the space to analyze her experience with sexual assault, body dysmorphia, sexuality, and colorism. It seemed that the more Ebony Rose engaged in talking about her experiences and feelings in a safe and affirming environment, the more she validated herself, resulting in taking pictures where she engaged directly and confidently with the camera.

This critical reflection in spaces with other Black women was also healing for many of the other women, yet for Alicia sharing space with a Black therapist and her sorority sisters did not require her to disclose her experience. For example, Alicia specified the characteristics of her Black therapist that were critical to her healing,

> . . .I mean I don't really often trust anyone who isn't a Black woman . . . I think that's, baseline. I just don't think I would have felt comfortable allowing anyone else into my mental space. She just seemed very blunt, straight to the point, and a little bit in your face about things. And I needed that. I will talk everywhere else but at what people are asking, so I was like that's what I need . . . so she was the first person that made me sit down and realize. Wait, I don't actually want to be in this situation, but I just feel like I need to be. And she helped me learn more about my emotions in general too, just the emotion wheel, that sort of thing so I could actually pinpoint, oh this is how I'm feeling. . . even if it wasn't like having to do specifically with that [ominous experience].

As someone who grew up learning about the ways her Native tribe was mistreated due to their race, she was strategic about keeping her experiences and feelings to herself as a form of protection and strength. Thus, Alicia was considered the "strong friend" in her social network; therefore, she was used to being everything for everyone and helping others navigate hard times. Yet, having a Black woman therapist who pushed her to grant herself full access to her humanity resulted in Alicia being vulnerable to feel her feelings. Irrespective of discussing her experience, such

spaces seemed to help her realize that as a Black woman, it was possible to have trusting relationships outside of the relationship she was in, where she could have her needs met and be expressive without someone causing her harm.

Differently, other participants sought out spaces with Black women during their healing journey because they felt it would be healing for others, which in turn was healing for them. Europa explicitly noted why she wanted to share space with me, the researcher,

> So seeing that you were a young melanated woman that's trying to do research on something, I was like yeah I'll definitely support this, of course, I want to have other women heal from whatever experience I have or have women be able to read what I went through and be like, oh, you know, you shouldn't feel shitty about going through your experiences it happens and it's not because of a "you" thing it's because of a "society" thing. . .hopefully my story can help other people. . .so it's kind of like doing it for myself. It's like that Ubuntu thing: I am because we are.

Europa is a spiritual umelanated wombman who sees herself as interconnected with nature and others within her umelanated community. Throughout her healing journey, she learned the ways that racism and sexism exist and are internalized by umelanated humans and thus perpetuate sexual assault. Her participation in this study seemed to align with her purpose in life of helping others, specifically those within her umelanated community. Due to Europa's sense of connectedness, she believed by sharing a space with the researcher, she would be able to share her story and facilitate healing for her community which would inherently be healing for her.

Body-based

For some of the cis women, body-based practices were significant healing avenues as they allowed them to reclaim ownership of their bodies and affirm their right to live authentically. In this study, the cis women explored various types of body-based practices that split into two categories, showing body compassion to oneself (e.g., tattoos, breast reductions) and others treating their bodies with care and kindness (e.g., hair braiding, baths). Nonetheless, body-based practices fostered healing that was often an intertwined individual and community process.

"Solely for Myself"

Alicia, for instance, spoke about the healing impact of getting a tattoo (Figure 2),

> Um I chose my tattoo just because of, I guess the time when I got it and kind of like"what it meant to me" [lower tone]. It was like the first tattoo that I got that was solely for myself, I guess. Because my other ones have some sort of tie to someone else [family members]. . .I um get a lot of inspiration from nature. And so, sunflowers always grow towards the light, and I'm like, I don't know, it really

> resonated with me at the time. Because you know you're going through like a kind of a dark period, almost, and so you're looking for that light and trying to use that to guide you through your healing and through your process, and everything.

Figure 2. Alicia's Sunflower Tattoo

As outlined in her vignette, Alicia's family and culture are an important part of who she is, and therefore, her body is a cultural site of familial memorialization and identity. It seemed that the sunflower was a symbol of Alicia, and getting it tattooed was a way to curve herself into her family's collective narrative of strength, resilience, and hope. As someone who observed her family and friends being mistreated and silenced, she felt disclosure would lead to the same. For Alicia, getting a tattoo was an act of resistance and reclamation to validate and express herself culturally, without risking further harm. Alicia's sentiments were echoed by Mama Africa but instead of a tattoo she spoke about how a breast reduction fostered healing,

> . . .she [mom] asked me if I wanted to get it [breast reduction] even before I went to college and I was like, no "I need my boobs, I like my boobs" [high pitch mocking voice]. Yeah, now I'm just over it; I'm like, this is too much . . . it's hurting my body and it's not even positive attention that I'm even getting. We went to see a surgeon like literally yesterday and now I'm in the process of doing that . . . I'm just trying to change things about myself that will improve my better quality of life and make me happier.

As detailed in her vignette, Mama Africa grew up in a traditional West African home and was socialized to view her body for the sole use of other people, particularly her future husband and children. Throughout our interviews, she spoke about how her familial socialization was affirmed by her experience with sexual assault and, as a result, made her believe that she was only worth what she could sexually provide a man, which was her breasts. During her healing journey, Mama Africa realized that the sexual assault was not her fault nor suggestive of self-deficiency. Thus, she sought a breast reduction to shed herself of the expectations of others and do what made her healthy and happy as a Black woman.

"Never Had Anyone Touch Me Like That"

Not only did tattoos and breast reductions foster healing for the Black cis women in this study but so too did the compassionate touch of others. Europa shared,

> Being with her [Black woman friend in the military], and having her do my hair, I hadn't had that done in a while like in that intimate way, actually ever from a friend that was my age or whatever. So that kind of helped me because we're able to talk and watch movies and I told her what had happened. I felt like a will to tell her, and she was like, yeah, that happened to me before. She shared her experience and having that space to be able to trust someone in that moment and share and have her be able to share her story. It just helped me.

A couple of days after experiencing sexual assault, Europa had a braiding appointment scheduled with her Black woman friend. Unbeknownst to Europa who did not have plans to talk about what she experienced, she found that the verbal and physical aspects of hair braiding were healing for her. The process of parting, oiling, braiding, and combing were all intentional and caring acts that counteracted both the sexual assault and gendered racism she experienced in her life. Resultantly, Europa and her friend were able to build a foundation of trust and connection where Europa felt validated and heard.

Mama Africa shared similar feelings about having someone show her body compassion, more specifically a man,

> There was one time with my boyfriend where he ran a bath for me and bathed me. I instantly started crying uncontrollably and couldn't understand why, and I realized it was because I had never had anyone touch me like that.

Mama Africa shared throughout the study that a great deal of her encounters with men involved some level of unwanted touching. Therefore, when her boyfriend offered to run a bath and wash her, it was healing because it counteracted her prior experiences. More importantly, it seemed that through this consensual touch, Mama Africa realized she was a multidimensional human worth more than just her body.

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black college cis women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault at a private PWI in the Mid-Atlantic region. Evident from the data, healing from sexual assault is an individual and collective experience for Black cis women centered on reaching and sustaining a state of peace. As the Black cis women described their healing journeys, peace was obtained through learning about, remedying, and resisting the root causes of sexual assault, such as racism and sexism. Both building communities with Black women and engaging in body compassion were culturally specific practices that brought healing to Black college cis women.

DISCUSSION

The participants expressed how their Black women therapists, advocates, sorority sisters, or the researcher provided them with a counterspace that heightened their

consciousness about gendered racism and affirmed them as Black women. For instance, Ebony Rose shared how a space with a Black woman therapist was healing because not only did it increase her awareness about the root source of sexual assault, but more importantly the ways racism, sexism, and colorism shaped her self-image as a dark-skinned curvy Black woman. These findings demonstrate that healing does not exist in a vacuum, where a person addresses the psychological consequences specifically associated with the sexual assault, instead healing is holistic; it's identifying the source of the harm and resisting that source - which is consistent with French et al.'s (2020) findings on radical healing from racial trauma.

Collective spaces with Black women, specifically research interviews, were also healing for some participants when they were able to facilitate healing for other Black women. For example, Europa discussed how her decision to share space with the researcher was solely to help support the healing of other Black women. This sense of connectedness she felt with her community supported her efforts to talk back and resist through testimony - which aligns with findings from Taylor's (2002) study. This finding is also consistent with French et al.'s (2020) framework on radical healing in that collectivism fosters healing because it allows POCI, in this case, Black women to understand their experience as part of a "common collective struggle" and therefore involves a collective resistance (Ginwright, 2010, p. 63).

While some women felt the need to disclose in spaces with Black women, some did not feel the need to disclose to facilitate healing. For example, Alicia explained that it was healing having people she "actually fully trusted" and pushed her to name her human feelings because it countered oppressive views of Black womanhood and offered refuge with other Black women who valued and understood her intersectional lived experiences - aligning with the cultural authenticity and collectivism components of French et al.'s (2020) radical healing framework. Overall, the Black cis women's narratives in this study demonstrate that healing was collective and required learning and resisting the impact of oppression on how they viewed themselves, others, and made meaning of their experience. Additionally, the findings support the epistemological and theoretical framework used in this study in that Black women do not develop nor express consciousness about oppression in the same ways (Collins, 2000).

This study found that body-compassionate practices were also critical to healing because they allowed Black cis women to reclaim ownership of their bodies and develop a sense of cultural authenticity and agency (French et al., 2020; Hua, 2014). For example, in supporting and extending upon Hua's (2014) research on the healing power of compassionate touching, many of the women described how baths, hair braiding, tattoos, and breast reductions were healing. One participant shared how the sensual touching by her boyfriend (a Black man) as a means unto itself, counteracted the trauma she experienced and, most importantly, remedied the effect of racism and sexism that caused her to internalize the Jezebel stereotype. While others highlighted hair braiding and tattoos, ancestral practices rooted in their cultures. For instance, Europa shared how getting her hair braided was healing. Specifically, the physical aspects of parting, combing, and braiding were healing for Europa in that it not only counteracted the sexual assault but communicated her worth as a Black woman. According to written and oral accounts, hair braiding originates back to East and West

African cultures, where hair symbolized a women's heritage and helped them survive hunger during the transatlantic slave trade (Coleman, 2002; Dirshe, 2020; Mbilishaka, 2018). Braids have always promoted survival in African culture, and this significant finding connects and magnifies its healing power for Black cis women in college post experiences with sexual assault.

Alicia shared and described how her body was a site of cultural memorialization and dedication, and it seemed that getting a tattoo of a sunflower was healing because it allowed her to engage in resistance by culturally sharing her story. These findings align with French et al.'s (2020) argument that healing consists of returning to ancestral roots and wisdom, thus extending its application to healing after sexual assault for Black college cis women. These findings are also consistent with the work of feminist postcolonial authors who used their creative art of writing as a vehicle of healing but took it a step further by demonstrating that creative art on the body is also healing for Black cis women (Adisa, 2001; Angelou, 1970; Anzaldúa, 1999; Danticat, 1994; hooks, 1999; Hua, 2014; Mootoo, 1996; Taylor, 1993; Walker, 1982).

Lastly, this study found that breast reductions were another healing modality that allowed Black cis women to reclaim their bodies and prioritize their definition of self. One participant shared how after being in community with other Black women she realized she was worth more than her body and thus had a heightened sense of self. As a result, she decided to get a breast reduction in that it was a way for her to reclaim ownership of her body and to shred the mental and physical conditioning of racism and sexism. This finding supports French et al.'s (2020) radical healing framework in that living authentically and prioritizing self-definition is an act of resistance that facilitates healing. Furthermore, this finding, coupled with the finding on tattoos, demonstrates Black cis women healing in silence, not needing to talk about their assault, which challenges discourses that argues disclosure as healing and non-disclosure as detrimental to healing.

IMPLICATIONS

The research, cis women's experiences, and recommendations directly received from participants when asked, "What did you need to hear to help you during your healing process, and what do you want other Black women to know?" all shaped the study's implications. Firstly, our findings highlight the importance for institutions of higher education to create counterspaces for Black women to engage in healing. Counterspaces are active sites where people of color, Black women in this case, can challenge deficit perspectives, receive validation, and develop agency (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). According to the cis women in this study, counterspaces went further than simply being understood and receiving understanding regarding oppression, patriarchy, and White supremacy, but it also equipped them with tools to engage in resistance (French et al., 2020). This could take many forms, including monthly spaces for Black women (e.g., students, faculty, and staff) to talk and engage in identity development work, co-hosting events with student organizations such as hair braiding programs, or offering other creative activities such as body art or identity mapping.

The findings from our study also indicate the need for institutions to provide therapeutic services by and for Black women. In this study, participants shared that engaging with Black counselors and advocates fostered healing because it allowed them to make sense of their experiences from a systemic standpoint. However, for half of the women, such spaces were only healing when, in addition to race and gender, helping professional's identities also mirrored their ethnicity, skin tone, and spirituality. Thus, because additional layers of oppression shape healing, institutions must recognize and ensure there is diversity among the Black women counselors, advocates, etc. Yet, it is critical to note increasing the number of Black women counselors is harmful if they, too, are subject to racist and sexist campus environments. Therefore, in addition to hiring more Black women helping professionals, institutional leaders need to also engage in critical, reflective, and introspective work to ensure they, too, are culturally competent.

Lastly, the cis women's experiences also highlight the need for institutions to support the healing methods used by Black cis women financially. Institutional leaders should consider offering survivor funds that support the healing customs of Black cis women in this study, such as breast reductions, massages, hair braiding, and tattoos. However, considering that Black cis women are not a monolith, institutions should consider a no-strings-attached, survivor fund policy and a broad definition for healing practices. The former will allow them to have true access to healing avenues that are important to them and not within the confines of Westernized or "standard" understandings of healing. This study also emphasizes the need for more research on sexual assault to include art as a method of data collection, which allows for "talking back" and one's consciousness to further develop and expand during the storytelling. Future research could also examine healing for Black women by disaggregating other identities such as by Black ethnicities, sexuality, spirituality, class, etc. Additionally, this study demonstrated that healing is not the same for all cis women; thus, researchers should further explore the experiences of other women of color. Further, scholars should explore if and how time from one's experience of sexual assault (s) shapes the healing processes for Black cis women.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study aimed to explore how Black college cis women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault at a private PWI. We examined healing through a gendered and racialized lens, which is still nascent in the existing literature. Our integrated findings suggest that healing for Black cis women is rooted in culture and community, with emphasis on therapeutic spaces with other Black women and body-based modalities. Many of the women in this study associated healing not solely with the impact of sexual assault but also with the societal harm that devalues erases, and renders them unseen. Consequently, scholars, higher education policymakers, and practitioners should consider how Black cis women view healing and cultivate a campus environment where they are intentionally centered. Black women have always looked out for each other, and as a reader, it is now your turn to either take or pass the baton.

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