A Seat At The Table: Womanist Narratives of Black Mothers in Doctoral Programs

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Abstract

Often the monolithic notion of being a Black woman silences how diverse groups of Black women experience the academy and dissertation process, especially those who are pursuing the doctorate while mothering. This paper focuses on the narratives of three Black women, who share how their racial, gender and mothering identities, and roles associated with these identities, affected their journey to the doctorate. This work is shaped by Womanist Theory, and the researchers use methodological tools centered on Black women, such as Sister-to-Sister talks (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett, 2003). Participants share how the intersection of their identities informs their research agenda, and why their commitment to completing the doctoral journey was fueled despite the challenges each experienced.

Overview and Background

Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) define Sister-to-Sister talks as an Afrocentric slang to describe congenial conversations or constructive exchange about life lessons shared between Black women. This study was prompted by Sister-

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to-Sister talks amongst the authors and their peers who were also Black women. In the midst of these exchanges we came to the realization that motherhood bound us to one another. As a result, we forged a unique collective focused on navigating the doctoral socialization process, and ultimately surviving and thriving as Black women in the academy. The insight gained during these conversations prompted us to examine the experiences of Black mothers in doctoral programs.

Black women who opt to pursue a doctorate must often decide whether we will be true to our nature, our spirits, and our community or if will we pick up the master's tools, and wear a mask (hooks, 1993). Many do not discuss the trauma that Black women engaged in the doctoral and dissertation process endure. However, as we address the trauma that is happening to us at the hands of agents of the state it is equally important for Black women to shed light on the trauma experienced in the academy. Each of the participants pursued doctorates at different institutions and had unique experiences and challenges. The degrees or the pursuit of the degrees were steeped in overcoming various barriers. It is through highlighting these barriers that we aim to identify systematic injustice and oppression that few discuss in the public sphere.

The super-myth that Black women are excelling at higher rates than their male counter-parts reproduces hegemonic and sexist ideals about the Black woman. Several scholars argue that Black women in the academy have unique experiences, and despite higher numbers of Black women enrolled in degree programs, social attitudes create (and recreate) racist and gendered microaggressions (Collins 2000; Rollock, 2011; Rogers 2014; Sealey-Ruiz; 2007; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, Solorzano, 2009). However, research regarding Black women in higher education largely examines the undergraduate experience. Literature concerning the experiences of Black women in graduate school is sparse, and research pertaining to the experience(s) of Black mothers in graduate school and doctoral programs is relatively non-existent. There is an overwhelming need to address the invisibility of Black mothers in doctoral programs. The role of Black mothers is compounded with intersections of sexual orientation, relationship status, ethnic identity, and class. Such a multi-layered existence demands a more unique approach to inquiries regarding socialization in academic spaces, and how it continues to marginalize and foster racist ideologies about Black women.

An examination of the Black mother's experience in doctoral programs highlights the ways in which Black women disrupt the status quo. This work illuminates the sexist, gendered, and racist attitudes embedded in the doctoral socialization process, specifically at predominantly white institutions. We have vowed to dismantle these ideologies as we frame and develop our research agendas.

Scholarly Significance

During the past several decades, a number of demographic shifts have resulted in more women and people of color enrolling in and completing doctoral programs

(Offerman, 2011). Women now receive nearly half of all doctorates, and within group data indicates that Black women acquire almost 70% of the doctorates conferred to Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). While there is an increase in women pursuing and obtaining doctoral degrees, they have lower retention rates in comparison to their male colleagues (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Attrition research has found that many women leave for personal reasons like marriage and children (Gardner, 2008). Further, in examining time to degree completion in a doctoral program, family issues like childcare and marriage prevent women from finishing early (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004). Other challenges include a lack of mentoring and socialization and little or no access to research opportunities (Ellis, 2001; Patton & Harper, 2003). Not surprisingly, women, and Black women in particular report lower levels of satisfaction with and commitment to their doctoral programs than their male and white counterparts (Ellis, 2001). Collins (2000) asserts that women of the African Diaspora can be defined or categorized in two ways: as individuals who have unique lived experiences, and as a subgroup within a marginalized population. Due to the historical objectification and exploitation of Black women, non-Black individuals tend to make damaging stereotypical assumptions about us. This informs behaviors and judgments, which then informs the lived experiences of Black women. All of the aforementioned serve as the impetus for this work, which centers Black women in the academy, and Black mothers in particular.

Points of Reflection

This work aims to shed light on how:

• Black women make sense of the socialization that takes place in doctoral programs.

• Black mothers navigate the complexities of being both a mother and an academic.

• Black mothers create and sustain mechanisms of support during their doctoral journey.

• The sharing of narratives transform/influence the experiences of Black mothers in doctoral programs.

Theoretical Inspiration: Womanism

Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

—Alice Walker

Alice Walker's multiple definitions of the term "womanism" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, sheds light on why many Black women prefer the term womanism to Black feminism. Walker offers two contradictory meanings of

womanism. On the one hand, Walker clearly sees womanism as rooted in Black women's concrete history in racial and gender oppression. On the other hand, this term, taken from the Southern Black folk expression of mothers to girl children "you acting womanish," suggests a womanist worldview accessible primarily and perhaps exclusively by Black women. Womanish girls acted in outrageous, courageous, and willful ways, attributes that freed them from conventions that had been long limiting white women. However, womanish girls wanted to know more and in greater depth what was considered good for them. They were responsible, in charge, and serious.

Despite her disclaimer that womanists are "traditionally universalist," a philosophy invoked by her metaphor of the garden where room exists for all flowers to bloom equally and differently, Walker simultaneously implies that Black women are somehow superior to white women because of the Black folk tradition. Defining "womanish" as the opposite of "frivolous, irresponsible, not serious," Walker constructs Black women's experiences in opposition to those of white women. This meaning of womanism sees it as being different from and superior to feminism—a difference allegedly stemming from Black and white women's different histories with American racism. Walker's much cited phrase, "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (1983, p. 12) clearly seems designed to set up a comparison where Black women are "womanist" while white women remain merely "feminist." As womanists, we intentionally approach this work with courage and seriousness, as it provides a much-needed focus on the intricacies of the academic and psychosocial experiences of Black mothers in doctoral programs. Like womanish girl children, we want to know more and in greater depth what is considered good for these women, and for us. Our identification as womanish allows and encourages us to be accountable for ourselves, and the women with whom we have ancestral bonds.

Building on the groundbreaking works by Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and other Black women who "broke silence" in the 1970s, Black women in the 1980s and 1990s developed a "voice," a self-defined, collective Black women's standpoint about Black womanhood (Collins, 1990). We are committed to sustaining this tradition. In this paper all three participants offer themselves as a Black woman in a predominantly white arena. Their stories are unique but blend at intersections and then spread out into individual tributaries, which mimic the experiences of Black women and Black mothers in the academy. There are spaces of togetherness and spaces of utter aloneness. The purpose is to highlight these stories and offer possibilities to create more spaces of togetherness and support.

Methods

The three women who took part in this study came together through a personal network of Black mothers who had engaged in the doctoral completion process.

We used a blended ethnographic and narrative approach for this work, and felt this was necessary to share personal and reflective analyses as a means to illuminate participants' experiences. Using ethnographic research methodology permitted us to honor the narratives that are needed in contemporary literature pertaining specifically to the cultural diversity of Black women, and their experiences in higher education. Utilizing narrative inquiry also allowed us to primarily focus on participants' experiences. However, the narrative approach permitted an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which participants' experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This hybrid methodological approach permitted us to deeply consider race/ethnicity, gender and parental status, the intricate ways in which they intersect, and how they create a distinct experience that must be centered in research regarding Black mothers engaged in the doctoral completion process.

We approached this work fully aware of participants' need to process and make sense of the academic, familial, social and cultural experiences that took place during their doctoral journeys. During the course of a year participants shared their perspectives publicly, and consistently connected via telephone and in private group chats on social media. Thus, the conversations and narratives took on different forms. The women wrote and read one another's individual stories and discussed them. They also took notes and recorded conversations to capture moments shared together. They chose to sit down with one another because they recognized common themes amongst themselves and wanted to explore and process their lived experiences in person. "The Table," the setting described in this piece, is based upon one moment throughout an on-going data collection period. This is deep personal work; therefore, a safe and transformative space emerged between the participants, who were three women that engaged in the doctoral completion process as Black mothers. The authors transcribed their conversation using the pseudonyms Toni, Alicia, and Maya, and all the themes that emerged as central to their stories were used to create a unified story. The personal narratives, notes and recorded conversations, and themes served as the authors' data set.

The Table

If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.

—Shirley Chisholm

It took four months of planning to finally bring the three women together. For over a year they spoke on the phone and met virtually. They shared narratives via email and online. However, all three women had not met in person until this day. They gathered at Toni's home on the far end of Brooklyn. "Where exactly are we? What part of Brooklyn is this?" Alicia asked once we were all seated and present. With a bit of awe, and more than a modicum curiosity, Alicia posed these questions as if this haven was somewhere that no map or coordinates had discovered. Toni

replied with a hint of annoyance in her voice. After all, since welcoming the other two women into her home she had already responded to this inquiry twice. However, as a newcomer to the space, there was something warm, sacred, and affirming about it. For Maya, it made the four and half hour drive from her home worth it. For Alicia, the train and bus journey was worthwhile as well. The warmth radiating from Toni's home came from the Caribbean colors on the walls. We all sat at a large circular wooden table in the dining room, and placed a recording device at its center. The day began with several cups of tea, which were made after Toni pulled out a seemingly endless array of boxes and bags. We quickly became engrossed in their stories, but eventually emerged from the light- and full-hearted conversation to order Chinese food. In the hours that followed there were more cups of tea—a consistent warming agent that helped buffer the chilling outside temperature, and accompaniment to a day full of conversation.

The pitter-pattering of Toni's daughter's feet above us as we spoke–a young girl child present–reminded us of our journey. From time to time we would notice her watching us, as we had watched our mothers, aunties, and friends gathering around the kitchen table during girlhood. It brought back memories, and all of us at the kitchen table (re)created a historical, then spiritual place. Maya noted that she could not recall the last time she had seen such a piece that resonated with her. Being seated at a round table evoked a spirit of African-ness that despite our diverse ethnic identities, reinforced the connections and lineage of our lived experiences as Black women and Black mothers in the academy, America, and the world. This made each of us feel at home. The table symbolized no head or beginning—just a cycle, or continuation of our legacy, energy, and work as Black women, and as Black mothers in the academy.

Setting the Table

Kitchen table conversations are commonplace amongst Black women, and they tend to happen in the company of family and close friends. This was illustrated when all three participants confirmed feeling "safe enough" to sit at The Table and talk about what they couldn't openly discuss in public. They described it as being able to "take off their masks," and speak freely about the world outside. Two of the women, Toni and Maya were undergraduates together, and reconnected through social media when Maya realized that Toni was also pursuing a doctoral degree. In the interim, a prominent Black woman scholar introduced the third participant, Alicia, to Maya at a women's writing retreat. Maya then introduced Alicia and Toni. All three women agreed that they have served as a pillar of support and force of affirmation for each other ever since.

While at The Table with the three women, the authors listened for shared experience(s). During these moments, the women often provided both confirmation and affirmation with phrases such as "Amen!" and "Ain't that the truth!" A great

deal of laughter and tears also expressed their recognition of a connection. During several points in the conversation, the women described how each experienced raising one or multiple children at various stages in their lives. For example, Toni entered her doctoral program with a toddler and an 8-month-old. Maya had a child who was in the first grade at the beginning of her doctoral journey. At the time Alicia started her program her two children were in elementary school, and she had recently moved to the United States.

There was also variation with regard to each woman's familial status. Toni, who is married, lived and studied in her home city. Her in-laws and parents were present and a great source of support. Maya chose to pursue her doctorate in the Midwest—12 hours from her family. She co-parented with her son's father in the same city throughout her coursework; however, due to relocations (on both their parts), Maya mothered as a single full-time parent throughout her dissertation process. Alicia was a single mother throughout her entire journey. As a result, her children's formative years were largely spent on the university's campus.

The women noted that the meeting happened because Black women, their mentors, "critical badass sistahs," reminded them that they are brilliant and capable, and not "in this alone." They all stated that they were encouraged to bond with other *sistah-scholars* to create together, and help "bring each other along." As they sat around the circular table, the room became a spiritual space—each woman acknowledging a shared or common thread. While discussing and processing how they were connected, three themes emerged. They include the prevalence of racial and gendered encounters, managing motherhood and relationships, and the importance of mentorship and affirmation. The analysis weaves together the individual voices of the women to create a manifestation of what they learned about themselves and one another as they engaged in critical reflections.

Naratives: The Women Speak

Racial and Gendered Encounters

> The racism and sexism that persists within the walls of the academy is a pure reflection of the dealings that Black women experience in society.
>
> —Maya

Despite the growing number of Black women in doctoral education programs, many suffer from racial battle fatigue (Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez, 2011; Rollock, 2011). This refers to the emotional, psychological and physiological distress racially marginalized groups are often subjected to, and the amount of energy they expend coping with the fight against racism (Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011). Racial battle fatigue is particularly applicable to Black women, who are often burdened with managing multiple roles (e.g., mother, caretaker, provider, etc.), while working in environments steeped in White-Anglo traditions and ideals. Participants spoke

at length about having to "separate" their identities, or "conform" if they were in a specific context. Although they asserted that this was tiring, they noted that dealing with racial micro-aggressions was especially burdensome. The women noted that microaggressions, or repeated exposure to subtle and covert racial slights (Sue et al., 2007), were quite prevalent. For example, white students often questioned and expressed their surprise at how articulate, well rounded, or educated they were. In some instances, white classmates became hostile. Toni shared how a white woman continuously "fought" her in the classroom:

> She spent the entire semester battling with me. This may seem like hyperbole, but she literally had a response for every comment I made and went out of her way to critique my opinions. I did not initially take it personally, but one day another white classmate approached me in the elevator and noted that she had observed it as well. At that moment I thought back to the beginning of the semester. The war-monger had cornered me in the stairwell, and told me I was 'really smart.' It became crystal clear. She was jealous, probably racist, and apparently under the assumption that dumb [Black] people were being admitted into doctoral programs.

Toni stated that the conflict made her "tired." Maya agreed, and then responded, "That is the impact of racial battle fatigue."

According to the women, dealing with an assessment of their writing ability was also challenging, as it often came across as racially charged. Maya expressed a belief that "our writing is never good enough because we can't write in our own voice." Interestingly, she also stated that sharing narratives (in ways similar to what she was engaging in with both Toni and Alicia) would allow others to "see where they are coming from," and "view them differently." All three women agreed that they struggled with the writing process during their journeys, and stated that although academic rigor is common in doctoral programs, they often received feedback that was blatantly cruel. As a result, they would regularly question or doubt their progress. Two of the women—Alicia and Maya—openly admitted that it was a "tough topic" to discuss because being told "you aren't good enough" or "you are going to struggle" hampered their motivation. Alicia shared the following, which details what happened after an interaction with a white faculty person:

> I remember meeting with her one day where she was trying to convince me to leave the program because she said my writing would never even allow me to be awarded a Master's degree. I felt humiliated, downtrodden and so uncared for that I literally took two online classes for the next full academic year. No one asked about me, no one inquired as to whether I needed any kind of support. Nothing.

Alicia highlighted the isolation that many Black students in doctoral programs endure, which Maya described as feeling "like you don't belong in their world." In and of itself, "feedback" can be a microaggression. It was not uncommon for the women to assert that conversations with faculty made them feel unprepared and unworthy. Maya stated, "One faculty member told me her parents made her find

errors in the *New York Times* growing up, so she grew up learning how to write at home." Such an interaction, which made Maya question her own upbringing, could cause Black students to believe that both their families and communities failed them. Indeed, Black students in predominantly white spaces tend to suffer from physiological, psychological and behavioral stressors intermittently (Collins, 2000; bell hooks, 1993; Smith et al., 2011). To protect themselves, Maya stated, Black students stifle their own voice and take on another—typically a Eurocentric one. Ironically, this results in the continued suppression of their identity.

Toni, Maya and Alicia all referred to "repeated intellectual battles" with their male counterparts. They were particularly troubled however, by what they perceived as unfair treatment by Black men in academic spaces. Alicia explained that it was not uncommon for the accomplishments of Black students and faculty who were women to go unnoticed, while the institution highlighted the scholarly achievements of Black men. "There was this one Black professor. He won an award and was all over the website. What about the Black woman who won an award too? She has done… is doing amazing work. He basked in it. He could've found a way for her to be acknowledged as well." Maya confirmed that she had witnessed similar occurrences, but also explained that an internal conflict may take place when Black women are slighted by Black men in academic spaces. "There are moments when we are cut by their actions and words, and we feel that we have to take it in stride because we don't want to publicly discuss or engage in conversation in front of 'company'." Toni expressed her belief that this protection is not always reciprocated:

> One of the most impactful experiences I had while in my program transpired during the first time I publicly presented my scholarly work. At the conclusion of my lecture, I was confident the presentation went well. I received accolades, but the very last comment… the only negative comment came from a Black male student, who stated that although I explained why my research is important to the field of higher education, the presentation would have 'been stronger' had I discussed its applicability to students in the K-12 sector, and that 'I needed' to look at this area of education. I was stunned. We were the only two Black students present, and in a moment when he could have supported my work—this man—this Black man—chose to criticize me. I remember thinking, 'Is he serious?'

Another point of agreement amongst the women was when Maya asserted, "Black women do all the 'heavy lifting' with little or no reward." Maya described feeling shocked and betrayed when a Black male colleague supported a Black male student who attempted to poach her scholarly work and dismiss her intellectual abilities:

> The experience was unbelievable. You expect this from them but not my male counterparts! Nothing prepares you for the battles that happen between us [Black men and women]. The brother was co-opting my style… on my back. This happens I suppose, but as women who spend time away from our families, and sacrifice to create this work…

> we have to find ways to fight back. So I didn't publically address the behavior, but I did pull the brothers aside and had intentional conversations with them.

Maya's decision to "pull the brothers aside" illustrates the covert behavior many Black women engage in when they confront Black men about gender-based slights. Also noteworthy, is the participants' opinion that Black women contend with invisibility on the basis of both race and gender. Each woman expressed that academic spaces often operate in ways that prioritize the scholarly endeavors of men and white women. "It is important to understand that Black women operate in a very unique space," stated Toni. "We are in academia dealing with racism, and a great deal of gender-based challenges too." Maya agreed, and explained why she believes Black women overwhelmingly contend with an interesting intersection of 'racial and gendered battle fatigue':

> Black women silence ourselves when Black men attack us. It is not because we are incapable of engaging in prolonged discussions or defending our ideas… it is more so because we feel the discussion shouldn't happen in front of the 'company.' However, the irony is that they repeatedly commit these offenses or address us in ways that publically marginalize us… and our contributions.

Managing Motherhood and Relationships

> Sometimes you plan what happens and then sometimes you just have to wing it.
> —Toni

Each participant began their doctoral program with children, but were mothering at different stages. The women explained that they often had to 'wing it,' because there is no official manual regarding how one should mother while engaged in the doctoral process. Because of differences in relationship status, the women had varied experiences. During their journey, Toni was married, but both Alicia and Maya separated from significant others. They openly admitted that they had to manage multiple responsibilities, which led to making sacrifices. Alicia stated, "I didn't start cooking again until after I defended." This drew laughter from Toni and Maya who agreed, and also stated that besides coordinating meals, they oversaw their children's academics and extracurricular activities. Maya noted that she believes Black mothers live up to additional expectations:

> Racist and sexist systems in this country create added stress. Black mothers have to find inner strength to press on. We have to survive and thrive… model for our children how to manage the extra load.

There were several moments when each woman openly discussed the importance of family throughout the doctoral process. Toni's parents and in-laws assisted her with rearing her children, as they knew their help would be an integral part of her ability to complete the program. And while Maya was no longer in the same city as her family, she received a wide range of emotional and spiritual support

from them. Alicia, whose ties to her family also remained strong, explained that for many Black mothers pursuing a doctorate, going back to the place where you feel safest is often a necessity. She shared:

> When my marriage fell apart, my parents spoke to me on the phone. My father was adamant that I come home. 'Bring the boys home,' he said. My mom grabbed the phone and asked me if I wanted my PhD. I said I did and she said, 'Then stay… whatever it takes… stay and finish this. Don't let him win. Don't let him break you. Follow your dreams and goals.'

Their approaches were different, but in that moment the both of Alicia's parents were trying to protect her, or keep her safe. Interestingly, Toni and Maya received similar advice from their own mothers when the pressure of balancing their academic and personal lives became overwhelming. Maya stated, "There are moments when only our mothers can save us, and offer us a perspective that becomes a resounding theme throughout the experience."

Although their family and friends understood and appreciated the significance of a Black woman acquiring a doctoral degree, each woman had to spend time educating their loved ones about the dedication it took to complete the program. They often took "short-cuts," which were difficult for their families to process. Toni explained:

> Once, my mother-in-law told me to 'go change into appropriate clothing' after showing up for my daughter's birthday party and noticing my attire… a t-shirt and sweatpants. That was closely followed by a tense exchange with my mother who wanted to know why I decided to order food for the party instead of 'cooking it myself.'

Maya had similar experiences with her mother, who regularly reminded her that her son should always "come first," even if it meant not using her time in the most effective ways. All the women stated that while pursuing their doctorate they had two committees. The first determined the quality of their academic work, but the second, a family committee, evaluated and critiqued their mothering. Yet, they noted the irony of being first-generation scholars raised in families with Black women who routinely made sacrifices. Maya shared why she thought it was unfair for their families to not understand what they were going through:

> When times get stressful as first-generation scholars, we want our families to recognize we are working our asses off, and they beat us up... However, the entire [doctoral] process is a Eurocentric idea and construct, and families of African descent place value and emphasis on community and participation in community. The notion 'I am because we are' centers and guides our engagement. Therefore, we are able to be doctors or aspiring doctors because our mothers and their mothers sacrificed. They actually mothered in a specific way that allowed us to focus on schooling and avoid specific pitfalls… but they don't understand that.

The amount of time dedicated to their degree programs impacted participants'

close relationships in other ways. Toni recalled drastically reducing the amount of quality time she spent with her husband. "I poured that energy into completing my program," she stated. Maya and Alicia also noted that the personal growth they experienced during their journey encouraged them to reduce or cease their interactions with people who were once close to them, but no longer "for them." In many instances, this included both family and friends. It was common for the women to express that they could not "afford" to add any more stress to their lives.

The women at The Table also discussed their experiences creating or sustaining relationships in academic spaces beyond the classroom, and expressed that being a mother consistently "stood out." Toni stated that her interaction(s) with other doctoral students at conferences frequently resulted in feelings of self-doubt and insecurity. Many of her peers were working on projects that required them to travel, and were also able to move from one location to another with their advisors. Because of her familial situation (as both mother and wife), she was primarily stable. Toni often wondered if her work was as significant as theirs, or if her experience was as well rounded. She stated that for many mothers, feelings of self-doubt and insecurity also manifest during conferences because they are spaces overwhelmingly focused on academics (i.e., research and publication) and leave little or no opportunity for those who balance the roles of both mother and academic to discuss or process their experiences. "I often felt as if it was taboo to mention my 'other' life," she said. Toni also expressed that conference spaces were isolating because although Black scholars were present, there were very few Black women and virtually no Black mothers. Toni would be "anxious" to get back home to "escape" the loneliness of rarely having individuals present that she could relate to. However, she also stated, "In retrospect, I wonder how many other Black mothers were in these spaces… how many of them were thinking and feeling just like me."

For Alicia, the financial toll of being a single mother was most salient. She explained:

> When my colleagues spoke about their presentations I just felt more isolated and alone. No one knew that at this point I could not afford to attend conferences. I was living below the poverty line with my kids and the department did not provide any compensation to attend... at least not enough for a single mother raising two kids by herself.

Maya also stated that the financial costs associated with conference travel were most burdensome. Throughout her doctoral program, she shared rooms with colleagues, and divided costs. All the women expressed that not being able to travel to conferences (due to familial or financial reasons) is particularly challenging because the doctoral socialization process demands that you attend them. It also requires students to create knowledge that will be shared with those who can benefit from their work. This results in chunks of time being mentally, emotionally, and physically disconnected from loved ones. In fact, participants explained that even when they were with

their families, their minds were usually elsewhere. It was not uncommon for them to struggle with feelings of guilt, and stress. Toni described this in-depth:

> The doctoral process is unfamiliar to most people, and even more foreign to many children. My children regularly asked if I was still 'working on that paper.' Understandably, they couldn't comprehend why I was unable to spend a few hours at the park, or accompanying them to the movies. I often joke that for my children, the best part of 'dissertating' was the fact that they ate a substantial amount of pizza rolls and popcorn shrimp—two of their favorite foods. The worst part however, was coming to terms with the fact that I didn't spend as much time with them as a mother probably should. I still struggle with that guilt, and have decided to share my narrative because somehow, I believe it will compensate for the sacrifices I made while in the program.

Toni, Maya and Alicia all agreed that the doctoral process does not recognize the demands of mothering, and often made them feel like they had to choose either their children or their program. Maya noted that not "choosing" her child could make him more susceptible to systemic oppression and violence. For example, after moving to a predominantly white neighborhood with her son, Maya decided that her mothering identity had to come first, particularly when he began to get older, and white teachers started to target him. "I had to be there for him," emphasized Maya. Toni and Alicia–both of whom shared this sentiment–also felt compelled to "be there" for their children and shield them from societal harm. All three women were adamant that they did not "choose," but "figured it out." Maya stated, "Choosing one over the other was not an option. I want to be clear that our point is that we are challenged in unique ways and we had to figure out how to center and anchor ourselves in our work without sacrificing our children."

While each woman discussed challenges faced while pursuing a doctoral degree, they all stressed the importance of Black mothers embracing the journey, finding ways to seize joy, and understanding very early on that each of their identities has different demands. They noted that failure to do so can "kill the spirit." Maya shared the following:

> As Black women and mothers it is relationships—familial and romantic—that make navigating the doctoral process either smooth and seamless or chaotic and uncontrolled. However, this is where the beauty and fearlessness that we attribute to Black women comes in. Your brown soul and body may be battered and bruised. You may be barely standing. But then you hear your children come through the door and you get yourself together. You begin your routine.

Mentorship & Affirmation

> Had it not been for my Black female advisor, I would never have completed my doctorate. Despite her being diligently and violently traumatized by her own colleagues in the department, she managed to support and metaphorically drag me through the process.
>
> —Alicia

Toni, Maya and Alicia all discussed the role of mentorship in their respective journeys. Toni explained that she was fortunate enough to receive mentorship from two women whose academic careers had already been established. They helped her set goals and mold her professional aspirations. Toni's mentors were also "very open" about race- and gender-based challenges she would likely encounter, but provided her with insight about how to navigate them. Maya and Alicia echoed this sentiment. Yet, unlike Toni they received mentorship from the Black women who served as chairs of their dissertation committee. Both Maya and Alicia spoke about having direct access to someone who was willing to "hear them," and had first-hand knowledge about where they "were coming from." While at The Table, Maya recalled her conversations with Toni and Alicia, and described their mentors by stating the following:

> The mentors we had challenged us. But they also showed us love and care and listened when life felt heavy... They helped us find spaces to emotionally heal and then sent us on our way to write. They made us believe that the world was our canvas… led us and pushed us out there. They told us who to connect with and where to be. They helped us figure out how to navigate this journey.

Alicia explained that she was pleasantly surprised when her mentor approached her at a conference. "She asked how she could support me, and within a week, was the chair of my dissertation committee." If she was not "found" by her mentor, Alicia asserted she would not have completed the program. Her chair provided an invaluable amount of support and guidance. Toni, whose relationships with her mentors became stronger during the dissertation process, similarly explained, "Ultimately, I crossed the finish line because I was lucky enough to have women who saw more in me than I saw in myself."

Each woman identified their mentors as individuals who "pushed" them in ways they would not or could not push themselves. They also noted the significance of having mentors that were equally concerned with their academic and personal lives. Maya expressed that it is particularly important for Black mothers in doctoral programs to have mentors who understand the importance of family and children. This is because in the academy one's performance is often assessed based upon a single, white, male-dominated construct. Alicia noted that it is important for mentors to realize that Black mothers engage in the doctoral process to better their lives, and the lives of their children.

When asked about relationships outside of mentoring, all three participants stated that their connections to *sistah-scholars* were a vital part of their journey. These Black women, all at different stages in the doctoral process, and many of whom are mothers, serve as a source of strength and inspiration, and provide advice, as well as solace and support. They buffered feelings of isolation, and encouraged the women when they believed their work was inadequate. Most importantly, they made what they were engaged in "feel real." *Sistah-scholars* were living examples

of who Toni, Maya and Alicia wanted to be, and what they wanted to contribute to this world. Toni's sistah-scholars, including Maya and Alicia, would often state, "Girl, if I can do it, you can too!"

Toni, Maya and Alicia expressed that it takes a special type of mentoring to keep Black mothers in, and get them through a doctoral program. They discussed the importance of being guided by those whose ways of knowing and doing are grounded in Afrocentric ideals. Maya described the significance of her mentor baby-sitting her child by noting that such an act is largely tied to the collectivistic nature of communities throughout the African diaspora. Toni explained that her mentors consistently stressed an obligation to "lift as you climb." This refrain guides much of the work Alicia's mentor engages in with Black women who are new to a career in academia. Overall, each woman agreed that no matter what their professional ambitions are, Black mothers who embark on the doctoral journey need mentors that can guide them academically and personally. Alicia further explained:

> We trusted their guidance and clung to them. These relationships were not all rosy, but they were consistent and reliable. I am fortunate… and have found myself ready to offer advisement and encouragement to other Black women… to Black mothers in the academy.

Discussion

Toni, Maya and Alicia all identified the doctoral journey as an experience rife with encounters rooted in both racism and sexism. Each woman had to frequently contend with stereotypical notions when they voiced dissent (e.g., the "angry Black woman"), and had their intellectual abilities and research interests questioned on a regular basis. In addition, it was not uncommon for their views regarding race and racism to be challenged. Besides a multitude of negative race-based incidents, participants explained that their gender often made them the target of caustic remarks, hostile behavior, and even academic or intellectual theft. Their experiences validate the supposition that Black women occupy a unique space—one where both race and gender contribute to their marginalization.

All three women had distinct doctoral journeys that were primarily shaped by the intersection of their racial identities and gender, but parental status as well. While their families appreciated and supported the pursuit of a doctoral degree, they often had to educate their loved ones about the dedication that is crucial to completion. This caused tension, as each woman expressed that it was difficult for family members to accept their preoccupation with writing and research, and emotional or physical absence. Thus, familial encouragement of the endeavor was apparent, but so was a lack of understanding. This was exacerbated by an academic culture that seemingly forced the women to choose between their children and their course of study. Nevertheless, they rose the occasion, and their sacrifices became strategic. Toni, Maya and Alicia became more adept at learning how to

manage multiple responsibilities. This suggests that Black mothers who complete the doctoral degree journey must actively engage the process with resiliency and resistance.

Each participant expressed that a lack of opportunities to communicate or process their experiences (as a Black woman, mother or academic) resulted in feelings of frustration and/or isolation. However, all three women derived support from relationships with sistah-scholars, or other Black women throughout academia—many of whom are mothers that were pursuing, or recently obtained doctorate degrees. Because these relationships were symbiotic, both the women and their *sistah-scholars* were able to reap the benefits. Toni, Maya and Alicia also noted that besides their *sistah-scholars*, they had minimal access to women with a similar background and/or comparable challenges. Mentors were a notable exception, and credited with "pushing" them, and ensuring that they had realistic expectations about what it means to be an academic. In addition, mentors provided wisdom about Black womanhood and Black motherhood, and served as role models. All three women agreed that their ability to navigate a doctoral program while mothering was the result of having mentors who recognized their intellectual abilities, passion, and commitment, and encouraged them to remain motivated. This was frequently described as going "above and beyond." It was not uncommon for mentors to offer a safe space for the women to be emotionally vulnerable before providing them with advice and reassurance. These narratives indicate that for Black mothers, support and guidance from a mentor can be crucial to their completion of the program. It is no wonder why participants stated, "We salute them."

Implications

Throughout the past few decades, wide-ranging perspectives have emerged to describe Black doctoral students' experiences and socialization (Gay 2004; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004; Nettles, 1990). Yet, beyond a few noteworthy exceptions (Grant & Simmons, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Patton, 2009; Turner & Thompson, 1993), very little research has focused on Black women engaged in doctoral study. And an extensive review of the literature as well as data recorded by the National Center for Education Statistics reveals a significant gap regarding Black mothers pursuing the doctorate. Indeed, most areas of study focused on mothering in the academy does so in general (racial) terms, and fails to mention or pay adequate attention to the specificity of mothering while Black.

In 2015, 12% of the Black students enrolled as undergraduates in the nation's colleges and universities were Black men, and 15% were Black women. For post-baccalaureate study these numbers were 11% and 16%, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016c). In addition, Black men acquired about 6% of the doctoral degrees conferred in 2015, while Black women received more than 10% of doctorates awarded that year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b).

These figures suggest continued growth in the amount of Black women pursuing doctoral degrees, and likely, an increase in Black mothers. In spite of this, there has not been a consistent effort to study, and shed light on either group. However, research has shown that many Black doctoral students do not refer to their programs as supportive of their research agendas and academic endeavors, and often perceive their campus climates as racially hostile (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). Black doctoral students are also less likely to have access to adequate mentoring opportunities (Blackwell 1989, 1991), and more likely to enter doctoral programs less prepared than their White counterparts (Pruitt, & Isaac, 1985). Furthermore, scholars have noted that for many women in doctoral programs, familial matters such as childcare and marriage extend their time to degree completion, serve as the primary reason why they do not persist, and may even dissuade them from pursuing an academic career (Gardner, 2009; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Quinn & Litzler, 2009). Yet, research that highlights the ways in which Black women's doctoral status intersects and interacts with their race, gender and parental status is scarce. While the experiences of Black men in the academy are unique, so too are the experiences of Black women, particularly those who are mothers.

Given the value of relationships such as those forged amongst sistah-scholars, programmatic efforts which facilitate similar interactions may present Black women in doctoral programs with opportunities to learn and grow with women whose ways of knowing, doing and being are not unlike their own. This may include support groups facilitated by Black women on the faculty who are knowledgeable about the experiences of Black women engaged in the doctoral journey, and able to assist these women with building both camaraderie and solidarity by sharing their narratives. Collins (2000) has noted that such an act is one of resistance, and can be especially empowering for Black women. We acknowledge that these efforts would require doctoral programs to increase the presence of Black faculty persons who are women, a group that comprises only 3% of the nation's full-time instructional faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a). Yet, given that Black women received over 10% of the doctoral degrees conferred in 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b), we fully support such a position, and in fact, deem it necessary.

Doctoral programs should also consider a consistent allocation of funds to assist students with travel to professional conferences. We have all benefitted from the relationships created with other Black women in these settings. This was due to special interest groups and informal socials that foster connectedness by presenting a space for those with shared experiences and identities to provide one another with personal and professional counsel. Conferences also provide pre- or post-conference mentorship and/or writing institutes. Given the dearth of Black women with a faculty rank in higher education, these institutes can provide an opportunity for Black women in doctoral programs to create and/or strengthen relationships

with other Black scholars within and outside of their programs. The benefits of Black students having access to, and receiving support and guidance from a Black faculty person include emotional, academic and professional encouragement, and the transference of social and cultural capital (McLean-McKessey, 2015; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Patton, 2009) – all of which have been established as positively correlated with retention (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995; Blackwell, 1989; Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Nora, 2002; Nora, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). Ironically, research has shown that an inability to acquire the aforementioned is the primary reason why retention rates for Black students remain bleak (Allen, 1992; Blackwell, 1991; Harper, 2009; Pena, Bensimon, & Colyar, 2006; Pruitt, & Isaac, 1985; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tinto, 1993). If given adequate access to Black women in the professoriate, Black women enrolled in doctoral programs may be much more likely to persist.

Finally, support for Black doctoral students who are mothers should also be prioritized. This includes practices that are intentionally inclusive. While pursuing her degree, one of the authors, Rogers, contacted a professor via email to inform him that her young son—for whom she had no childcare—would be accompanying her to class. The professor replied, "I hope he has his questions ready!" Such an act is representative of the ways in which faculty can provide support, and buffer the challenges that are unique to mothers pursuing the doctorate. Additional inclusionary efforts should focus on the structure of programmatic affairs. Because mothers are often put in a position where they must choose between themselves and their children and/or significant others (Gardner, 2009; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004), efforts that foster the presence of family must be given serious consideration. Encouraging the inclusion of children and/or significant others in spaces traditionally reserved for doctoral students and faculty (e.g., receptions, networking events, department-sponsored symposia) enables family members to gain a better understanding of a process (and domain) they are not directly involved in. The authors all note that during their doctoral journeys, inviting family members into the aforementioned spaces resulted in their loved ones identifying the process as less abstract. What followed was increased support from children and/or significant others. Thus, the exigency of appropriate shifts in both research and practice are clear. Institutions have a duty to train and serve students in the best ways possible, but without concerted efforts to retain all doctoral students, the academy and society as a whole are in jeopardy of losing an opportunity to access a great deal of talent.

Final Thoughts: Lessons Learned at the Table

While our sample is small, there is power in telling the story of a few, particularly because the experiences of Black women are so often couched in a broad narrative about us. In addition, we are often presented as juxtapositions of white women or Black men. We view this as problematic and disruptive to the critical

conversations that need to transpire about the distinct position of Black women in academia with regard to both womanhood and motherhood. Thus, the intimacy of this work was purposeful. It was our intention to begin with three Black women who engaged in the doctoral journey. These narratives revealed their challenges, and how they found solace amongst other affirming Black women within and outside the academy. This illustration of the dynamic power of the relationships amongst Black women rebuffs the myth that we do not build or sustain community, or work collaboratively.

We assert that more work on the Black mothering experience by Black women and Black mothers is needed. Frameworks such as Sister-to-Sister talks (Few et al., 2003), Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990; 2000), and Womanist Theory (Walker, 1983) should be continuously weaved into the fabric of inquiries regarding Black mothers in higher education. Continued exploration of Black mothering experiences can help us all gain a better understanding about how Black women are marginalized and silenced while striving to be their best self.

Perhaps most importantly, Toni, Maya and Alicia gave permission to themselves and one another to "put work down" and be there for their children. This meant they wouldn't finish first, publish first, or present everywhere they wanted to. These women had to accept that they might move slower than those who are single and unwed. Maya stated,

> Our walk will be incomparable and our battles will be plenty. But, we have to trust the process. As Black mothers in the academy we have to walk in our own light.

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