“I DON’T SEE MYSELF”:

EXPLORING RECEPTION TO HOLLYWOOD’S CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY

THROUGH BLACK WOMEN’S BIOPICS

A Dissertation

by

ASHA SIMONE WINFIELD

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Chair of Committee,	Srividya Ramasubramanian
Committee Members,	Robin R. Means Coleman
	Kristian Poirot
	Joe Feagin
Head of Department,	Hart Blanton

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ABSTRACT

In recent years Black popular culture in television and film has moved beyond the stereotypical texts by complicating the Black narrative with historical storytelling. Within the last ten years, there has been an increase in historical dramas and biographical pictures (biopics) across a variety of media such as feature films (*The Help*, 2011; *Hidden Figures*, 2016; *Harriet*, 2019; *Respect*, 2021), made-for-television films (*Crazy, Sexy, Cool*, 2013; *Whitney,* 2015; *The Clark Sisters*, 2020), and limited docu-series via internet-based streaming platforms (*Self Made,* 2020). Previous studies have focused on stereotypes in fictional programming while missing the opportunity to explore the impacts of memory and authenticity inside historical programs like Black biopics. With more Black women's stories featured in these recent biopics, one must consider how a historized, racialized, and gendered story impacts the Black audience's understanding of public memory. Within the contemporary COVID-19 context, racial inequities, and pandemic injustices, a nationwide call has been made for Black stories since the summer of 2020; however, the Black stories most often featured are Black men's biopics. Black men's biopics have become the standard for Black stories, perpetuating the erasure and silencing of Black women's voices and experiences.

This study addresses the production of and responses to Black women's biopics through Black feminist epistemologies (Collins,1989;1990), encoding/decoding (Hall, 2003;1980), and the white racial frame (Feagin, 2013) to better understand the media text and its impacts. Using this theoretical framework, I discuss the identity-making and meaning-making when Black women engage in Black women's biopics by exploring audience reception to Black women's stories, characterization, and representation in these films. Using a newly formed culmination of focus groups and qualitative survey data called virtual sista square methodology, this dissertation

addresses how Black historical discourses are shaped by particular stories (Black biopics), storytellers (production), and perspectives (Black women) and produce public and private memory. This study presents several findings: an intersectional call-and-response; Black living room pedagogy amongst Black families with particular regard to Black mothers as teachers; and differentiation between silhouetted representation and shadowy presentations of historical Black women figures.

DEDICATION

To my village,
you kept me strong; you kept me lifted
You loved me and covered me
It's because of you that I persisted

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Ann Ray "Annie" and Rev. Jerry Winfield; my brothers, Cedric, Eric, Derek, and Garrick; my sisters-in-love, Danielle, Joy, and Ashlynn; my nieces, Jasmine, Destiny, Sha'Niya, and Morgan; my nephews, PJ and Isaiah; and my entire extended family, I love y'all with my entire soul. From this life to next, you are my heart and my reason. **I hope I made you proud.**

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Say Her Name, Tell Her Story

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> "If there are to be significant African American films, the Black actors and actresses, the directors, the writers, the producers, and the technicians who are now being given a chance to work must articulate the contemporary African American's mind, his/her perspectives, aspirations, and lives. African American films can liberate audiences from illusions, Black and white, and in doing so, can give all of us vision and truth. It is a tremendous responsibility, in some cases perhaps greater than that placed on ordinary white moviemakers . . . And now one can only hope that new dazzling Black lights will continue to emerge on the screen -- and behind it-- to capture and extend one's imagination as good performers, good filmmakers, and good movies should, to both entertain and enlighten us." (Bogle, 2016, p. 477).

> "Black film is capable of articulating the rich plurality of the Black experience so that we, in the African diaspora and the world, will come to a deeper understanding about the soul of Black culture" (Yearwood, 2000, pp. 16 -17).

> somebody/anybody
> sing a Black girl's song
> bring her out to know herself
> to know you but sing her rhythms
> carin/struggle/hard times
> sing her song of life
> she's been dead so long
> closed in silence so long
> she doesn't know the sound
> of her own voice (Shange, 1975 p. 4).

COVID-19 Pandemic, Racism & Calling for the Black Biopic

The year was 2020. America had suffered cultural losses on top of familial and celebrity deaths from the devastating COVID-19 pandemic. The ever-present and deadly "racism pandemic" had and continues to kill more people of color, particularly Black people, at alarming rates. By racism pandemic, I refer to the ongoing public health issue of racism which negatively affects people of color at staggering rates and decreases their life expectancy much more

drastically than their White counterparts in every area of their existence (Feagin & Bennefield, 2014). The combination of the COVID-19 virus and the impacts of systemic racism at play even during the global pandemic presented a real challenge for those of us caught in the intersections while dodging the bullets of injustice, oppression, and disease to survive. Our country was fighting dual pandemics, and, unfortunately, with institutional and systemic racism, Black people were fighting to live through corrupted healthcare and justice systems. A few months apart, we lost Breonna Taylor, Armand Arbery, George Floyd, and many others during the global pandemic with no real justice nor accountability in sight. Black protesters filled the streets as their voices echoed in their declaration of racial injustices and the need for true change, reform, and abolition. The nation was all encompassed in the flames of anger, grief, exhaustion, and literal forest fires.

Within a week of George Floyd's murder streaming services such as Amazon Video, Hulu, HBO, Netflix, and Disney Plus released social media statements declaring in unison their support of the Black Lives Matter movement. In their support, they devoted curated sections on their platforms to amplify "Black Stories." Most notably, Netflix wrote upon its Twitter wall, "systemic change will take time – we're starting by highlighting powerful and complex narratives about the Black experience" (@Netflix, Twitter, 2020). Yet, their special efforts to center and promote viewing Black movies and television shows missed the opportunities just months before Breonna Taylor was murdered in her home by police officers; there was no immediate media outcry or streaming service dedication or corporation statement in honor of her life or death. It would be months later when Hulu released a documentary surrounding Taylor's case. What is most clear here is that Black lives [death] matter when there is an opportunity for financial gain, and too often, Black women's lives have neither been viewed nor depicted as valuable. Black

women's stories were not the first to be produced, showcased, or promoted, and in the history and memory of Black audiences, Black women's stories are not the first to be remembered. Ultimately, the capitalist nature of Hollywood's allyship and support of Black stories has always been tied to whose stories or memories are deemed worthy inside of the societal trends.

Figure 1.1. Netflix "makes space" for Black biopics (screenshot)

A substantial amount of the Black stories selected by streaming platforms were Black biopics. Of the 97 Black historical dramas found across Hulu, Amazon Prime, Disney Plus, HBO, and Netflix, the 36 biopics that "centered" Black women focused on depictions of violence, respectability, religion, and success after trauma. In the streaming services' attempts to

provide historical context and an understanding of Black life in America, more than half of the movies again make salient the pervasive nature of Black men's narratives and experiences at the expense and erasure of Black women's stories. (See Appendix 4: List of Black Biopics). These Black biopics, more times than not, reify the purity of Whiteness and the framing of the Black struggle through a White lens (Varriale, 2012).

Defining Black Biopics

This study first must define, explicate, and understand how Black biopics perform and function in a media landscape filled with truths, alternative frames, and vast perspectives by which audiences come to understand how Black public memory impacts history and vice versa. Biographical pictures or films are how many audiences are introduced to a myriad of stories and experiences outside of their frame of reference and educational institution's core curriculum. As a foundation, this dissertation employs Dennis Bingham's (2010) definition of biopics:

> The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of her personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person, or, as with Andy Kaufman, to be that person's audience. The appeal of the biopic lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character (p. 10).

In another more recent text, biopics are described as a "troublesome genre" (Brown & Vidal, 2013, p.1); the term "biopic" was referred to a "fiction films that deals with a figure whose existence is documented in history, and whose claims to fame or notoriety warrant the uniqueness of his or her story" (p. 3.) While the argument around worth and identity gets very murky when centering Blackness or womanhood in biopics, I begin our focus with the discourse around Black biopics.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I define Black biopics or biographical pictures as a film, series, or program that tells a visual story about the life of an actual Black person or group of Black people during a specific time period or event with a certain perspective, framing, and intention often highlighting several periods in the person's life. Black biopics can also share the complexity of Black identity through individuals and collective historical storytelling. Black biopics have been marketed as based on real events, true stories, and inspired by the life of real historical Black figures. These authentic and near-realistic representations of the historical occurrences depict the very real impact of racism and sexism on Black people in several ways especially depending on the writers and directors of these stories. Interestingly, Black biopics have been directed and written by Black and non-Black people. These Black biopics not only reveal the graphic treatment, persistent resilience, and intentional erasure of Black people in historical discourse, but they have often worked to write and rewrite history. In this way, Black biopics produce and construct a more nuanced version of history by showing more of the actors at play during the time; they also provide another perspective than the often whitewashed, palatable version presented in school curricula and mainstream media (if their stories are shared at all).

Black biopics have also been used to present a counternarrative to the often dominant one-dimensional tales where white savior tropes are centered in historical stories where Black people are featured. Counternarratives insist on recognizing the experiential knowledge of people of color (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993) to counteract the stories of the dominant group (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017, p. 288). Black biopics are used to respond to white controlled media; Black biopics exist in and of themselves like many other types of genres where Black creatives present Black stories in the nonfictional, fictional, and speculative forms

that touch historical and imaginary with Black characters leading the action. Black biopics do not only respond visually out of spite. Black biopics rewrite history with new memories and discourses around major events in the public and private sphere. Black biopics have often featured the stories of famous civil rights leaders, athletes, musicians, and other figures who made widespread differences in society for Black people and other persons of color. Black biopics started appearing in mainstream media around the 1950s, with the first known Black biopic being *The Jackie Robinson Story* in 1950, directed by Alfred E. Green and starring Jackie Robinson himself.

While all Black biopics are historical dramas, not all historical dramas are biopics. Historical dramas are often based on real-life events or the public's perception of them. Contemporary Black biopics have the opportunity and power to tell the story of historically marginalized, underrepresented, and silenced individuals who have played major roles in American history. Black women have played major roles in our American history, all while being marginalized and silenced in the public memory of Black media. Put into the context of Black biopics, Black women's biopics presents audiences with an opportunity for deeper stories, lost stories, and needed stories of our nation's histories. More specifically, I define Black women's biopics (BWBs) as feature films or limited series that center the lives of Black women during a period, and often take a critical and feminist view of society. The definition of biopics must include an intersectional view of life, and Black women's biopics make space [at times] to see identity in a complex way. Bingham sees male and female biopics are two genres (p.10) as both tell and produce very different histories and responses.

Biopics can be manipulated to tell a specific story and frame a group of people based on the production team's power, agency, and ideology while also empowering or disenfranchising

the Black protagonists. Black biopics, like most biopics, are set in a time period, making them period pieces. However, most period pieces place Black characters in the not-so-distant past where they were either enslaved or endured several other forms of oppression called "slavery porn." Too often, Black biopics are lumped into the categories of trauma porn and slave movies because of their authentic and graphic presentation of violence against Black bodies, but they are much more nuanced than that. In recent years there has been an influx of Black films that take up the historical. Those films like biopics can often trigger an emotional response because of the trauma endured by Black bodies over time on American soil and globally. Black biopics, apart from and yet similar to their slavery and trauma porn counterparts, present the stories that mainstream media does not often take up, and if they do, there is often a profit-seeking reason or spin.

Biopics work similarly to written biographies in several ways. First, biopics can represent the construction of someone else's private and public memory. Biographies, especially those written by other authors, problematize our understanding of "truth."

Biopics challenge and present history. A differentiation must be made among biopics, slave movies, trauma porn while also seeing where the film may overlap to parse through Black biopics. I define slave movies as a film that focuses primarily on the lives of those enslaved by white supremacy under the racist elite hegemony past of capitalism called American slavery from the early 1600s to late the 1800s. Those films include the representations and exceptional stories of Black people like those seen in *12 Years a Slave, Amistad, Roots, Harriet,* and *A Woman Called Moses.* More often than not, slave movies center on the white heroes who help Black people get free while pacifying the devastation and violence of enslaved people. On the

other hand, those films make space to see how traumatic slavery was because it is often skipped in secondary education curricula, as noted by participants in this study.

Black biopics and slavery movies have also been called Black trauma or trauma porn because of their impact on Black people who suffer through them. Trauma porn can also refer to any media (picture, record clip, animated meme, feature film, or short video) distributed causing emotional harm to its viewers. Chioma Emesih defines trauma porn as the "exploitation experiences for the sake of shock value and entertainment (2021). Most specifically, Black trauma has been exacerbated by Hollywood's [profitable] obsession with Black tragic stories (Harrison, 2021) despite the pain it causes its viewers. This pain has also been dubbed "Hollywood Black Trauma Profit Fatigue" by Jamarlin Martin (Harrison, 2021). Black trauma and slavery porn can also be found in the entertainment industry when films attempt to shed light on "slavery, police brutality, wrongful incarceration, the crack pandemic, and more," according to another recent article (Emesih, 2021). But what usually happens is not an inspiration from slavery or trauma porn. Some believe that these films remind Black people of their place while reifying the power, agency, and privilege of whiteness. If honest depictions are present, Black biopics can have a traumatic impact on viewers; this is not the case for all; some biopics leave the audience with a celebration and inspiration beyond the traumatic possibilities. These feelings that the audience is left with following the consumption of these films could be considered audience reception which is key to this current study.

Traditionally, biopics are based on real-life films highlighting major dates and events in a person's life or group's existence (Williams, 2020; Varriale, 2013). These films appear on cable television through major networks and premium networks, box office films and made-for-DVD formats. They focus on the real names and stories of actual individuals. Historical dramas, on the

other hand, weave fictional and historical elements. While historical dramas do include accurate dates and moments in history, they are more illustrative, finding ways to deepen the historical discussions of major societal events.

Black biopics are historical dramas that retell the life history of a Black celebrity, historical figure, or layperson with provocative life events, especially about their identities and unsung role in major social movements. Black biopics give audiences a view into the authentic circumstances of American history, shedding light on the realities of individuals living in systems of oppression from the personal experiences and perspectives not seen from the dominant or mainstream view. Black biopics allow audiences a type of dualism that transports them from their current state of being to another historical reality using escapism. This escapism exists as a kind of realism, both racialized and gendered in context.

Black biopics (as marketed to the public) work to tell a more holistic story about people, groups, organizations and the events they experience during a certain period. These types of films help to complicate history with the use of intersectional storytelling. Intersectional storytelling may be defined as when films describe a character's intersecting identities or matrices of oppression. This type of storytelling describes what happens when real stories, or actual occurrences, impact and resonate with their Black subjectivities. I posit that this type of intersectional storytelling happens dynamically: in Black biopics themselves, in the stories that Black audiences tell themselves about their identity when consuming these films, and in the conversations that Black audiences of Black biopics have with each other both face-to-face and online. For the study, I am interested in the conversations Black women have with each other and their families about the representations they see in Black women's biopics as it is imperative to understand the relationship between content and reception.

A Legacy of Black Biopics

Race films are defined as "movies made after World War I and through the 1940s by Black filmmakers with mostly Black casts for Black audiences. These films tried to uplift the image of African-Americans and contradict the racist stereotypes in D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" (Wang, 2016) and the other negative imagery of that time. If Black biopics are built on the foundation of race films and historical dramas, what is produced should have a Black audience in mind, Black directors in control and Black actresses in the films.

Biopics have been around just as long as any other genre or film type (Williams, 2019), with their popularity with Black audiences only growing within the last twenty years (Obenson, 2017). The first well-known Black biopic appeared in 1950 with *The Jackie Robinson Story*, directed by Alfred Green. This film is interesting because its "star" was still living and could play a significant role in making his own story. Put another way, Jackie Robinson was in control of telling his story, so much so that he played himself in his biopic.

The first Black woman biopic would not be seen until the 1970s with the Billie Holiday Black biopic *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), in which Diana Ross played the lead. This film was originally made for television but would be released as a box office film; it was unsuccessful, and financiers would use that film as an example of why Black biopics were not profitable.

Audiences would have another Black women's biopic the following year, 1977 with *Wilma, A Woman Called Moses* (1978) and *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1979), and then *The Marva Collins Sto*ry in 1981. There was a significant break between Collins' story and the next Black biopics, followed by *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991) starring Lynn Whitfield. The next decade would be filled with a few Black biopics: *The Jacksons: An American Dream* (1992), *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993), *Rosewood* (1997), *The Tuskegee Airmen* (1995),

Basquiat (1996), *Why Do Fools Fall In Love* (1998), *The Temptations* (1998), *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999), *The Hurricane* (1999), *Little Richard* (2000), and *Men of Honor* (2000).

The number of Black biopics increased even after several years of reports that declared the genre was unpopular and unwanted by some movie watchers and financiers (Demby, 2013). Contrary to those authors' beliefs, Black writers reported more than 60 biopics in production or development (Obenson, 2017). A deeper look in the audience lists (Ranker, IMDB) revealed that about 78 movies fall into the category of African American (celebrity) biographical dramas, historical dramas, or Black biopics with less than 30 movies centering on Black women and girls or their positions in major movements. Black women's stories are often overlooked and forgotten, as seen even in the online honoring of such films. In most articles remembering, suggesting, or highlighting Black biopics, Black women's stories are in the minority.

A few Black biopics released at the beginning of the pandemic included *Netflix's Self Made: Inspired by the life of Madam C.J Walker,* and *The Clark Sisters: First Ladies of Gospel* with other 2021 releases of National Geographic's *Genius: Aretha,* MGM's *Respect*, the first Aretha Franklin's box office movie and Lifetime's *Salt N Pepa* film. Additionally, there are even more Hollywood films in development, including three Black-owned iterations of a Mahalia Jackson biopics and two Hattie McDaniel movies in the next year or so.

What has become apparent is not only the need for truth-telling and storytelling but also a diversity of voices and perspectives in Black storytelling and a need for a deeper look into some of history's most forgotten unsung (s)heroes -- Black women. The lack of movies about Black women is concerning, especially compared to the number of Black men's stories and their ease of accessibility across streaming platforms. This access to a greater number of Black men-

centered historical dramas reflects the ease at which public memory is available to mass audiences, one that does not restrict memory to the accessibility of stories and exposure to mass audiences.

Constructing Public Memory Through Biopics

Because biographical pictures depict the life stories of famous individuals or groups, they exist in a contestable state of public memory. Though different from history, memories are always subject to the interpretation of the person sharing and the person receiving. Biopics provide mass audiences with a visual of the collective and cultural memories they have heard in their familial and educational circles. In general, biopics introduce interesting, important people or events in history to new audiences but can also distort real-life events in a controversial manner that does a disservice to the life of the figure depicted (Sheldon, 2019, p. 1). In more recent research, Sheldon posits that biopics memorialize individuals, and in doing so, " a culture's remembrance of its own history is shaped not necessarily by facts, but rather by the relationship of a culture to its own past" (p. 2).

Sheldon also notes that:

> This notion suggests that the fundamental question of memory is not one of a memory's accuracy, but rather why specific memories were constructed in a particular way at a particular time and their effects on the present as constructed/mediated texts. Thus, the construction of memory through these artifacts situates public memory-making in the rhetorical field (Sheldon, 2020, p. 3; Hasian, 2012, p. 341).

For Sheldon and Custen, public memory is constructed; this construction is not a solo or individual task of recuperating moments worthy of commemoration. Instead, this social and collective task of remembering is one that is often profitable for production companies. Film production companies are usually the recipients of this profitable construction. Additionally, the

film companies may not be as concerned with presenting the truth in their storytelling as they are with telling an interesting story.

Custen (1992) notes that film has gained significance as the popular medium by which biographies and historical fiction are disseminated, such that "while most biopics do not claim to be the definitive history of an individual or era, they are often the only source of information many people will ever have on a given historical subject" (p. 7). As Sheldon states, epideictic rhetoric, when conversing with the public or collective memory, and biopics work as eulogies for individuals. Put another way, directors eulogize and remember individuals through film. These public memory films can work as a complex celebration or condemnation of individuals while also making strides toward educating mass audiences through media storytelling of real individuals. This research aims to reveal that the construction of white public memory and Black public memory is different and has different considerations.

Memory, like identity, is dynamic. It changes, deepens, and is resolved through different stories. For Black Americans, memory cannot be romanticized through white-washed lenses. Rhetorical scholars have most often viewed memory through the discussion of sites, places, and space. I expanded this research by contributing another layer to understanding collective public memory through Black women's biopics.

Media Construction of Black Public Memory

This section introduces and differentiates between memory and history and what those concepts mean for Black women viewers of Black biopics. To build a working definition for this study, I discuss Black women's public memory in three parts: framing, memory, and Black public memory.

Biopics, like most media, have been framed to tell certain stories in particular ways for a certain audience. Framing is defined as the "process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (Entman, 2007, p. 163). With this definition of framing, Entman argues that it shapes and alters audience members' interpretations and preferences through priming. These frames introduce or raise certain salient or important ideas, activating schemas that encourage the audience to think, feel, and decide in a particular way (Entman, 2007, p. 164). Many studies have looked at framing studies by studying the racial stereotypes found in the news media and primetime television (Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Linz, 2002, 2000; Mastro & Robinson, 2000), but I consider how popular culture constructs Black women's public memory through Hollywood's inaccurate and exaggerated framing of Black women. I argue that to construct an image, one must first frame the narrative that is shared. Biopics are another example of framing that occurs. For Black biopics, the framing of reality or society's interpretation of historical reality is impactful for its audiences, even with its often erased or fabricated storylines.

By engaging Black historical memory and historical fabrications in conversation with framing means, I argue that audience reception is subject to the messaging inside, and ultimately, what is produced is an altered version of Black public memory. What then can be considered Black public memory inside of Black biopics?

There is much discussion on Black public memory, but not a definition of the concept, so I offer this language. Black public memory (BPM) is the intangible collection of constructed reckonings of historical events, altered by dominant and minoritized groups in their retelling of Black people's roles, impacts and consequences; BPM is shared through narratives, films, familial storytelling, curriculum and commemorative acts that recall the event that shaped the

Black American experience often punctuated by eras (e.g., slavery, antebellum South, Jim Crow, reconstruction and civil right movements) while highlighting its framed Black individuals and groups. Interestingly enough, most mediated memories of America's racial past are romanticized by white sympathizers/savior tropes, ignore the travesties of slavery, and disarm Black leaders who worked for Black freedom. In this altered memory, publics, specifically Black publics, are left to rely on limited sources for their recalling of historical events:

> Memory scholars are also beginning to conceptualize memory as an active, dynamic process – collective remembering – as opposed to treating it as a thing to be discovered (Olick 2005) . . . Through engaging these cultural products that have been constructed and sponsored by institutions, people learn which events of the past are worth remembering, how they should be remembered, and which characters are worth our reverence or condemnation. Inevitably, these historical renderings are abridged, incomplete, biased toward the dominant group. (Lavelle, 2011, pp. 24-25)

For scholars Romano and Raiford (2006), memory, in their book, The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory, refers to how people recall, lay claim to, understand, and represent the past (p. xiii). Memory is constantly changing, tying and untying, doing and undoing, storying and counter-storytelling, especially for its Black figures, particularly for the Black women figures. Some scholars distinguish between history and memory as the difference between objective versus subjective retelling of events, historical events versus selective and unreliable accounts (Romano & Raiford, p. xviii). These memories of particular events, people, and movements shape our "personal, group and political identities" (Romano & Raiford, 2005, p. xvii). Custen states that Hollywood's biographical films create public history by declaring that lives are worthy and acceptable for public memory through production and distribution. These worthy and acceptable biopics are often chosen because of their white racial framing and vicinity to whiteness. Hollywood has had an enormous impact upon viewers' conception of the world (p. 12); this also includes the place of Black people in history.

Consider now, what is the impact of framing and media construction on Black women's public memory. For the sake of the dissertation, I offer this definition for Black women's public memory: the subjective and historical collective understanding of historical Black women figures and events led by Black American women, which are curated by the construction of dominant and minoritized groups and organizations through various types of narratives and storytelling. Historical Black women have been remembered through postage stamps, honors and awards, artwork, school and institution renaming, street or site dedications, among other ways. In some cases, the framing can lean toward the authentic counter-narratives, and other times, it leans toward stereotypical tropes that are seen in the fictional recallings of history.

Memories of the past, especially those of slavery, inform collective memory or forms of remembrance, according to White-Ndounou (2014, p. 16). White-Ndounou argues that "rememory" is one of the many unique Black contributions to American film because it reworking and reformation of collective memory. Toni Morrison defines rememory "as a thought picture from the past that emerges when a person returns to the site where a traumatic experience has occurred" (cited from White-Ndounou, 2014, p.16).

I question here: how rememory and remembering work for historical Black women when many of their efforts in society have been erased, stereotyped, fabricated, or severely altered by the mass media's most powerful storytellers. According to Timeka N. Tounsel, "it is impossible to divorce Black women from the history of repressive images that continue to haunt them in the contemporary media landscape" (2015, p. 7). From the tropes of controlling images to the "new contemporaries bred from the white patriarchal ideologies that distort how Black women are viewed and understood with popular culture and society at large" (Tounsel, 2015, p. 7), the images of Black womanhood, both past and present, are complicated by Black historical public

memory. Biopics act as an intangible site for contending with these ideological frames of Black public memory where the further construction of historical Black women is shaped for media consumption. This dissertation discusses the impact of that construction on audiences.

The Focus of Present Study

This dissertation explores the dynamics of Black history through Black public memory, Black storytelling and Black film and searches for the women's stories and identity-making at its center. The nexus of the research is Black women's public memory in conversation with contemporary media studies by way of film representations and reception. This dissertation's overarching questions are, how is Hollywood's production of Black women's biopics impacting Black women's public memory and individual identity-making through the media's mainstream storytelling? What meaning-making practices are Black women audiences bringing to and taking away from these Black women's biopics? In light of these questions, this dissertation investigates the myriad ways in which audiences engage and read the historized tales of the past.

Ultimately, the dissertation investigates how Black women audiences make meaning with, through, and in opposition to Black biopics through focus group discussions. These discussions shed light on the Black collective's consumption of popular culture and dedicated loyalty to representations in Black stories. These discussions are deepened by moving beyond general biopics to focusing on Black women's biopics, shaping, and reshaping the audience's understanding of Black history and Black women.

Adopted from Cavalcante's (2013) dissertation, the current study examines how media representations and audience engagement with media help Black audiences understand historical movements and figures concerning their own identities. This dissertation develops from and

extends the scholarship on media audiences and audience reception by centering contemporary Black media and Black audiences. This work affirms the importance and necessity of qualitative research like audience ethnography, critical autoethnography, and immersive inquiries into audience experiences.

Coleman (2002, p. 12) conceptualizes audience reception as a "nexus between a medium and its audience" that attempts to uncover how audiences discern the nature of reality during media encounters and how this ethnographic information can communicate a larger story about the social structure, political relations, and cultural life (Cavalcante, 2013, p.16; Coleman, 2002, p.12). The lack of Black women's stories does not alone suggest the importance or urgency of inquiry or the dire need for research into audience reception to the available stories. But when those factors are combined with the great amount of online discourse about Black women's stories when Black women's biopics do appear, it signals a greater play between the media's story and audience reading. This study will make space to honor Black women's lives through the biopics constructed about them while also grappling with the meaning-making inside of it Black women viewers.

The Current Media Landscape: Producing Black Women's Stories

> "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies of me and eaten alive." - Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider.
>
> "As storytellers, we make choices, and this was my choice." Kasi Lemmons quote in Blackmon, 2019.
>
> [Robert] Weems suggests that so much of Black people's experience of citizenship has been tied to consumerism, so when Black women because a mainstream target demographic in the 1990s, they experienced new levels of cultural visibility that expanded to other arenas like books and movies . . . I

> struggle, then, with how to simultaneously hold the competing truths that shape Black women's public and private lives. (Cooper, 2014, pp.114 - 115)

During the inception, data collection, and analysis of this dissertation, at least five Black women's biopics were released in the form of mini-series, television films, and feature films. Many of those films were delayed due to the COVID-19 restrictions on filming for producers and gathering for viewers (Whitten, 2020). The pandemic left several films delayed in their premieres or release (McNary, 2020) with an optional at-home viewing such as HBO Max, Amazon Video, Hulu, Netflix, and limited theatres. Many films were released during the pandemic, with even more platforms giving access to older films that were not previously available (Shadow & Act, 2021). Audiences could see just how many Black stories were available during this revival of Black media and Black voices even more than before.

This dissertation's search for Black women-centered films began with the streaming platforms in this revival of Black voices through film. An even deeper look for the Black women's biopics and non-biopics revealed that though the number of choices was seemingly increasing, the production did not always mirror the cast. The choices made in the production and development stages of Black biopics help to shape the fickle critiques around Black films. These critiques include but are not limited to the story, representation of Black women, and the choices made by production (writers, directors, and producers) when telling the story of Black women's lives. These storying choices impact how Black audiences resonate with the stories; this is more than just a reaction; it responds to representation. When the story is compelling, a Black audience may be more likely to move from loyalty-viewing to appreciation and resonance from the authenticity and care for the Black women's memory. However, when a biopic is devoid of care in the presentation, the responses are devoid of celebration, circulation, and popularity.

One recent example of a Black women's story gone wrong in the production room is Nina Simone's biopic, *Nina*. In 2016, writer/director Cynthia Mort released Nina, which focused on the American musician and civil rights activist Nina Simone, portrayed by Zoe Saldana. The film was a box office flop making only $22,584. In a recent report by CNN (2020), Saldana apologized for playing Nina Simone in the 2016 biopic, years after receiving heavy criticism for darkening her skin and wearing a prosthetic nose for the role (Picheta, 2020). First and most importantly, Simone's estate did not endorse the film, followed by outrage from Simone's fan base. See Figure 1.2.

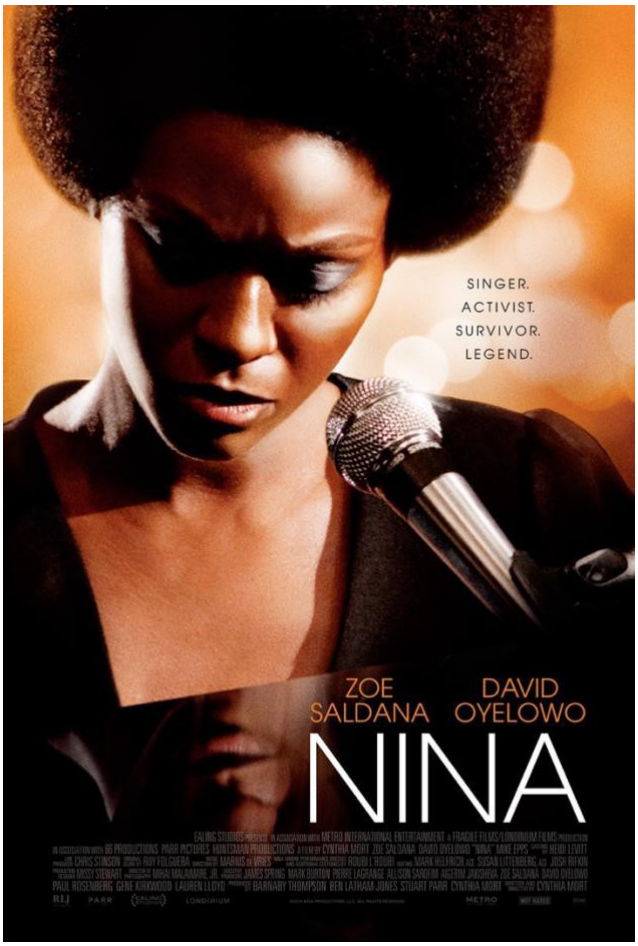

Figure 1.2. *Nina*, 2016, directed by Cynthia Mort

As much as fans wanted a biopic about the beloved woman, it mattered to them who played her role, especially related to the movement that Nina Simone was fighting for dark-skinned Black women (Picheta, 2020). Indie Arie, a dark-skinned woman, a fan of Nina, and an international musician and songwriter, said Saldana's performance of Nina Simone resulted from "tone-deaf casting" (Sun, 2016). Grammy-winning soul singer Indie Arie who viewed early images of the film in 2012, along with Lina Simone Kelly, the only child of Simone, both said they did not blame Saldana for the casting choice. This was production. It may also be worth mentioning that Saldana, who has played in multimillion-dollar projects that banked billions, may be used to applying these prosthetics to her body for a role and any performance, so the use of such additions for a character may not have been out of the ordinary. Except for two producers, David Oyelowo and Aigerim Jakisheva, everyone in the writing room, director's table, casting calls, and makeup chairs, was all white. One must wonder that if there were more Black people -- Black women -- in the room, would a Blackface incident have happened?

Blackface occurs when white or lighter-skinned individuals apply dark makeup and perform the stereotypical mannerisms associated with historical stereotypes of Black people. The entire film appears to be a modern-day version of Blackface, where colorism and ideals of beauty constrict and constrain the storytelling and characterization of Nina Simone.

In an interview with *Hollywood Reporter*, India Arie's statement rings true for Hollywood's version of Black women:

> "It made me sad. The way she looked in the movie was ugly. Whether or not Nina Simone was beautiful in your eyes, I thought she was beautiful. But in this movie, she just looked weird. Her skin looked weird, and her nose looked weird. It made me wonder, was that how the filmmakers see her? Did they not think she was beautiful? Were they like, "Yeah, we got it! That's how she looked." (Indie Arie interview, 2016).

How does Hollywood see Black women? Are Black women hideous in their eyes? Is this why financing their movies and giving their stories voice and amplification so difficult? Directorial choices continue to impact the audience's perception and reception of historical figures, but there is a greater impact on the fans who loved her and Black women who resemble her. Producers' demands and choices also impact audience reception of Black women's stories.

RESPECT the Producer, Aretha

A Black biopic for Aretha Franklin has been in the works for almost twenty years. Within the last three years, two different production companies have filmed Franklin's life history, and the COVID-19 pandemic delayed both during the filming and distribution. Aretha Franklin's feature film *RESPECT* (2020) with MGM and National Geographic series *Genius: Aretha*, which was also scheduled for 2020 (Goldberg, 2020), have all been postponed to 2021. (See Figure 1.3 and 1.4). Cynthia Erivo, who also played Harriet Tubman in her biopic, also recently played Franklin in the *Genius* anthology series chronicling Franklin's life. Both of these works have pushed dates for the release more than twice, adding more anticipation for Franklin's face to appear on the screen. Franklin, who passed away in August 2018, only had a production say in one of the works, her biopic with MGM. Her family was consulted in the making of both film and series.

Figure 1.3. *RESPECT*, 2021; director Liesl Tommy

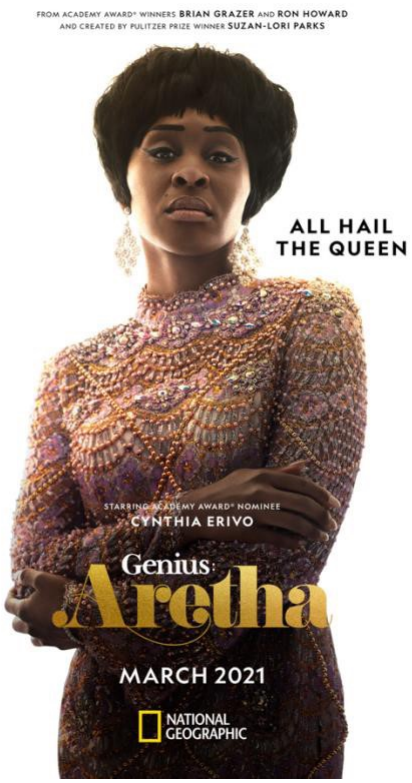

Figure 1.4. *Genius: Aretha*, 2021; directed by Anthony Hemingway

In this one particular case of a posthumous producer, Aretha Franklin not only left her ideas and instructions on how she wanted to be represented, but she also chose whom she wanted to portray her in her movie. While singer-actress-songwriter-Oscar winning Jennifer Hudson may be the star of the show now, Franklin's first choice was academy-award-winning actress Halle Berry. Berry looks nothing like Franklin other than their common race and sex. However, this choice put in context with Zoe Saldana's Nina Simone is an important one. We can assume that Franklin chose Berry because Berry was popular and loved by mass audiences, but most of all, she was Black and beautiful. Franklin wanted to be seen as beautiful in her life story, and what better choice. She was willing to throw away the authenticity of being for beauty. On the flip side of the conversation, Berry's popularity added another level of authenticity to the film because of her acting acumen. In a report by *The Guardian*, Franklin suggested that Berry "could

lip-synch to the original recordings" (Child, 2011). Berry told production that she did not have the voice to carry off the role and believed "someone should tell Aretha that I can't do her justice" and so despite the reports of Franklin begging Berry to play her in the biopic, another person would be chosen (Child, 2011).

At the time of this article, Jennifer Hudson was already in the works, but nothing was set in stone for Franklin. Franklin knew that Hudson was an amazing songster and actress after her role in *Dreamgirls* (2007), but Franklin still wanted her original recordings to be heard in the film. In 2018, while the film was still in production, Franklin passed away, but her producers/friends were "committed to carrying out her wishes on the film" (Hinds, 2018). Harvey Mason, Jr. stated that "going forward, what will be foremost in my mind is, 'What would Aretha do here? What would Aretha want here? She will always be in the front of my mind as I make decisions on the film" (Hinds, 2018). With this in mind, Franklin's handpicked [but second] choice, Jennifer Hudson, would fully embody Franklin in this biopic. From the film's trailers and released clips, it appears that Franklin's notes, even from the grave, are being honored and that the film will be a great success with Hudson leading the way in the fullness of Black womanhood and Black woman literacies.

Oprah Magazine stated that the story of Aretha Franklin's journey from "child prodigy in Detroit to international supernova is rife with struggle and triumph, making her life one of the great American stories of all time," said director Liesl Tommy (Janes, 2020). What is most interesting about Aretha Franklin's story is that she was active in storytelling and story-making before her demise in August of 2018.

What does it mean? How does it impact a story - for Black women to play a crucial role in her own story? Will her inclusion add more authenticity to the story or more masking of other crucial points in the life history?

Like Franklin's biopic, *The Clark Sisters: The First Ladies of Gospel*, four Black sisters and gospel artists were instrumental in their biopic production, filming and editing plausibly changing the trajectory of their story.

The Clark Sisters: Sister Producers & Storytellers

> The quintessential Black family story — with the storytelling we need but all too often do not want, and consequently do not often receive. It was not neat, not tidy, not spotless, not faultless; but neither was it helpless, hopeless, godless or joyless. It was everything we are, yet hope to be, and need not be in its displays of toxic patriarchy, domestic violence, church violence, lack of mental health and irrationality of shirking standard good medical practices in exchange for pronouncements of miracles that lead to perhaps unnecessary and surely premature death. It was a story of how Black mothers and daughters, and sisters struggle to relate, release, and respect each other as grown women. It was a story with as much greatness and resolve as it had very little of the resolution which accompanies the perfect happy endings we so often seek despite knowing otherwise in our own lives. (Dr. Crystal A. deGregory interview in Obenson, 2020)

Another example of Black women who have played a critical role in their storytelling is The Clark Sisters and their 2020 Lifetime film, *The Clark Sisters: First Ladies of Gospel*. The Clark Sisters reported in a 2020 interview that they have been trying to get their story released for 15 years, searching for producers, funding, directors to make sure that their story was told correctly; that it was honest, vulnerable, truthful. It was not until much later that the film got celebrities to back their project as producers (Black women) like Mary J. Blige, Missy Elliott, and Queen Latifah. See Figure 1.5.

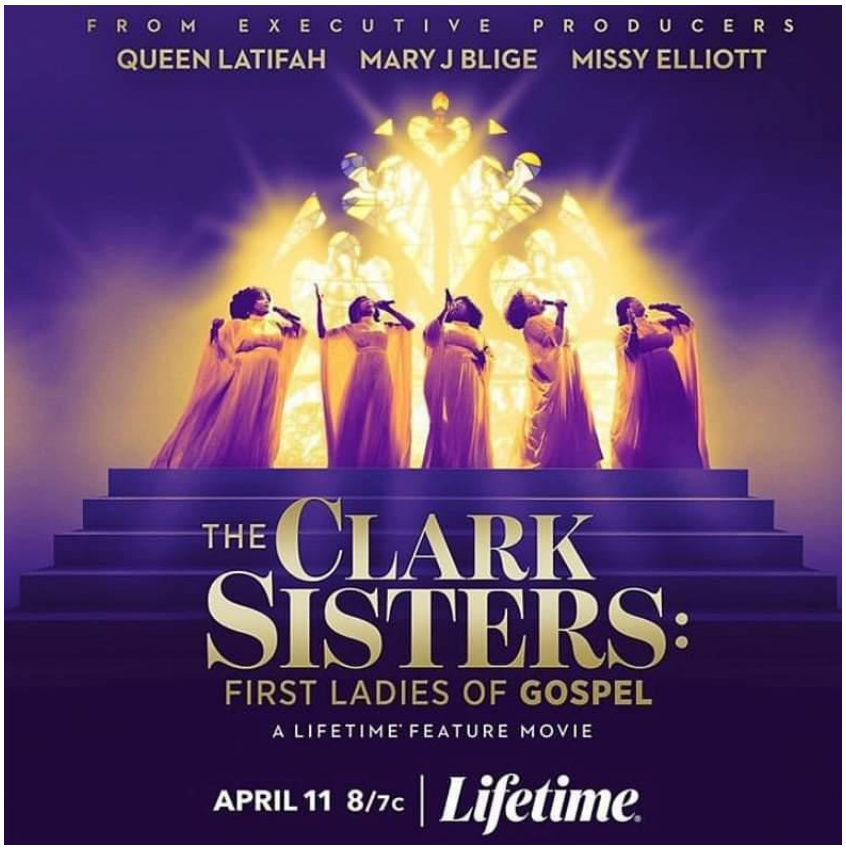

Figure 1.5. *The Clark Sisters: First Ladies of Gospel*, directed by Christine Swanson

According to *Vibe*, the Clark Sisters' movie became Lifetime's highest-rated movie in four years with 2.7 million views on Nielson (Imarenezor). The release of the film in April 2020 not only attracted an older audience, but many young viewers watched as well as interacting with Facebook and Twitter during the premiere. According to A&E Networks, the 2-hour movie pulled viewers from every adult age group: "with 1.1 million Adults 25-54, 905,000 Adults 18-49 and 813,000 Women 25-54." *Vibe* reports that the hashtag #TheClarkSisters garnered more than 700,000 interactions and hit the No. 1 trending spot during its April 11th debut (Imarenezor, 2000). National Public Radio reported after the premiere more details on the success of the storytelling itself: "Director Christine Swanson insisted that the women playing the sisters in the film be able to sing — really sing. Acting experience was less of a requirement" (Martin, 2020).

Swanson, who is also from Detroit, wanted to make sure the legendary Clark Sisters, “who have an enduring creative, spiritual legacy in music and culture,” were represented accurately. They had a deep and excellent standard for how their story would be told, and that meant including women who could really sing. In addition to the song and spirit of the film, the producers and director desired to capture the Clarks Sisters mother, Dr. Mattie Moss Clark and her vision in this film. Aunjanue Ellis, who played Mattie, said in an interview with NPR:

> She was singular in her vision at the time ... for the place of women in the [Church of God in Christ] tradition," Ellis says. "And she was doing all of this at a time when women were expected to hold positions, yeah, but not wield this kind of power in the church.

Director Swanson, with writers Camille Tucker and Sylvia L. Jones, and other producers (including lead actress Aunjanue Ellis) made sure that the simple touches of Blackness and tangibility of Black womanhood, the region Detroit, and the religious denomination of Church of God in Christ were seen and felt by the audience; an audience that would certainly be in search of these elements in the story. It was more than a matter of authenticity; it was a matter of identity and identity-making. With so many Black women present in the production side of this film and Aretha Franklin’s Respect, the belief was that the media text would accurately reflect reality for the subjects and audiences, thus impacting the story’s reception with its viewers.

It is here that I build the current research study: with the consideration of the production of stories and construction of identity through certain content around Black women figures throughout history that we look to for representation or reception with Black women audiences.

Organization and Scope of the Dissertation Project

This first chapter outlined the current state of biographical pictures, what is known about Black biopics, and more specifically, the historical lack of and the recent surge of Black women's biopics as the focus of the current dissertation project. A review of issues shows that the current clarion call for Black stories often leaves Black women's public memory in the hands of powerful non-Black production companies, resulting in an incomplete, Whitewashed view of historical Black women. This phenomenon of consuming and engaging with incomplete and flawed characterizations of Black women figures impacts Black audiences, specifically Black American women audiences. The exploration of Black women's biopics offers readers an opportunity to better understand Black women's identity-making, collective viewing, and interpretative reading of Black women's histories through audience reception studies using an intersectional lens.

The second chapter introduces the literature review and theoretical framework that connect Black women's biopics to Black women audiences. This chapter discusses and connects public memory, audience reception, Black feminist epistemologies, intersectionality, and white racial framing to understand better how Black women's public memory is created, produced, and disseminated through mainstream and alternative media, and then impacts the storytelling inside of its viewers. Discussion of these major theories helps to explicate the phenomenon and significance of Black women viewing Black women's biopics.

The third chapter discusses the methodologies used for this research project and the paradigms, constructs, and epistemologies using which the study was framed and conceptualized. This project utilized the storytelling aspects found in qualitative methods through focus group discussions and open-ended questionnaires (demographic pre-test and post-test). This project

used five focus groups comprised of 4-7 individual, non-recurring participants from all over the nation, with a specific focus on the southern region of the United States. The meaning-making we constructed together in the virtual focus groups was based on a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data collected from the five groups. This approach centered on the voices and experiences of the Black women in the study.

The fourth chapter discusses the analysis process and findings in more detail. This chapter highlights each participant in the five focus groups as their identities and watching preferences impacted and framed their understandings of the Black women's biopics. The chapter discusses how the methodology in this virtual setting allowed for an organic expression of acceptance and negotiation of identity- and historical-making between the participants as we remembered these biopics together. The overall themes found in the Black women's biopics salient for Black women viewers were discussed in the theorizing of Black women consuming Black women's biopics.

The fifth chapter includes a summary of the dissertation project and a discussion of the theoretical implications of the research findings. The chapter discusses the implications for Black women audiences and the producers/creators of Black women's biopics as curators of Black public memory. The findings related to media reception, representation, Black feminist knowledge production, and historical memory are summarized. The chapter ends with recommendations for studying contemporary Black media and audience reception with Black women using the current and other methodological practices. The limitations and potential future research into Black women biopics and Black women's biopics, specifically, are also examined.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

> Aretha - Every family's got their secrets. We don't air our dirty laundry.
>
> Ruth - Understood. As your booking agent and publicist, I'll make sure the world only sees the Aretha Franklin you want them to. . . .
>
> Aretha - For the record, Ted and I have a wonderful marriage, we are raising 3 lovely boys, I come from a remarkable family, and I am a princess in a fairytale.
>
> Ruth - I can take that to the bank.
>
> (Dialogue from Genius: Aretha, Episode 1; March 23, 2021)

Overview

The research on media reception is as broad as the media landscape that audiences consume for their entertainment uses and gratifications. Audience research, media effects or media reception has been studied in several different ways and methodologies, including experimental, surveys, ethnography, and the like. Research on representation, specifically Black representation, has often focused on stereotypical presentations with fictional characters (Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012); in broadcast media (Dixon, 2005), video games (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014), primetime television (Stroman, Meritt, & Matabane, 1989; Stamps, 2017), reality television (Tyree, 2011) and films (Guerrero, 2012). Some studies have even focused on such variables like gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and age in their study of Black representation and its impact on multiple racial and ethnic groups. Those texts like Coleman's edited work on *Say It Loud: African American Audiences, Media and Identity* (2002), which included the audience analysis of the *Menace II Society, The Cosby Show* (Innis & Feagin), *The Color Purple* (Bobo), and *The Boondocks* (Cornwell & Orbe) laid a foundation for contemporary

audience analysis at the turn of the millennium. Though almost 20 years ago, *Say It Loud* provides insight into the complex relationships Black audiences have with Black media.

In the foreword of the text, Herman Gray reminds us that Black audiences are actively engaged. Gray states, "Blacks read, listen, view, and engage with media in the context of complexly organized social lives, circumstances must be socially located and made visible discursively by scholars as subjects of complex life ways and practices rather than reduced to a potentially attractive segment of a consumer demographic that can help media and entertainment companies gain an advantage in market share" (Gray, 2002, p. viii). Gray insists that the economic indicators cannot determine the meanings and identities of Black people as audience members. This point is important to note. Some of the most meaningful Black films may not be the top-grossing or the most awarded films, but those media texts are important for representation. Additionally, Coleman argues that African Americans as members of a media culture engage with dominant cultural forms, work to make sense of their own conditions, and consider the convergence of these conditions with the represented worlds of media (2002, p. 2).

For this current study, it is key to note that the conditions of society work to frame and give Black audiences a worldview to pull from with interpreting the media. As discussed later in the dissertation, the complexity of identity and the current state of American society makes for a loaded experience for the Black audience. The active work that Black audiences must participate in when consuming Black media specifically is a heavy meaningful work based on the constructions of identity-making. Moreover, Coleman impressed upon us that identity is marked by difference (we know whom we are by differentiating from what we are not) as well as membership, biology, location, the body and the symbolic (2013, p. x). For her, identity is defined by representation and constructed by several institutions like family, school, government,

law, religion, language, communication, and media. She goes on to say that identity is a construction that is the result of interactions, relationships, and influences between individuals and institutions (Coleman, 2013). Media audience reception or audience ethnography considers the identity of the audience members of which they are studying.

Based on Coleman's arguments, I build the foundation of the study. Identity constructions, layered meaning-making, and audience reception to Black representations in the media are interrelated. The relationship between Black audiences and their parallel representation is based on their constructions of identity, which are used to read media presentations of the group.

Several Black audience reception studies have also been researched using different methodologies. Reception for some Black scholars is experience on personal levels. Following the release of the Black biopic, *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), Dr. Amber Johnson responded by calling our attention to what was/was not only present but who was missing from the historical narrative of the famous Black rap group, NWA (2018). Johnson found that nostalgia serves as a conveyor belt for erasing Black women's narratives by replacing them with service positions that cater to male dominance, resulting in a cycle of hypervisibility. They found that Black women used several social media platforms to clap back in response to the film. Johnson defines the Black girl magic clap back as the alternative truths situated within the lived experiences of Black women that help to counter and paint a more complete history through memory.

In another example, Robin M. Boylorn's *As Seen on TV: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Race and Reality Television* (2008) uses layered storied accounts to discuss, interrogate and engage the representations of Black women on reality television. In Boylorn's reception of

reality television against the historical stereotypes that are offered inside of the Black women's programming, she also urges Black women consumers to be more critical of their experiences as they are depicted on screen. Boylorn, like Aisha Durham's *Home with Hip Hop*, and Brittany Cooper's *Eloquent Rage*, uses her own experiences as knowledge production. Their contemporary understanding of audience receptions begins with self, and one's lived experiences. While their examples may be on reality television representations and the musical presentations of Black womanhood, few studies in the field have focused on Black biopics as the genre continues to grow with the number of these films increasing each year. Even less research is done on Black women's biopics. They are often conflated with Black men's biopics that focus on musical, athletic and civic leadership.

This current project connects Black feminism, framing, storytelling, and audience reception approaches with an understudied genre of Black biopics -- Black women's biopics. Several theories are useful for this research, including Black feminism, audience reception, representation, memory storytelling, white racial framing and collective identification. This chapter discusses tenets and elements characterizing each of these theories and concepts related to the creation, production, consumption and readings of Black women's biopics by Black women audiences. By studying audience reception with audiences and not only by content analysis (Hermes, 1995), we can better understand the meaning-making occurring with Black American women watching their foremothers in the fight for freedom, voice, and agency in this land. To begin, the theoretical framework is addressed as this influences the study's methodological approach.

Black Feminist Epistemologies & Interpreting Controlling Images

This dissertation uses Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as a theory to frame the study and explain how Black women audience members view or spectate images of historical Black women. As scholars have pointed out, BFT is a useful framework for critically interpreting mediated representation given its emphasis on interrogating dominant characterizations of Black femininity (Griffin, 2013, p. 184; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1981, 1992). Some of the most recognizable dominant images of Black women have been referred to as controlling images. Controlling images have been around since enslaved African women were stolen, captured, and shipped to America, and those images persist today as stereotypes in the media. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) found that controlling images were originally applied to Black women during the slave era "to attest to the ideological dimension of the U.S. Black women's oppression" (p. 5). These controlling images assume certain qualities about Black women to justify oppression (Collins, 2000): mammies, matriarchs, jezebels, sapphires, tragic mulattos, breeder women, Black prostitutes, welfare mothers, gold diggers, hoochies.

While these controlling images exist, the key here is the power of Black biopics and their ability to complicate a controlling image, stereotype, caricature, or archetype with an intersectional story, a story that Black audiences see, know, and embrace with their own identities and self-definitions. In the end, Black women's biopics insist on the multiple layered, dynamic, intersectional presentation of a person, group of people, or event without generationalization.

To speak of images surrounding Black women's lives, politics and oppression, I must also discuss the ideological forces that perpetuate these controlling images even in Black women's biopics. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000),

> Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interest of a group of people. Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression.

Controlling images and forces that keep Black women's portrayals connected to stereotypes and one-dimensional characterizations even in their real-life representations depict a "larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite White male interests and worldviews" (Collins, 2000, p. 5). These incomplete and deformed representations of Black women represent a framing based on a racist system of ideas in which Black women's biopics are produced only if it is believed that a film will be profitable and that whiteness will also be included, often seen in their creative liberties.

Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist scholar, coined Black feminist epistemology and matrix of domination or what has come to be known as the groundwork for Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, which describes the multiple, simultaneous oppressions experienced by Black women. Her work provides a framework to make space for Black women's knowledge production, particularly in our stories. This informed the methodology in a major way as Black feminist thought (BFT) is a specialized thought that reflects the distinctive themes of African-American women's experiences (Collins, 2000, p. 251). By centering the knowledge production through Black women's experiences in representation and reception studies, we can dive more deeply into the intersectional identities related to interpretation and the intersectionality present due to complex identities and oppression.

There are four criteria included inside Black feminist thought as an epistemology: 1) experiences as criteria for meaning; 2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, 3) the

ethics of caring, talking with our hearts; and 4) the ethic of personal accountability. Black Feminist Epistemology includes four epistemological tenets as summarized by Dotson (2015):

1. A criterion on meaning, which takes lived experiences and practical images as important for grounding and making knowledge claims (Collins, 2009, p. 276)
2. A criterion for assessment, which refers to vetting knowledge through dialogue with and among one's community/communities (Collins, 2009, p. 279).
3. Criteria for members of one's community/communities, which articulates forms of competence required for members of a given community of knowers (Collins, 2009, p. 281-282); and
4. A criterion on knower adequacy, which stipulates that those making claims to knowledge also need to have moral or ethical connections to those claims (Collins, 2009, p. 284).

Black feminist epistemologies (BFE) shape this dissertation as a conceptual framework for the methodology and ultimately frame the theoretical implications. The first tenet, a criterion on meaning, places the meaning-making or interpretation back in the hands of Black women by empowering their experiences and calling it what it is - knowledge. Reception to Black women's biopics by Black women is of great importance though it has not been discussed on the whole in the academic conversation of representation, reception or authenticity. Previous studies have used the BFE and specifically Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to center Black women's experiences in several disciplines. The second tenet, a criterion for assessment, allows researchers to use collective Black women's individual and collective understanding of the world around them to assess through dialogue. This is extremely important for this study's methodology as I use group conversation to recuperate memories of Black media and construct

identity and meaning through media's presentation/re-presentation of society. The third tenet, ethics of caring, result from knowing the community one is a part of while also being responsible for their well-being. The last tenet, the ethic of personal accountability, speaks to individual responsibility. Black women feel over their knowledge and experiences. This moral and ethical accountability connects Black women's knowledge to themselves, their communities, histories, memories and body of ancestral truth regarding the placement and treatment of their identity group.

BFE helps us know Black women's experiences more intimately while also being very aware of the complexity and multiplicity of a dynamic being inside a historically oppressive system that perpetuates violence, silence, and erasure. BFT, which "values, centers, and normalizes Black women's standpoints," grants "the tools to resist one's own subordination" (Collins, 2000; 1990; p. 198). This lens is no longer just used as a framework but as a tool to empower voices and experiences of those who have historically and too often been placed in the margins and periphery of even their own stories. I use BFE to address the construction of Black women's public memory through BWB and audience reception resulting from the consumption of said memory content. It is useful for grappling with how historical stories of Black women represent a historical site of contestation where memory is no longer reduced solely to the remnant of materials shared on the walls of museums, the historical markers across cities, or the holiday traditions that commemorate the great efforts of Black figures, but also the creation of stories recreating major moments in Black life.

Like other Black feminist scholars before me, I adopt and make space for BFT as a lens to ask questions of the media text like Black biopics and Black audiences in addition to other lenses within cultural studies and critical theory (Noble & Tynes, 2016). Intersectionality is not

only the lens, but the framework around the dissertation birthed out of the BFT. Noble and Tynes (2016) cite Crenshaw's 1989 coining of intersectionality as the single word to describe a long and complex discussion about Black women's multiple forms of simultaneous oppression. Speaking definitionally, Collins (2015) suggests that "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as a reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities (p. 32).

Why does this matter to audience ethnographers or theorists? The current study connects intersectionality to the subjectivity in media storytelling, public memory, and audience reception.

Collins defined methodology as the principles by which we conduct research and how interpretive paradigms are applied (2000, p.252). Later in the methodology section, Black women's standpoints as epistemologically sound and logically when attempting to assess knowledge about audience reception to the cultural production of historical Black women's stories are discussed. Black women can self-identify and should according to this framework. By self-defining, "we center Black womanhood as an epistemological site" . . . [which] creates a "stronger body of knowledge about the impact and importance of Black women's experiences in a system that often generates knowledge from a European patriarchal perspective" (Dotson, 2015, p. xx). Sniders agrees that this approach of centering the experiences of Black women strengthens and (re)establishes the importance of Black Feminist Thought as a valid epistemological approach to communication studies research (Snider, 2018; Dotson, 2015). Centering Black women's experiences through Black feminist thought helps to address and interrogate the controlling images seen in Black-centered historical films. When taken together

with public memory and the White racial frame, the theoretical framework expands to capture the production and construction of these particular historical narratives.

Black Women and Public Memory Under the White Racial Frame

In the section, I ask what place memory has in Black representation studies or Black representation in memory studies. It would be nearly impossible to construct Black women's public memory without representation or representation without the memory/memorialization, representation, and the framing of Black women in historical films that reveals the interpretative nature of storytelling and the subjective elements of reception. When considering the construction of public memory, one must consider the producers of those identity constructions. More, I juxtaposed white racial framing and public memory with Black representation to understand better the impacts of how Black audiences are engaging biopics. Research in the field of monuments and public memory reveals there is a "selective (re)framing and (re)contextualization of public memory that exemplifies how governmental entities hold power over representation" (Kay, 2019, p. 4). But governmental agencies are not the only entities who have the power to reinforce preexisting depictions (e.g., controlling images) and tropes around Blackness and Black womanhood. Kristen M. Lavelle's dissertation, *Our Generation Had Nothing To Do With Discrimination: White Southern Memory of Jim Crow and Civil Rights*, investigated "how memory operates within the white racial frame . . . to uphold systemic racism and to maintain white's collective and individual identities (2011, p. iii).

Lavelle's and Feagin's stance on memory informs this study: According to Feagin (2010), "How we interpret and experience our racialized present depends substantially on our knowledge of and interpretations of our racialized past. The collective memory of that racist past

not only shapes, but legitimates, the established racial structure of today's society" (p. 17). As Feagin (2010) points out, white elites and historians have largely dictated how history is portrayed, and they operate out of the white racial frame in doing so, which results in a sanitized and white-centric historical record (Lavelle, 2011, pp. 28 - 36). The act of remembering can be a conscious political undertaking, a gesture of defiance against denial and silence (Lavelle, 2011).

In theorizing the frames and stereotypes Black women viewers must consume and then look past, I consider the White Racial Frame, as theorized by Dr. Joe Feagin. He shows the omnipresent white frame as encompassing verbal-cognitive elements, racist stereotyping, and ideology which are most often seen in deep emotions, visceral images, language accents, sounds (pp. ix). He explains that the white frame is taught in thousands of different ways -- at home, in schools, in the courts and in this case, the mass media. But can the opposite be true as well; can counter frames also be learned through those same mediums? Black biopics offer counter frames and counter narratives to the dominant images produced for more than a century since the introduction of radio and black-and-white television.

As seen through the white racial frame, media messages play a crucial role in forming social stereotypes (Ramasubramanian, 2010; Armstrong, Neuendorf, & Brentar, 1992; Fujioka, 1999). The white frame is concerned with dominant ideologies disseminated through the hegemonic structure, specifically about the marginalized and minoritized populations. As Feagin (2013) notes:

> Major framing of African Americans takes the form of deeply embedded associations with: animals and animalistic traits (subhuman); deviant gender roles, hyper-sexuality and threat to white sexual performance; criminality, violence, and danger; dirt and ignorance; claimed "ungrateful" and oppositional orientation; incapacity for self-determination or self-protection, and therefore requiring white paternalism and care (p. 163).

Often the white racial frame invades Black women's biopics, thus creating what is considered negative, one-dimensional, incomplete versions of history, body, and memory. When Black people are not a part of the producing, writing, directing of their own stories, then Black audiences are left with movies that feature Black women as subservient, grotesque and lacking. White racial frames remove Blackness from biopics and leave audiences with inauthentic public memory and Black history. Thus, it is no longer a Black biopic and more or less a historical drama framed by mass media. Even when white-owned production companies claim that their Black-casted historical dramas are Black-centered, the production and direction are often under the control of powerful white elites, as Feagin describes.

Put into the context of a white racial frame, Black women's biopics, representation, and public memory are at the hands of productions more often than not, which can lead to a problematic presentation of Black women in history. By acknowledging the WRF, this study makes space to address Hollywood's violent and subtle approach to cutting Black women from public memory. As we move into discussing who produces the Black content for Black audiences and where those stories are shared, we must also make space to investigate the history of Black stories in film over time; to do so, we must recap films. So often the worth of films is attached to the global acclaim. Put another way, certain stories are made memorable based on who is framing the story, who is included, and where/how the story is being disseminated. In the next section, I offer a brief history and content review as a foundation for searching for Black women's stories and histories in the shaping of Black public memory.

Who is producing "Black centered films?

In this last century, the media landscape has changed regarding who is producing and directing Black films with more films starring Black actors. The landscape has also changed in

terms of who is telling Black stories. However, this is not to be conflated because Black actors do not equate Black stories or Black-centered media. In fact, over the last century, more stories featuring Black actors were also accompanied by the buddy trope. This trope provided audiences with more visibility of the good Black person (Bogle, 2016) on screen but did not give Black audiences their own stories independent of whiteness. Black men and women starred alongside White actors and histories playing the supporting roles. Additionally, a history of controlling images often placed Black women in relation to Whiteness and gave them names that decreased their existence, minimized their contributions, and applied the erroneous and incomplete frames to their lives. Consider the mammy character who took care of White children, friends, and communities that transformed into the contemporary Black best friend role. Or the good Black friend roles that audiences saw with the magical negro caricatures.

In a search for Black stories and faces in the history of box office films, audiences have seen less than 100 films that were popularized through financial gains and international acclaim. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), which is the "world's most popular and authoritative source for information on movies, TV shows and celebrities" (2021), according to their website, provides a list of the Top 1000 Grossing Films of all time. I curated the following chart to discuss the financial gain attached to certain Black stories from this list. Apparently clear were the Black women's centered films on this list (See Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Top Grossing Films of All Time Starring Black People

#	# out of 1000	Movie Title	Year	Produced/Distributed by	Directed By	Starring Black Actors Leading

1	12	Black Panther	2018	Marvel Studios, Disney	Ryan Coogler	Chadwick Boseman
2	85	Independence Day	1996	Twentieth Century Fox	Roland Emmerich	Will Smith
3	149	Hancock	2008	Columbia Pictures	Peter Berg	Will Smith
4	151	Men in Black 3	2012	Columbia Pictures	Barry Sonnenfeld	Will Smith
5	167	Men in Black	1997	Columbia Pictures	Barry Sonnenfeld	Will Smith
6	264	Men in Black II	2002	Columbia Pictures	Barry Sonnenfeld	Will Smith
7	285	Bad Boys for life	2020	Columbia Pictures	Adil El Arbi, Bilall Fallah	Martin Lawrence & Will Smith
8	286	Django Unchained	2012	The Weinstein Company	Quentin Serintino	Jamie Foxx, Samuel L. Jackson,
9	300	The Bodyguard	1992	Kasdan Pictures	Nick Jackson	Whitney Houston
10	367	Tenet	2020	Warner Bros	Christopher Nolan	John David Washington
11	410	Rush Hour 2	2001	New Line Cinema	Brett Ratner	Chris Tucker
12	452	Green Book	2018	Participant Universal Pictures	Peter Farrelly	Mahershala Ali
13	480	The Blind Side	2009	Alcon Entertainment Warner Bros	John Lee Hancock	Quinton Aaron
14	483	Pursuit of Happyness	2006	Columbia Pictures	Gabrielle Muccino	Will Smith
15	531	Coming to America	1988	Paramount Pictures	John Landis	Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall
16	538	The Green Mile *	1999	Castle Rock Entertainment Warner Bros	Frank Darabont	Michael Clarke Duncan

Table 2.1 (continued)

#	# out of 1000	Movie Title	Year	Produced/Distributed by	Directed By	Starring Black Actors Leading
17	558	Nutty Professor	1996	Imagine Entertainment Universal Pictures	Tom Shadyac	Eddie Murphy
18	550	Bad Boys II	2003	Imagine Entertainment Universal Pictures	Michael Bay	Martin Lawrence & Will Smith
19	570	American Gangster	2007	Universal Pictures	Ridley Scott	Denzil Washington
20	574	The Princess and the Frog	2009	Walt Disney Studios	Ron Clements, John Musker	Anika Noni Rose
21	597	Rush Hour 3	2007	New Line Cinema	Brett Ratner	Chris Tucker
22	607	Get Out	2017	Universal Pictures	Jordan Peele	Daniel Kaluuya
23	608	Us	2019	Monkeypaw Productions Universal Pictures	Jordan Peele	Winston Duke, Lupita Nyong'o
24	647	Rush Hour	1998	New Line Cinema	Brett Ratner	Chris Tucker
25	673	Hidden Figures	2016	Fox 2000 Pictures Twentieth Century Fox	Theodore Melfi	Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monae
26	690	Sister Act	1992	Touchstone Pictures Buena Vista Pictures	Emile Ardolino	Whoopi Goldberg
27	694	Space Jam	1996	Warner Bros. Family Ent. Fathom Events	Joe Pytka	Michael Jordan
28	745	The Help	2011	DreamWorks Walt Disney Studios	Tate Taylor	Viola Davis, Octavia Spencer, Cicely Tyson, Anjanae Ellis
29	762	Creed II	2018	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer MGM	Steven Caple Jr.	Michael B. Jordan

30	793	Safe House	2012	Universal Pictures	Daniel Espinoza	Denzil Washington
31	795	Traffic *	2002	Compulsion Inc. USA Films	Steven Soderbergh	Don Cheadle
32	798	Philadelphia *	1993	TriStar Pictures	Jonathan Demme	Denzil Wasinghton
33	825	Straight Outta Compton	2015	Universal Pictures	F. Gary Gray	Corey Hawkins, Jason Mitchell, O'Shea Jackson Jr., Aldis Hodge, Neil Brown Jr., LaKeith Stanfield

Table 2.1 (continued)

#	# out of 1000	Movie Title	Year	Produced/Distributed by	Directed By	Starring Black Actors Leading
34	866	The Equalizer	2014	Columbia Pictures Sony Pictures	Antoine Fuqua	Denzil Washington
35	873	The Equalizer 2	2018	Columbia Pictures	Antoine Fuqua	Denzil Washington
37	883	12 Years A Slave	2013	New Regency Productions Twentieth Century Fox	Steve McQueen	Chiwetel Ejiofor, Lyputa Nyong'o
38	894	Inside Man	2006	Universal Pictures	Spike Lee	Denzil Washington
39	930	Deja Vu	2006	Touchstone Pictures Buena Vista Pictures	Tony Scott	Denzil Washington & Paula Patton
40	957	Lee Daniels' The Butler	2013	Follow Through Productions The Weinstein Company	Lee Daniels	Forrest Whittaker, David Oyelowo & Oprah Winfrey
41	968	Dr. Dolittle 2	2001	Twentieth Century Fox	Steve Carr	Eddie Murphy

42	978	Big Momma's House	2000	Twentieth Century Fox	Raja Gosnell	Martin Lawerence
43	983	Creed	2015	MGM Warner Bros.	Ryan Coogler	Michael B. Jordan
44	984	Gemini Man	2019	Skydance Media Paramount Pictures	Ang Lee	Will Smith

Glancing over this list of top-grossing films of all time, the usual list of Black actors recurs more frequently than any other group. Will Smith, Denzel Washington, Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, Chris Tucker, and Jamie Foxx are names that frequent this list the most, with only a small number of Black women starring in top-grossing films. Only a few of those films were actually about Black women at all. The production companies that were most often highlighting Black actors/bodies (not necessarily Black stories) were Columbia Pictures, New Line Cinema, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal Pictures, Warner Brothers, with honorable mentions being Walt Disney and MGM. But where were the Black women in these top-grossing films? Where were their stories?

In the history of top-grossing films of all time, Black women did not appear in many of the titles. White men directed the 2011 film, *The Help*, and 2016 film, *Hidden Figures*, in both of which Octavia Spencer, an award-winning Black woman actress, co-starred. At almost $236M, *Hidden Figures* was the only BWB that made the list. It begs the question, are Black women's stories not worth seeing globally? Are Black stories relatable, palatable, or generalizable enough for other audiences in the genre of historical dramas and specifically biopics? Does that matter to Black audiences who are supporting their stories?

Over the last century, the number of Black directors and creators has also increased. Those directors include Spike Lee, Lee Daniels, Tyler Perry, John Singleton, Barry Jenkins, Ava

Duvernay, Jordan Peele, Ryan Coogler, Dee Rees, Hughes Brothers, Mario Van Peebles, Malcolm D. Lee, F. Gary Gray, Gina Prince Bythewood, Rick Famuyiwa, George Tillman Jr., Robert Townsend, and Julie Dash. This is not an exhaustive list of directors, but these have created Black stories for television and film. The list of those creatives producing Black women's stories has changed throughout the last century of Black stories. More Black films centering on Black women have been released in the last two years, but not all of them saw box office dissemination. While this is later discussed in the findings chapters, I do want to discuss the current landscape of Black women's stories in film.

Producing Black Women's Stories

The Foundation: Black Women As Cultural Readers

Do the creators of Black women's stories care if Black women positively respond to their art? Are Black and non-Black creators of historical films concerned with aesthetics and authenticity of intersectionality inside of Black women's stories? Jacqueline Bobo's seminal work on Black women audiences responding to certain Black-centered media, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995), addressed this issue. Bobo argues that "because critics misunderstand Black women's experiences, they misconstrue the significance of these women's cultural work" (p. 2). The cultural production of Black women's experiences differs from any other group seen on television.

As Bobo's works inform my own, I am also interested in the reception of Black women's stories in film. However, the representation on film requires the most interrogation because Black women are "reading" these media texts with their identities and experiences. Bobo reported that Black men and even some Black scholars read the film negatively, judging it more

harshly because of the limited Black media and ongoing stereotypical and negative depictions of Black men in the media. For her, it also matters who is creating these types of stories. Interestingly enough, Bobo's work looked at Alice Walker's novel, which famous director Steven Spielberg adapted in the movie *The Color Purple*, which compares to the Black women's biopics that are discussed in this study as many of those films were directed, written and/or produced by white counterparts who were interested in the cinematography and the representation of Black women stories.

Bobo goal moved beyond just the commercialization of the Black women's stories and into the reception of seeing Black women's stories on screen:

> . . the film is a commercial venture produced in Hollywood by a white male according to all of the tenets and conventions of commercial cultural production in the United States. The manner in which an audience responds to such a film is varied, diverse, and complex. I am especially concerned with analyzing how Black women have responded . . . to examine the way in which a specific audience creates meanings from a mainstream text and uses the reconstructed meaning to empower themselves and their social group. (Bobo, 2007, p. 179)

Ultimately, Bobo interviewed two groups of Black women between 1987 and 1988; some had read Walker's novel, and others had only watched the film adaptation. She asked them about their identities, "background, histories, and social and cultural experiences" (1995, p. 99) and their affiliations to "gauge their reactions to aspects of the novel and the film that dealt with religious issues, gender roles, sexuality, and more. This work lays the foundation for this study because it places Black women at the forefront of confronting Hollywood's recreation and construction of Black women's experiences and other Black women critics who have varied in their readings of Black media.

I place this dissertation in conversation with hooks' oppositional gaze for Black female spectators and Bobo's oppositional reading in *The Color Purple*. Both scholars position Black

women's reception as the focal point of reception studies while also addressing the fact that reception is connected to the dominant group member's ideological understandings of underrepresented groups. A popular term that describes this phenomenon is Misogynoir. Misogynoir, "coined by queer Black feminist professor Moya Bailey" describes the specific misogyny directed toward Black women in American visual and popular culture because of their race and gender (Kendall, 2019, p. 88). Misogynoir and the existence of intersectionality help reveal Black women's experiences in society and on film, which impact each other in the study of audience reception to Black popular culture. Moving from the present call for Black stories to the understanding of Hollywood's construction of Black public memory through film to the production of Black women's stories, I now move more specifically into the creation of historical Black women's stories through Black biopics. Put into the context of Black women's biopics and Black biopics more generally, the battle for visibility has been a tough one for storytellers and producers as there has always been a heavy price attached to the cost of Black stories.

Selling vs. Telling Black Stories

It has often been assumed that Black biopics were unpopular, unwanted, and would not sell because they lacked a global appeal. So much so that Hollywood would disrespect and unauthenticate a story to sell a film. In a recent example of trying to sell a story versus telling Black stories, Julie Roberts, an award-winning White American actress, was approached by producers to play Harriet Tubman (Tinubu, 2019). The Harriet Tubman! An abolitionist and Black woman who helped to free enslaved Black people. Hollywood producers had been trying since 1994 to create another Tubman biopic. The first Tubman biopic, *A Woman Called Moses* starring Cicely Tyson, released in 1978 on NBC, chronicled Tubman's life through a seemingly

mythical portrait of the remarkable woman (Dabel, 2009). The struggle then appears to be resisting the mythologizing of historical Black women figures or taking away from their stories in even more violent ways by using non-Black characters to Blackface their bodies, thus caricaturing their existence. Both options have been used, and both options have minimized the magnitude of Black women's contributions to American society.

Black biopics seemed to be an unpopular venture because historically, White audiences would not watch a story about Black people with an all-Black cast. Director George Lucas found this to be particularly true about Red Tails when he searched for studios to bankroll and distribute his film about the World War II Black fighter pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen (Demby, 2013).

George Lucus noted:

> It's because it's an all-Black movie," Lucas said. "There's no major White roles in it at all. ... I showed it to all of them, and they said, 'No. We don't know how to market a movie like this . . . I'm saying, if this doesn't work, there's a good chance you'll stay where you are for quite a while. (Lucus interview with The Daily Show, 2012)

In the case of Red Tails, NPR author Gene Demby said Red Tails "sucked," but despite the critical analysis of the film, Demby also found that "church and community groups planned outings to see Red Tails in theatre to prove that there was a big market for big-budget, positive portrayals of Black life (Demby, 2013). To much surprise, Red Tails won its opening weekend because of the support of the Black audience. Demby found that the success of the Black films was due in part to this kind of loyalty and responsibility felt in part by the Black audience.

What was clear throughout the article was that Black audiences support Black men's stories, but there was little to no mention of any Black woman's biopics and the support of the production and distribution of her story. Black women's stories were not even a part of the

conversations leading me to ask: who is producing Black stories and why? What was clear from article to article was the lack of Black women's stories and an appreciation for their films compared to the Black biopics canon.

Since 2017, the number of Black biopics has increased, creating interest in the retelling of Black history through their perspectives and stories of our beloved Black figures and unsung heroes. Author Tambay Obenson (2017) found that more than 60 Black biopics were in various stages of development, some of which have since been released, others have been on the list for more than five years, while some may never see the light of day. Of those 60 subjects listed, more than half of those films were focused on Black women's stories. Of the 32 Black women's biopics in development, five have been distributed through box offices, made-for-television, and streaming platforms.

The number of Black women's biopics now in development reveals the cultural shifts happening in Black popular culture in today's society. Black women have too long been silenced or erased from Black film histories and are just now beginning to share the intersectional realities of their existence. Today, we find that many Black women's stories are in production fights similar to the battles for Black men's stories to secure financiers and distribution costs. An important aspect of audience studies is the role of production and political economy. Conversations in the production room and on-set determine major storytelling elements from actor choices, soundtracks, scenes are included, along with distribution and access.

The Uniqueness of Black Women's Stories

Utilizing Black feminist cultural criticism and Black feminist epistemologies as the central framework allows scholars to explore the vast realities Black women in America and

worldwide have experienced. This dissertation employs the teachings from Black feminism and Black feminist epistemologies, including the Black feminist autoethnography with critical autoethnographies in context with each other.

What does this mean for a study that centers on Black women's stories and utilizes the voices of the entire Black collective? It means that Black women's studies are used to frame this work and to compare the findings based on gender: As Smith notes (2001),

> Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the "real world" or white and /or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown. (cited by Barbara Smith, 2001, p. 7)

Black women scholars understand that Black women's Black identity is not the same as Black men; neither is white women's womanhood the same as Black women's. Realized by intersectionality, complex tales like those found in Black biopics that reveal oppressions across social class, region, religion, sexuality, economics, and education disclose the vast realities of the Black woman's American experience (Davis, 2001). Taken together with media scholarship, Black biopics offer a unique opportunity for exploration through a Black feminist cultural criticism framework, through the stories being shared, what they teach Black viewers, and what themes are present throughout contemporary storytelling.

hooks (2014) argues that Black women are in an unusual position in this society, as seen in the Black biopics that will be discussed in the dissertation. The complicated way of presenting Black women allows the audience to see stories, not stereotypes. This dissertation approaches Black feminist thought through storytelling and storytelling through a critical lens (Cooper, 2016) and Black feminist thought. Much like Audre Lorde, Jacqueline Bobo, and Aisha Durham, this dissertation views Black women as cultural readers, cultural producers, and warriors fighting

to tell a holistic story about whole people from the diverse diaspora for the diaspora. The amplification of voices and experiences can be done by centering Black expressions through the focus groups discussions that this study adopts.

Audience Reception, Memory, & Black Films

Many audience and critical-cultural scholars are concerned with audience analysis of media messages, but none are more famous or quoted than the British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall. Stuart Hall's work on encoding and decoding the media with audiences helps to shape this current study's theoretical framework. Critical/cultural studies scholars use Hall's encoding/decoding theory to discuss the construction of messages and the interaction between the media text and its audience. In Hall's Encoding/Decoding (1980), he posits that the composition of a message (encoding) is bound by personal and social limits within which it is read (encoding) (Means, 1996, p.16). Hall argues that audiences engage in "decoding" media messages to make sense of them (Hall, 1973; 1980), which directly involves the audience's relationship with the media.

Hall argues that just as messages are constructed and interpreted, so too are audiences' receptions (Means, 1996, p.16). Like Means' 1996 dissertation, *Satire or Stereotype?: A Reception Analysis of African American Portrayals in Black Situation Comedies*, I use Hall's model to understand better that programs do not have singular meanings but are polysemic texts and have a range of meanings (Means, 1996). Coleman and other scholars noted that audiences are not passive recipients of constructed texts (1996), but they are actively engaged in deconstructing or decoding the media messages they are consuming. They are engaging and consuming these messages with their own decoded meanings attached to them. Black women do

this, as Bobo's study (2007) revealed. Bobo and Means both used Hall's encoding/decoding to understand better the complex and dynamic relationships between the specific Black-centered media and Black audiences.

Hall's work revealed that message reception was not linear at all, seamlessly moving from sender to recipient. He reminds us that if "no meaning is taken, there can be no consumption; if the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect" (1980, p. 51). Hall says that an event must become a 'story' before it can become a communicative event (1980, p. 51), which begs the question for this research, who is telling the stories that Black audiences are consuming and engaging?

> The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a moment of the production process in its larger sense, though the latter is predominant because it is the point of departure for the realization of the message. Production and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical but they are related . . .. Before a message can have an effect, satisfy a need or be put to a use, it must first be appropriated as meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which have an effect, influence, entertain, ideological or behavioural consequences. (Hall, 1980, p. 53)

Hall identifies three different types of coding or readings: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. Dominant reading refers to audiences reading messages in the ways the producers of that message intended them. Negotiated reading denotes a reading that is a "mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" and "it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make grand significations" while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules" (1980, p. 60). Put another way, negotiated readings make spaces for the dominant and situated elements. The last reading is the oppositional reading. The oppositional reading is where many of the Black scholars in this paper have settled. To read with an oppositional reading means to read against, in opposition to, the dominant meanings attached to the media text.

For several reasons, Black audiences have read against the dominant when the representation depicted them in a generalized, stereotypical, and incomplete way. Douglas Kellner stated that to understand a media artifact, one must be able to understand the socio-economic context in which it is created (production); analyze its constructed meaning(s); and determine the impact on collectives and individuals and how these audiences contribute to a meaning-making process and the production and distribution of cultural products like films (Yousman, Yousman, Dines & McMahon Humez, 2021, p. 1). Additionally, Black audiences and Black critics have been more critical and interrogative of Black-centered media because of the representations and responses to those representations. Hall's, Bobo's, Means', and Kellner's individual work on media reception all point to the complex relationship between media and audiences and the complex nature of audience reception through the meaning-making process in relation to individual identities and experiences.

Black media representations have been under the microscope of criticism for more than a century now from both white and Black audiences. From media critics to scholarly rhetoricians, those with an opinion shared it widely. Nevertheless, scholars are not the only ones with an opinion or reaction to the representations in media featuring Black people and Black stories. Audiences of all racial groups interpret the Black historical figures featured in mainstream media's Black biopics. Their reception to this genre of films is the foundation for this study. This focus begins with an intentional view of reception studies and Black women's media portrayals.

Reception studies have also been called media audience studies or audience analysis, but all of the terms refer to understanding how the audience reads a certain message from a sender (Staiger, 2005). What is known about receptions research is that there is not simply a hypodermic needle effect on audiences, especially Black audiences. Meaning, in particular, is

never “just transferred from the media to the audiences” (Schroeder, Drotner, Kline, and Murray, 2003, p. 122). Reception studies ask, “What kinds of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changes over time? And do these meanings have any effects? Cognitive? Emotional? Social? Political?” (Staiger, 2005).

Here, several questions emerged. Have media studies forgotten about Black biopics, or Black women’s biopics, more specifically? Have we ever asked the question: Do Black audiences care about real stories or the authenticity in them? Do authenticity and truth in representation impact nostalgia and public memory for the audience concerned with the factual historical storyline in entertainment media.

George Custen, author of Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public Memory, moves the discussion beyond the question of how realistic is Hollywood biography, and into the realization that audiences treat biopics as “as real because despite the obvious distortions ranging from the minor to outright camp, Hollywood films are believed to be real by many viewers” (p. 7). Custen argues that these films do not offer audiences a concrete illustration or literal recapitulation, but rather it is an explanation of “history” (1992, p. 7). Unfortunately and interestingly, according to John E. O'Connor, “most well-educated Americans are learning most of their American history from film and television” (1988, p. 1201). Custen posits that if we are to view the biopic as a type of historical artifact, then we must consider the issues of how true it is and how the process of creating film inevitably alters the truth or accuracy of the telling of history (Custen, 1992, p.2).

To put this in context with what we know about Hollywood being used as a tool for cultural learning, inaccurate histories do not work for Black people. When Black biopics or historical dramas take up stories and insert Black characters without care for truth, this process

alters and reconstructs our historical discourse. If produced by those who care not for the truth surrounding Black lives and Black experiences, Black biopics cannot accurately center the truth in their stories without applying a "white frame." Multiple truths and perspectives of truth exist inside of historical narratives and memories. Black women's stories host intersectional truths that cannot be and should not be masked by any creative liberties found in the whitewashing of history for the sake of palatable cinematography.

The Tension Between Authentic, White-Washed & Palatable Cinematography

One area that causes most of the tension in media storytelling is the retelling of real events and real people, especially Black people. Problematizing this retelling, even more, is the framing of Black stories by Black and non-Black creators. With the implementation of advancing mobile devices and citizen journalism over the last two decades, mass audiences have been exposed to the very real images of Black trauma that later became pieces of Black history, and some became characters in historical dramas based on those real events (e.g., *Fruitvale Station*, 2013 the story of the tragic shooting of Oscar Grant).

Making sense of these moments with Black audiences who lived through some of the most traumatic moments in American history is also a question of identity-making and daring to gaze upon the construction of Black stories critically. bell hooks, in The Oppositional Gaze (2003), told us that "there is power in looking . . . and [the] overwhelming longing to look [produces] a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze" (pp. 94-95). She goes on further to say that "speaking against the construction of white representations of Blackness is totalizing," and this site of resistance rarely deals with the realities of Black women (pp. 94-95). By focusing on the

reproduction of racism in cinema and television, hooks points us in the direction of critical interrogation of Black films by Black female audiences. hooks notes:

> Black films were also subject to critical interrogation. Since they came into being in part as a response to the failure of white-dominated cinema to represent Blackness in a manner that did not reinforce white supremacy, they too were critiqued to see if images were seen as complicit with dominant cinematic practices . . . As spectators, Black men could repudiate the reproduction of racism in cinema and television, the negation of Black presence, even as they could feel as though they were rebelling against white supremacy by daring to look, by engaging phallocentric politics of spectatorship . . . Black women have written little about Black female spectatorship, our moviegoing practices . . . Talking with Black women of all ages, in different areas of the United States, about their filmic looking relations, I hear again and again ambivalent responses to cinema. Only a few of the Black women I talked with remembered the pleasure of race movies, and even those who did, felt that pleasure interrupted and usurped by Hollywood. (2003, p. 95-96).

hooks places us in conversation with the elements that Black stories are almost indigestible to Black audiences while making it palatable for non-Black and White audiences. Mass audiences have seemingly been pushed to accept Black trauma on screen as the normal, delectable, and desirable representation, but not the authentic Black victories. More often, the audience sees the White savior trope added to Black stories that can stand alone on their own acumen and resilience that too often gets diluted in the story under the guise of capital. The altering of Black figures through historical dramas and Black biopics has been happening since their inception. The cinematography of Black biopics is a tricky genre where the blurred lines of nonfiction and fiction become the nexus of storytelling. The genre and the audiences are subject to subjective cinematography, a twisted cultural learning artifact and often an incomplete story that leaves Black audiences needing and wanting more.

Black historical stories have been altered throughout history, shaping and reshaping the historical memory of certain groups by erasing some actors in major events and minimizing the

impact of others. With some film directors, their creative liberties have impacted Black public memory very harshly.

Arnold Burks (2019) states in his online report, "White Biopics Can Be Fabricated; Black Ones Can Not:

> " . . . lying is normal behavior for white filmmakers. They could care less about the thousands of Black kids who will watch their films and absorb ahistorical lies. They only care about their precious "artistic" license. When Black viewers watch biopics, or films based on real events, they do so to learn from the past and solve current problems. White viewers, on the other hand, don't do this because more than likely they have no problems to solve. When we watch films like 12 Years a Slave or Roots, it's almost a religious experience. We may become somber, reflective, even emotional. (2019)"

In this quotation, Burks makes it clear for his readers that films based on real Black life cannot assume the innocence of creative liberties will not alter the public and collective memory of Black history. With little access to the same knowledge production and accurate historical facts that capture the wholeness of Black people's contribution to American and global societies, mainstream films have to be careful of what they are feeding audiences.

Audience reception studies, particularly those using focus group methodology and Black media, may not be as widely used as other methodologies. Nevertheless, this methodology is impactful at returning meaningful data to better grapple with the interpretive responses by groups of people. Audience reception studies typically utilize several methods to capture the individuals and collective experiences with media to explore engagement and consumption, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups discussions, big data like social media, ethnography, and autoethnography. Staiger argues that one major approach to audience reception is phenomenology which focuses on how the interpreter engages with the text (Staiger, 2005, p.10).

Studying Black Biopics

Few studies have focused on Black biopics in mainstream media, and only a few insist on rhetorical analysis of Black stories. One popular type of Black biopic is the Black musician story, also called Black jazz biopics (Varriale, 2012). Varriale states that "biopics construct narratives that deal problematically with issues of race" and historically deal with "a distinctive notion of 'popular' which frames Blackness as otherness and whiteness as human nature (2012; p. 27).

Like Varriale, I also argue that Black biopics change the representation of African Americans in the context of historical narratives, race relations, and cultural storytelling. Black biopics were needed then and are needed today as these films deepened the discussion of racialized, gendered, and class aspects of jazz music and Black identity. Films like *Notorious*, *What's Love Got To Do With It*, and *Ray* construct rhythm n' blues as Black, racially charged music; and place negative, cheap, dangerous, and criminal imagery around Black artists' background, implying ontological differences of the sexual politics within the Black body between men and women.

Helene Charlery's HBO's Black Women Artist Biopics: *The Josephine Baker Story* and *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (2016) electronic article is another example that speaks directly to the construction of Black women icons memory. At the time of the article, fewer BWBs were available, but several of them appeared to be musician stories and made-for-television. HBO was one of the few to popularize Black women's stories in a "niche" market, as it is referred to in the text. Charlery notes that *What's Love Got to Do With It and Lady Sings the Blues* both focus on Black female tragedy rather than Black female triumph:

> These two women artists' biopics characteristically center on the victimization of their subjects, relegating the construction of their careers and success to the

> background. American critic, bell hooks contends that *What's Love Got to Do With It* foregrounds the protagonists' conjugal relationships and downplays Tina Turner's career as a duet partner or as a single singer: It's so interesting how the film stops with Ike's brutality, as though it is Tina Turner's life ending. Why is it that her success is less interesting than the period of her life when she's a victim?" (Charlery, 2016)

Charlery posits that this focus on female victimology instead of their success "tones down the valuable creative and political contributions of Black female artists to American society and culture by diverting the viewer's attention onto the dramatization of their private life stories" (Charlery, 2016). This is key in this dissertation as it centers on the gendered differences present in intersectional Black history stories. Biopics contribute to a shared perspective on national history or historical events and may reinforce approaches to history that prioritize hegemonic points of view and continue the tradition of ignoring or actively silencing the divergent voices of historically subjugated populations (Williams, 2019, p. 14).

In another recent text, "A Companion to the Biopics," Hobbs wrote about the representation of prominent "Afro-Americans in Biopics" (2019), asking the question about the emergence of the number of films being released. For some, the general biopic is a mediator of the past (Gustafsson, 2008), connecting contemporary media and media audiences to historical events. In a more recent piece, graduate student Nicole N. Williams (2020) viewed Black biopics: 42 (Jackie Robinson's story), *Hidden Figures* (NASA Black women) and Harriet using content analysis to understand the linchpin character in each movie better. Williams found that the linchpin character was used to " (1) ensure white centrality, (2) minimize the Black protagonists, and (3) to present an individual character as being capable of mitigating the effects of deliberate, race-based systemic inequities (p. iv). According to Williams, the linchpin trope is a White character in a majority non-White film, who is centered and plays a pivotal role in the film's narrative while also appropriating African American vernacular. Most of these studies on

Black biopics are focused on whiteness studies, white characters, white stories, and sometimes missing the audience reception all together.

Responding to Black Biopics

Black audiences have always had an active response to Black films (Ely, 1991), even Black biopics; these responses can be seen in their art and the critiques offered via protests, box office successes, and online appreciation. This is seen most recently when Black audiences demanded that other Black viewers boycott *Harriet* (2019) because of the inauthentic and stereotypical imagery in the film (Blackmon, 2019). This event also occurred when *Nina* (2016) was released because of how the producers depicted Nina Simone using an actress who required darker makeup and nose prosthetics to play the role (Sun, 2016). Black audiences care deeply about their presentation and representation in the media. These presentations, whether fictional or nonfictional, have real-life implications for Black people. Audience reception has been discussed and studied in several ways (rhetorical criticisms) and methods (qualitative and quantitative).

Research Questions

RQ1: How do Black American women regard themselves in relation to Black women's biopics?

RQ1a: What meanings, themes, and interpretations do Black American women (audiences) bring to and take away from Black women's biopics?

RQ2: How does the construction of representation for Black women's biopics impact the engagement and reception of these films for Black American women audience?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

"Stories are data with soul" (Sarojini Nadar, 2014)

Overview

This chapter introduces two methodological approaches for the current study on Black women's biopics and Black women's audience reception. First, the study uses interpretative qualitative methods through focus group discussions. The focus group discussions used a listing exercise to assist in recalling Black biopics with the participants. First, the focus group discussions were thematically analyzed. A pilot study of Black biopics and historical dramas was conducted a year before this study commenced, and its details are briefly summarized as preliminary data informing the current research project. Next, the pre- and post-focus group surveys are discussed. The participant profiles and summaries are also discussed. The rationale for choosing these methods and their collective benefits on the overview study is discussed as well as my outline for data collection. In the end, a new research method emerges from the methodology and is discussed below. To examine the Black women's biopics, I begin locating BWB's through the last century and moving to the procedures used to discuss these films.

Locating Black Women's Stories Through Film: The Last Twenty Years

Since 2000, the number of Black women biopics has increased greatly. The number is slowly growing and is moving consistently, with many creatives and production companies writing to share the stories of many Black historical figures. More often, the Black biopics to which audiences are privy are primarily exceptional, extraordinary, and excellent beyond

measure and despite the burden of American culture. However, this exceptional lens from which White hegemonic media views Black bodies is problematic in several ways. First, it means that Black women's stories are produced far less frequently. Second, when they are produced, it is often a lacking tale of history. Third, Black women continued to be intentionally invisible in American culture because of the powerful white elite's control over production companies.

While studying Black biopics, it became increasingly clear that Black women's stories were laden with intersectional truths. Those truths would reveal the realities in the curated stories and the stories that occur in and with those Black viewers who use their subjectivity to understand and connect with the Black film. Biopics fall into different categories based on who is telling the story: the individual themselves, their close family and friends, or an outside historian or scholar; what is the story about; how the film is distributed.

Some Black biopics are released as feature films through box offices, while others are seen on television. Made-for-television films have been seen movies on Lifetime (*CrazySexyCool: TLC story, The Clark Sisters, Whitney, Aaliyah: Princess of R&B, Salt & Pepa, Toni Braxton*); BET (*Bobby Brown Story, New Edition Story*); MTV/VH1 (*All Eyez On Me*), with some older films being through other networks (*The Temptations, Little Richard, Jackson 5: The American Dream*). Other platforms include streaming services (*Self Made*), premium networks (*Bessie, Dorothy Dandridge*), with very few films making it to the box office. These films were discussed as their salience and recency triggered memories with the participants.

Conducting Research With/As Black Women

> Although Black women have always conducted research using qualitative methodologies, rarely are Black women given space to play with or theorize methodological moves in qualitative inquiry. (Evans-Winter, 2019, p. 1).

This work is deeply rooted in the ontological and epistemological understandings of Black history and its role in knowing, recognizing, and analyzing the elements of identity and identity-making. I posit that Black history set inside mainstream media makes space for us to learn, advocate, and imagine Black identity that is a progressive, transformative and historical truth. The meaning that comes from this media text is reflected in the meaning-making of its viewers. With this in mind, this study utilized the understanding of qualitative methods from several interconnected approaches to answer the research questions.

For this, the study adopts an intersection of social constructivism/interpretivism and critical theory paradigms. According to Lincoln and Guba, social constructivism states that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed (1985, 2000; Neuman, 2000; Schwandt, 2000), which is important to this study because social media, Black film and Black identity are also constructions. My embodied and reflexive place in this study also means that "inquiry is influenced by the researcher and the context under study" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 100). This approach allows my voice to be heard in the conversations about the audience and audience reception to the realities presented in films and the ones lived for meaning-making. Most importantly, because social constructivists believe that reality is socially constructed (just like race), individuals develop subjective meanings of their personal experiences; this provides a way for multiple meanings and interpretations of a text or situation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). My goal is to understand the multiple realities from the participants' perspectives (focus groups and myself) and interact with them in meaningful ways (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 29). Like other constructivist researchers, I recognize that my background shapes my interpretation, and I must position myself in the research to acknowledge my own cultural, social, and historical experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

In addition to the social constructivist approach that this dissertation employs, I also adopt a critical theory that includes feminist perspectives, racialized discourses, queer theory, and disability inquiry (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 29). The critical theory paradigm has a clear focus on social justice and moves beyond the spaces where social constructivists missed addressing injustice and inequality because of its attachments to politics, action, and advocacy. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012, p. 29), critical perspectives involve research like narrative analysis with empowering and democratizing goals. Critical research aims to create political debate and discussion to empower people to take action, change existing social structures and processes, and reconceptualize the entire research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). For me, both social constructivism and critical approaches help shape and better understand the data gathered from Black biopics and Black audience's perspectives and engagement.

Black Women POV & the Researcher's Positionality

As a faithful and loyal viewer of Black biopics since my youth, this project resulted from my background and thoughts surrounding the history of Black biographical images and my vested interest in Black women's stories and how they are consumed. Over the last 30 years, watching these Black biopics with particular attention to the last decade offered me learning unavailable in my primary or secondary educational institutions. My parents' deeply religious and Black experience through the Jim Crow era guided me back to these Black films for learning and relearning, storytelling and counter-storytelling, stereotypes, and counter-stereotypes. Watching these films was a family experience that shaped my Black identity and Black pride, and with my Black knowledge of American society and the treatment of Black bodies. I started

watching these films alone with a critical eye during my graduate school years because the critical response to Black popular culture on digital platforms like Twitter, especially Black biopics, was overwhelming. I found myself engaged in the appreciation of consumption, engagement, and regurgitation with strangers who viewed the film and brought their opinions and critiques to the social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter using hashtags to connect across the globe. I witnessed the oppositional and negotiated gaze as discussed in Stuart Hall's work (1980) amongst Black people who had either lived through the periods or were extremely disengaged from the on-screen violence against Black people. I started reading and listening to why Black women would engage or disengage in Black popular culture in the non-fictional genres. Their reasons for engagement, consumption and critique ranged based on their various intersectional identities (i.e., age, religious affiliation, educational level, region, motherhood, upbringing, etc.)

Asking Black women to discuss their Black popular culture consumption is not a new phenomenon. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jacqueline Bobo's seminal work (1995) on Black women and "The Color Purple," "Daughters of the Dust," and "Waiting to Exhale" in the text, Black Women As Cultural Readers laid the groundwork for this study. The Color Purple (1985) is Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of Alice Walker's novel. Bobo interviewed two separate groups of Black women and found that their responses to the film were just as diverse as the population. Bobo gathered self-identified African American women inside group interviews and found that despite African American men's disapproval of the film, the women identified with the images and stories inside the media surrounding Black women's plight. Because of this audience reception study, this current study frames films inside of the Black popular culture. The

group communication between the women in the focus group was vital to this research as a formula for collecting their stories as reception.

Expanding on the scholarship of Hall, Bobo, and Coleman on Black audience reception, I want to see what identity work is present in Black women's stories as they consumed Black women's biopics -- more now, following the deaths of so many Black people and the resounding call for visibility via streaming platforms' capitalist allyship. My position as a researcher in this topic began as I found myself engaging in Black women's biopics.

Why Focus Groups?

Qualitative methodology has greatly impacted who I am as a scholar and this research study. Storytelling in qualitative methods like interviewing and focus groups provides me the space to tell our stories and for my Black sister-friends to create and narrate their life histories and engagement with the media. In this circular relationship of stories: real-life impacts stories, stories impact the media, media impacts our lives, and how we see ourselves in the reflections of reality inside media representation of Black women's lives. Black women are impacted by the media's portrayal of their stories, lives, and the meaning. Often Black women discuss these impacts in the groups we have cultivated over time. Even if Black women watched these Black biopics alone, they discussed its impacts with the people closest to them who also impacted their identity-making. This is a key point of emphasis and leans on Coleman's earlier analysis of identity and media reception among African American audiences. Specifically for Black women, their identity and reading of their media representation are impacted by many other societal and institutional factors.

I approach research and life "qualitatively." Like Venus E. Evans-Winters writes in *Black Feminism Qualitative Inquiry* (2019), life becomes data; data becomes praxis; praxis becomes awareness; awareness becomes critical consciousness. The decision to hold focus groups was based on several considerations related to culture and consumption. First, the topic of Black media was determined to be fit for a group setting.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak across the globe, I wanted to meet with small groups (10-12) of women in their homes, churches, event centers, and the like; these women would be from the same families, organizations, institutions, and workplaces. As a researcher studying the community from which I am a part, I occupy an insider-researcher view. Almost as a tradition, I watch Black media with the intention of discussing it with others because it was a ritual in my home. With Black biopics particularly, I watched classic films like *Little Richard, The Temptations*, *and Jackson 5: American Dream* and parts of *What's Love Got To Do With It* with my parents, sitting on their bed, singing and dancing with my twin brother, Garrick, to the melodies that our very religious parents let us sing so innocently, unaware of their meanings. I believe that others, like myself, also watched these films with their families. Over the years, I continued the tradition with other family members and friends, watching to support films, watching to learn a piece of history unavailable in the curriculum I was privy to as an adolescent. Watching to be inspired by the life lessons of other Black people, I found myself in the theatres watching movies like *Hidden Figures* (2016), crying beside my sister-in-law at the women's role in history.

Black Media and Focus Groups

Staiger says that memories have played significant roles in media reception studies in terms of methodology and findings. In my research on media engagement and resonance, I have

found that focus groups were useful to capture data in the discussions between participants about their Black media consumption, memories, and choices. In that study, I used same-gender and mixed-gender groups to isolate the findings based on race, gender, sex, class, region, age and educational level. More often than not, focus group studies have been used to distinguish group-based differences to discuss the impact of media on a particular group of people more deeply.

Click and Smith-Frigerio's (2019) focus groups of 31 Black women viewers were used to explore how their demographic group made sense of FOX's *Empire* and its main lead, Cookie Lyon, played by Taraji P. Henson. They found that the Black women were able to move beyond the stereotypical images of Cookie and see the person, businesswoman, mother, wife, sister, and friend that she embodied in the primetime programming.

French (2013) also used Black American high school girls for two focus groups to understand how Black girls confront racialized, sexualized, and gendered scripts related to media images. Once again, women and girls were placed in these groups to have collective conversations about the media they were all collectively consuming and impacted.

Adam-Bass, Stevenson, and Slaughter Kotzin (2014) used focus groups to measure the meaning of Black media stereotypes and their relationship to racial identity, Black history knowledge, and racial socialization of African American youth with 100 participants. This was one of the few contemporary studies that also used mixed-gender groups to have larger conversations about race and gender identity in media.

In most cases, we come to know audience reception through quantitative data analysis. Ward, Jerald, and Cole (2019) used survey data from 594 heterosexual Black women to connect mainstream media use (music videos, reality TV programming, movies, and women's magazines) to Black women's gender beliefs and sexual agency. Quantitative audience data

makes larger data sets accessible and creates interesting analyses, but something remarkable occurs in amplifying audiences' voices in research about them.

With these few studies, a gap remains that intersects Black biopics and audience analysis with special attention to storytelling and identity or how the story impacts and invades the audiences' intersectional storytelling about themselves.

Pilot Study

In the Fall of 2019, I gathered five groups from a predominantly White institution in the southern region of the United States to discuss the impact of Black historical dramas on collective identification. I gathered 30 Black individuals from around the community who responded to an open call for participants in the focus group research. The participants ranged from students to student workers, with a large number being graduate and professional students. They ranged from 18 to the mid-50s in age and originated predominantly from southern and southeast regions of the United States. Each focus group watched a different combination of clips from "When They See Us (2019)," "Selma (2014)," and "Detroit" using online streaming services of Netflix and Hulu. For Netflix, the movies were filed under the category, "drama" and the duration of the film clips was between 3 - 12 minutes. Each of the film's clips displayed an interaction between Black people and White police officers, which was a retrospective regulation about recent historical dramas. After we watched the clips, we discussed our emotions regarding the clip and Black identity.

I used a tool called "listing" with the participating audiences. I asked the audience to 1) list all of the Black television shows they remember growing up, 2) which of those shows could they most identify with, why and why not; 3) list all of the Black biopics they had seen, and then

4) which of those biopics were about women. From that list, it became increasingly clear that Black women's stories had been forgotten, erased and seemingly invisible in the public's collective memory of Black history. There was the gap. There was a significant numerical gap between the number of Black men and women that Black audiences remembered or recalled viewing in the biopic consumption. I noted this significant difference in Black public memory, particularly Black women's public memory.

Qualitative Methods & Black Audiences

Qualitative research is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the research participant's perspective (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 27). Utilizing qualitative methods to investigate Black biopics and their audience responses emphasizes exploration, discovery, and description (Bloomberg & Volpe). This study is based on meaning-making that is often attached to constructivism. Meaning is constructed based on the conversations we have about identity together; we construct meaning and a full picture of Black history and identity together with intersectionality at its center.

Qualitative methodology has traditions or genres (Creswell, 2007) encompassing case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative research. The current study focused on audience ethnography as a phenomenological study capturing moments of engagement-consumption-identification in online focus group spaces. Grounded theory is found inside of narrative inquiry that hosts these intersectional storytelling moments.

Various types of ethnography include confessional, life history, autoethnography, feminist ethnography, critical ethnography, ethnographic novels, and visual ethnography, including photography, video, and electronic media (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.32). Of these

types of ethnography, I position myself within the Black feminist ethnography rooted in Black feminist epistemologies. While this study employs theoretical frameworks, grounded theory was used as well to guide the data collection and analysis. Grounded theory moves beyond description toward the generation and discovery of a theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views and experiences of the participants' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Constructivism and narrative inquiry/biographies go hand-in-hand. Narrative research, as a method, begins with the experiences expressed in lived and told stories of individuals or cultures (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.34). The researcher then retells or restories the data captured from participants' stories to give meaning to the audience's reception of a film while also answering the research questions. Narrative ethnographies, said Boylorn, include "a compelling narrative that tells a good story, but is also critical, analytical, and theoretical" (2015, p. 4). Because stories can do the work of theories (Bochner, 1994), narratives can be used to help us understand and make sense of cultural phenomena and our personal lived experiences" (Boylorn, 2015, p. 4). We typically see these narratives present themselves in the types of methods discussed in this section.

In the current study, I wanted my participants to act as storytellers of their own mediated and cultural experiences (narratives) with their own Blackness, gender, and media. As collective and individual textual analysts, my participants and I engaged in Black women's biopics as a media text and mirror to historical and contemporary societies. Like other studies focus on Black views of Black media via interviewing methods (Inniss & Feagin, 1995; Coleman, 1998) and have shed light on the work of intersectionality on subjectivities, I want to interview but as groups.

Why groups?

Because we typically watch movies to talk about movies and realties, group dynamics of focus groups help mirror the co-viewing aspects found in Black American friends and family groups. In previous research with Omotayo Banjo, Osei Appiah, and Zheng Wang, in a study on co-viewing, I found that Black people reported having more positive attitudes, greater perceived similarity, and identification when viewing racially charged comedies with Black in-group members than with White out-group members (2015). When Black audiences watch a film, they watch it with the intention to discuss its plot, characters, and stereotypes. We never experience the Black film watching in isolation, even if we watch it alone. This phenomenon is discussed further in the findings. Bringing the collective together to share its narratives concerning the context of films adds significance to the focus group setting. However, research that utilizes focus group discussions to center Black voices is lacking in the literature. These techniques allow scholars to amplify Black audiences' voices and stories, which are not necessarily captured in other methods and methodologies.

Black Feminism & Focus Groups

Focus group discussions are historically popular for their collectivist approach to understanding social phenomena and human interaction (Madriz, 2000). Focus groups permit me to situate my own Blackness and Black experiences alongside my Black participants -- this is an intentional choice. Focus groups, like in-depth interviews, are useful for storying and narratives as answers to a film's impact. Focus group discussions allow for story-making. Put another way, they facilitate collective identity formation. This constructivist approach allows multiple realities inside Blackness to be heard and captured with a holistic way of gathering data.

Feminist-oriented focus groups provide a social context for authentic, contextualized, and non-exploitative meaning-making for women (Hall, 2020, p.117; Wilkinson, 1999). Like other theories and traditions, different orientations fall under the umbrella of feminism. This study uses Black feminist thought or Black feminism qualitative inquiry to bind online, synchronous focus groups together. Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that argues that Black women are self-defined and independent people who can confront oppression and use their knowledge as a source of social justice (Hall, 2020, p.118; Collins, 1990). Black feminist thought allowed me to recognize the intersectional identities present in the Black women participants as well as the "structure of power simultaneously interact[ing] with the cultural identities of Black women in the context of the United States (Hall, 2020, p. 118; Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). Black women focus groups that focus on their shared experiences have been called sista circles or collective testimonies because their functionality is useful for breaking the silence with shared expressions of ideas and emotions (Madriz, 1998). As other qualitative studies have shown, the use of grounded theory permits a theory and deeper understanding of a phenomenon to be realized as they emerge from the data collection and analysis portions of this research.

The next sections cover the recruitment, participant's profiles and summary, and procedures used to collect data for this study.

Recruitment

To recruit participants, I used verbal recruitment, bulk email through the university system, and shared recruitment fliers via social media platforms which increased shareability among my networks. Once the fliers were distributed, potential participants shared the fliers, which helped with the snowball and convenience sampling of the Black women population. I

recruited 50 pre-interview survey participants; of those, 45 participants used SignUp Genius to sign up for a focus group; of those, 31 focus group participants showed up for the current study. All these participants were of the same sample. Recruitment began at the end of October and through November 2020. The recruitment flier directed potential participants to use the web address or QR code to complete the pre-interview survey (See Appendix I).

Recruitment of participants included a call for women who self/identify as Black/African American. The women needed to be born and raised in the United States to participate in the focus group discussions. The rationale for choosing American-born Black women was to capture how the historical images of Black American women impacted Black American women audiences. Two Black women wanted to participate after submitting the pre-interview survey. One left the Zoom room after my introduction, and another participated in the dialogue. Her data was removed from the final study. This current study focuses on identity and representation, and the goal of the study was to examine the impacts of similar identities based on the race and gender of characters and audiences.

Participants

Fifty self-identified Black American women from around the nation completed the 20-question demographic survey. The purpose of the pre-interview survey was to gather biographical information about the women and information regarding how they identify themselves. Forty-five Black women signed up for a focus group using the external site. In the end, 31 participants were present for the focus groups. Of the 31 participants who showed up for the discussion, two were ineligible because they were not American-born and reared. Below, I

summarize the demographics of the 29 participants who were eligible to participate in the study. Following the summaries, I then go into detail with each of the participant profiles.

Location: On the whole, most participants were from the South/Southeastern region of the United States. The overall group was a well-traveled collective of Black women: 13 from Texas, 4 from Georgia, and 2 from Florida; everyone else ranged from California, Colorado, South Carolina, Mississippi, New Jersey, Indiana, and the DMV areas. Many relocated for higher education and job opportunities, as discussed in the pre-interview survey. With more than half of them from the South, their location played an integral role in their socialization as self-identified Black women.

Employment: Twenty-seven of the 29 participants were employed, and many were in education as students, faculty, and staff at institutions around the United States.

Family life/Marital Status: Twenty-one of the 29 participants were single/never married. Seven had been married at some point in their lives. Seven of them were mothers. Every participant had a sibling in their immediate family.

Education: Two had a high school diploma and were working on degrees, 6 had bachelor's Degrees, 13 had or were pursuing master's degrees currently, and 6 are currently pursuing or already have doctoral degrees.

Identity: When I asked them to describe themselves in the qualitative pre-interview survey, only 9 used the phrase "Black" or "African American" in their descriptions. One woman described herself as "tired."

Religion: Twenty-five of the women identified as Christian or having Christian backgrounds of which ranged in denominations from Catholic, Church of God in Christ, Baptist, Non-denominational, Methodist, and Apostolic. Two were unsure/agnostic, and one was atheist with Episcopalian and Jehovah's Witness backgrounds.

Age: The participants ranged from 19 to 66.

Using the demographic information aforementioned, Table 1: Participants Summary was generated. The table displays the pseudonyms, age, home state, and number of participants in the study. Following the participant summaries for each focus group, participants' profiles are discussed.

Table 3.1. Participant Summaries

	Participants	Participant Information
Focus Group 1	4	Lovel, 26 **/Dominican Republic Channing, 29/Texas Grace, 32/Texas Khadijah, 3/Georgia, Florida
Focus Group 2	6	Aniyah, 20/Texas Ana, 23/Georgia Angel, 26/Indiana Amanda, 35/Texas Kim, 41/Texas A.L Riley, 43/Texas
Focus Group 3	7	KRS, 19/Texas Nova, 22/South Carolina Rose, 30/Texas Nicole J, 32/Texas, Colorado, Louisiana Kristin, 33/Texas A.J. Gomillion, 33/Michigan, Georgia, Maryland Foxy Brown, 45/Mississippi
Focus Group 4	8	April, 21/Texas Tanya, 22/ Texas

		Dr. Maxine, 30/Ohio, Texas, Florida, Louisiana, California Cherolyn, 32, Rhode Island Valerie, 34? California Seen, ** 37/Nigeria Michelle, 40/Midwest Servant Leader, 66/Illinois, D.C, Texas
Focus Group 5	6	Sadie Belle, 23/New Mexico, New Jersey, Virginia Madame CJ Walker, 24/Georgia Savannah, 29/New Jersey Jasmine, 34/Philadelphia, California Sarah, 40/Florida, +5 states Monte Carlo, 43, Texas
Totals	29/31	29 included in the study; 31 participated

Note: ** Not included in the analysis

Participant Profiles

A.L. Riley, 43, Is a writer, actor, and theatre teacher from Texas with roots in Louisiana. She is a mother of two boys. She is single, never married. She notes that her parents have been married for 46 years, and she has two older sisters. She also notes that she is currently attending Baptist churches but was raised inside of the Catholic faith. Her goals include making a sequel to her book and becoming a best-selling author.

A.J. Gomillion, 33, has lived in Michigan, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Florida. She describes herself as a determined woman and employed by a large firm making $77k a year. She has been married for three years to a traffic engineer. She does not have any children. Her parents have been married and divorced twice in their lifetimes and bore multiple children from each relationship. She also notes being raised into the Baptist and Church of God in Christ traditions.

Aniyah J., 20, is a single, Political science college student from Texas who lives with her parents. She has five siblings from both parents. She notes that she has a religious background. She works inside the diversity office at her university. She has five siblings. Her career goals include getting a master's in public service.

Addie (Changed Name to Khadijah), 33, describes herself as a Black and Halfrican. She is a doctoral student from New York who has lived in Atlanta and Florida. Her research work is in representations and Black women's health communication. She has interests in biopics and the storytelling around Black women. She has two siblings, and her parent is a widow. She has a master's degree and says her career goals are world domination and to be a communication strategist. She also has background affiliations in the Christian faith.

Amanda, 35, is from Houston, Texas. She is employed at a large university in the South, earning $70k as a counselor. She is unmarried and does not have any children. She comes from a self-employed middle-class family and has three sisters. When asked about her career goals, she states she felt she was transitioning to something else and exploring her options.

Angel, 26, is a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration from Merrillville, Indiana. Her parents were married for 18 years, and then mom remarried. She has two siblings. She has backgrounds in the Church of God in Christ and the Apostolic Church. Her career goals are to be a higher-level administrator in higher education and then transition to higher education consultation.

Ana, 23, is a doctoral student and researcher majoring in animal sciences at a large university in the South. She is from Lithonia, Georgia and now resides in Texas. She is also single, never

married, making $28k a year. Her parents have both been previously married, but not to each other. She has two older siblings. Her goals are to go into pharmaceutical research after obtaining her degree. She has a background in the Christian faith, more specifically the Southern Missionary Baptist denomination.

April, 21, is a college student from Houston, Texas, majoring in English. She has never been married and does not have any children. She lives with both of her parents and younger brother. She identifies as a spiritual person with roots in the Church of God in Christ denomination inside of Christianity, specifically the Black church. She also works in the diversity office at her university. Her career goals include being an English teacher and then serving on the Board of Education.

Blessed & Highly Favored (Changed Her Name Monte Carlo), 43, describes herself as an optimistic and caring Black woman from Midland, Texas. She is employed full-time with a yearly income of $70k. She is single, never married, no children with one sibling. With her master's degree, she hopes to combine public health with graphic designs in a health care setting. She grew up in a Christian home.

Channing M., 29, is an educational leadership doctoral student from Houston, Texas, residing in Austin with her husband. They do not have any children. Her parents are still married after 34 years. She has one brother. She has served in Christian ministry for 20 years. Her career goals include teaching in a university setting and contributing to educational research.

Cherolyn, 32, is a Black woman who is full of energy, compassion, and adventure. She is a doctoral student and researcher from Rhode Island and Memphis, majoring in clinical

psychology. She is single, never married with no children. She has four siblings. She also notes being affiliated with the Christian church through the Seventh Day Adventists. With her Ph.D., she plans to work in an integrated care setting while teaching part-time.

Dr. Maxine, 30, describes herself as an author, entrepreneur, educator, creative and Black woman with a Ph.D. She has lived in Ohio, Texas, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, and California. She does not consider any of these places home since she has moved around so much. She is single, never married, with no children and lives with family. Her parents are divorced, and she has three siblings. With her doctorate in Higher Education Administration, she plans to be a Vice President of Student Affairs in addition to running her nonprofit organization.

Foxy Brown, 45, is a mother from Mississippi who believes in uplifting young Black women. She works for a childcare initiative with a yearly income of $50k. She was married for 20 years before she and her husband divorced. She has two children, a son and a daughter. Her parents have both been married but never married each other. They have been together for 45 years and have five children between them. She also identifies as Christian. With her Master's in Business Administration, she plans to work as a case manager in social services and says she is listening to God for His direction for her future.

Gloria (Changed her name to Kim in the meeting), 41, describes herself as caring, giving and too loyal. She is from Beaumont, Texas and lives there with her husband and four children. She has been married twice, divorced once after 16 years. She works for the State of Texas. She grew up in a Christian home with her siblings. With her bachelor's degree in Sociology and social work, she hopes to get her master's and grow her business.

Grace, 31, is a goal oriented-Black woman from Tacoma, Washington, who has lived in Houston, Texas, all of her life. She is currently a teacher in Houston. She and her husband have been married for three years and have twins, a girl and a boy. She identifies as a Christian and has been affiliated with the Church of God in Christ since her family leads a church. Her parents have been married for 38 years. She has one brother and two half-siblings. With her master's in Counseling, she hopes to obtain her LPC in 2-3 years, become an entrepreneur and build the brand that she founded.

Jasmine, 34, identifies as a Black female Christian screenwriter from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, living in Los Angeles, California. She is single, never married, with no children living with her family. She grew up in a Christian home with her siblings. With her bachelor's degree in psychology and location, her career goals include becoming a screenwriter.

Kristin L., 33, is an ambitious native of Houston, Texas. She currently works at NASA with a yearly income of $70k. She has been married to her husband for nine years, and they have one son together. They also own a business. She identifies as Christian and worked in the Church of God in Christ with her parents, who are pastors since she was young. Her parents have been married for 30 years, and she has one sibling. With her PhD in Higher Education, her personal career goals are to be a Dean at a University.

KRS, 19, from Galveston, Texas, describes herself as independent. She has one sibling and did not make any notes about her parental and home life. She identifies as Christian, specifically Baptist. She is currently a communications major at a medium-sized college in Southeast Texas. Her career goals are to be a lawyer or television anchor.

Madame CJ Walker, 24, describes herself as a fun, vivacious, inquisitive, poised, and nerdy woman self-employed as an organizational behavior consultant. Her hometown is Atlanta, Georgia. But she has lived in the Southeast and Midwest parts of the United States. She is single, never married and has no children, and lives with her parents. She notes that she has five siblings from both sides of her parents. She also identifies as a non-denominational Christian and has worked with her parents in the church. With her master's in Public Administrations, she hopes to be a College President and policymaker in the future.

Michelle, 40, describes herself as a caring, intelligent woman from the Midwest. She lives on both the East and West Coast. Michelle is a professor at a university in the Midwest, with a yearly income of $54k. She is also single, never married, with no children. She grew up in a Christian home with her two siblings. Her parents were never married. With her Ph.D., she hopes to continue teaching in higher education.

Nicole J., 32, has lived in Texas, Colorado, and Louisiana but calls Texas home. She is employed as a counselor at a large university in the South, making over $65k a year. She is single, never married and has no children. Her mother was married and is now widowed. She has four siblings and was raised in a Christian/Methodist home. With her psychology Ph.D., she hopes to open her own nonprofit organization. She has recently opened her own private practice.

Nova, 22, is a confident, fierce and determined graduate student from Columbia, South Carolina, majoring in STEM at a large university in the South.

Rose, 30, is a realtor from Texas. She currently works for a large university in the South in the engineering department. She recently had her first child, a son. Her parents are divorced, and she

has six siblings. Her career goals are to become an entrepreneur. She is also a part of a Black Greek letter organization. She also identifies as a Christian.

Sadie Belle, 23, describes herself as tired. She has lived in New Jersey, New Mexico, and Virginia, with New Mexico being home. She is single, never married, and has no children. Her parents are divorced, and she has two siblings. She was raised as a Jehovah's Witness but identifies as agnostic now. She is currently a double-majored graduate student in philosophy and sociology with the career goal of not working. She says she wants to live a happy and safe life. Those words could not ring more true after everything that 2020 was.

Sarah, 40, described herself as a Black woman trying to make it. Currently, she is a Public Health doctoral student with the goal of becoming a college professor. She has lived in Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas. Florida is home to her. She is single, never married with no children. Her parents were teachers and physicians and have been married for more than 40 years. She has two sisters, and they were raised in a Christian home.

Savannah, 29, identifies as half African American and half Nicaraguan. She identifies as Afro-Latina and a Black woman. She is a full-time doctoral student majoring in Counseling Psychology from New Jersey living with her married parents. She is unmarried but in a long-term relationship with no children. She identifies as an atheist but was raised Episcopalian. Her career goals include becoming a psychologist and entrepreneur.

Servant Leader, 66, described herself as an African American woman committed to her community. She is an Associate Professor at a large university in the South, making almost $90k a year. She has lived in Illinois, Washington D.C., and now calls Texas home. She has been

married and divorced twice. Her parents also divorced when she was a teen. She has two adult children and grandchildren. She has two siblings. Her career goals include becoming a full professor.

Tanya, 22, is an undergraduate student from Killeen, Texas, attending a major university in the South. (She did not fully complete her pre-interview survey before attending the focus group).

Valerie, 34, describes herself as being passionate about uplifting Black women. She is also a part of a Black Greek letter organization. She calls San Diego, California home but has lived in Kentucky, New York, Pennsylvania and Texas. She works for a large university in the South, making $62k a year. She is single, never married and has no children. Her parents are still married, and she has one younger brother. She also has a background in the Christian faith. Her career goals include being a university administrator.

Focus Group Procedure

Participants were first asked to complete the pre-interview survey using the link provided on the recruitment fliers. I emailed participants a Google Form containing a set of questions, some close-ended and open-ended, about their demographics and personal media consumption (See Appendix F). After completing the pre-interview survey, they were then taken to an external site (Sign-Up Genius) to sign up for one of the five available focus group meetings. This study utilized Zoom meetings; an accessible link was sent to each participant along with the informed consent document explaining the research goals and their part in the study. The Zoom meetings were scheduled for 5:30 PM - 7:30 PM CST on a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Monday over the course of two weeks. This time was chosen because most adult Black women

work during normal business hours of 9 AM - 5 PM. This special population had other intersecting identities like business owners, students, teachers, mothers, and partners, so I wanted to be very intentional with the time slots chosen.

The location of each focus group discussion was online, and many participants were either at home or in their offices when the meeting began. To begin the focus group discussion, I open with a Google Slides presentation to introduce myself as the researcher and the research purpose, background, and goals. In the first twenty minutes of the session, I read over the informed consent documentation required by the Institutional Review Board. Once I completed the overview, I asked each participant to agree to their participation with the statement verbally, "I agree," and their name. This verbal agreement was recorded.

After receiving verbal agreements, I gave the ground rules for conversation using Zoom and some directions for what the conversations should be centered around. Zoom is a teleconferencing platform used for synchronous virtual meetings, webinars, and conferences like the sista square in this study. I then asked each participant to introduce themselves using the pseudonym they chose on their pre-interview survey; they also told us their age, hometown (places they lived), occupation, and favorite tv show or movie with a few statements about what Black media reminds them of.

Each session lasted the entire two hours, with some participants staying after to share how appreciative they were for the space. I audio and video recorded the sessions and took interview notes during and after the sessions. I asked a series of semi-structured questions and probes to facilitate the dialogue during the warm-up and interview portions of the focus group discussion (See Appendix F). Each set of questions in the semi-structured format allowed me to have questions available to guide the conversation, but its semi-structured format granted me the

freedom to use probes to follow the organic conversation with my participants. The participants were asked to think about their current entertainment choices, location of engagement with Black media in addition to characters, scenes, storyline, and narratives each clip was telling as it relates to Black life and Black identity as they know it.

I asked them to name their past, present, and all-time favorite Black films to understand the group dynamic better and build camaraderie amongst the participants. The goal was to have them walk us through their lives using Black media. Connecting media to memory and moments with nostalgia and identity was important here for analysis. Music, wardrobe, and setting were also discussed as they related to their lives. Moreover, I asked the participants to interpret the Black films, particularly the Black films they remembered viewing and how those moments related to their own lives, family, careers, religion, and lifestyle. Their responses were video, and audio recorded and then transcribed following the session.

Listing As Memory & Recovery

We also set aside time to use listing as a method in the study during focus group discussions. During the listing portion, I asked the focus group participants to think aloud and as a group about the Black biopics that they had seen in their lifetime. This exercise lasted about 10 -12 minutes for each focus group. While my screen was shared, I opened a blank Google document to capture the list as they were salient to the participants for everyone to see and respond to. The purpose of this listing exercise was to capture which Black biopics were most salient in the public memory of my participants. Because we did not use video elicitation like the pilot study, it was important to think about which films most impact viewers. Once we

completed the 10 minutes of recalling Black films based on real life, I then asked the participants to count aloud how many of those Black films were about Black women versus Black men.

As I began typing the titles on the Google document where the participants could see, we began to notice the remarkable and staggering difference between what was remembered and why it was remembered amongst our small collective. In each focus group, our listening exercise differed slightly. In this listing exercise, seeing the names of the titles also worked to reveal the gender differences in Black public memory in regard to Black biopics. Below, I give more details on each focus group and how their recallings impacted the conversations of constructing Black women's public memory.

Focus Group #1: For the first group, I typed the list of films in one column without differentiation between sexes. The group listed 46 movies, and only 19 were about Black women. The four women were not only shocked but disappointed that they did not recall more films about Black women.

Focus Group #2: For the second group, I typed the listed films in two columns differentiating between the men and women to capture the reactions to the number of films available in their watching history. The group listed 37 movies, and 13 were about Black women. Many of the mentioned films overlapped with the first group.

Focus Group #3: For the third group, I listed the films in two columns differentiating between the sexes to capture the reactions again. This visual also seemed to motivate the participants to think more deeply about Black films and which ones were about women's lives. The group listed 50 films, and 17 were about Black women. Additionally, the group made a great argument about why there were so many titles under the men's column. The group all agreed that with Black women's stories, they were looking for Black women to lead and be

centered in the story. In many Black men's stories, Black women are present but not centered, leaving them to play only supporting or complementary roles in history. With that in mind, I adjusted the listing procedure for the subsequent groups. I added asterisks beside the titles where mixed gendered stories were present in the columns.

Focus Group #4: For the fourth group, I listed the films in two columns differentiating between the Black men and women to capture the reactions again. The group listed 40 films, and 15 were about Black women.

Focus Group #5: For the final group, I listed the films in three columns differentiating between the women, men, and groups to capture a more realistic representation between Black men, women, and mixed stories. This was the first group to end their listing with women in mind, at least as is reflected in the exercise.

Process of Analyzing Focus Group Data

The significance of listing Black biopics helped us to recover the history and legacy of Black biopics with particular attention to BWB. Seeing the titles kept the Black women's stories in my mind for the last set of questions during the focus group discussion. Following the listing exercise, I asked them to discuss the movies in terms of their own identity. I instructed them to think about their lives and if they saw their lives reflected in the stories, they saw on-screen with BWBs. Their identity and personal history were key in understanding their consumption and engagement with the BWB. For the analysis, it was essential to discuss and delineate the demographics of these diverse women in each focus group.

In the recent language shift around emerging themes and identifying themes in qualitative methods, I make space for both in the analysis as I connect with contemporary paradigms. I

analyzed and identified codes from my focus group data in terms of emergent patterns and themes from the focus group discussions (McCarthy, Jones, & Potrac, 2003; Charmaz, 2000) as they were apparent to my positionality, reflexivity, and researcher-insider position. In a more recent shift in the language of qualitative methods, Dr. Kakali Bhattacharya (@DrQueenB, Twitter, 2019) encourages qualitative scholars to speak about the data differently. With this encouragement, the previously mentioned positionality and reflexivity, and the backgrounds of each of my participants, I approached this work as the researcher and the researched, fully intertwined in the identity-making and meaning processes we co-constructed together in the focus groups.

During the focus group interview, each focus group participant was asked a series of semi-structured questions. The semi-structured nature of the questions allowed for freedom in the conversation so the women and I could flow with the conversation as we recalled media choices and impacts. While in the Zoom interview session, listing was also used to prompt memories regarding a lifetime of Black media consumption.

The data collected from these interviews were analyzed using grounded theory. Birks and Mills (2011) defined grounded theory as an explanatory scheme comprising a set of concepts related to each other through logical patterns and connectivity (2011, p.11); it explains or predicts something (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.31). Charmaz (2017) states that "grounded theorists value theory construction over description, patterns in the data over individual stories, developing fresh concepts and theories over applying received theory, and theorizing processes over assuming stable structures" (p. 2). Grounded theory allows the utilization of inductive reasoning/logic with interactive group dialogues to compare and contrast data across each focus group setting.

In line with the Charmazian and Clarkeian approach, grounded theory is a process of describing voices hidden from public view in which the coding focuses on building a theory of the participants or social phenomenon (Apramian, Cristancho, Watling, & Lingard, 2016). Charmaz stresses authentic representation of "the words, actions and stories of participants" (p. x). Following this approach to grounded theory analysis, I can accurately portray them in the study and findings.

I approached the data collection and analysis together as I co-constructed with them the meanings we take away from Black women's biopics as a genre and as an instructional, historical media text. Together, with all of the participant's data, I was able to do what Charmaz instructs: "fracture and reorganize the strands of the stories of participants and give the reader the sense that the categories constructed by me, the researcher, would be meaningful to the participants themselves" (Apramian et al., 2017, p.12; Charmaz, 1991, p. 7). The goal was not to force theory upon the focus groups but to examine how theories linked to focus group data and reveal how attitudes are shaped, reproduced, and legitimized through language and imagery (McCarthy et al., 2003, p. 225; Tonkiss, 1998, p. 253). Grounded theorists construct a picture drawn from, reassembles, and renders subjects' lives (Charmaz, 2000, p.522). Each focus group was transcribed and coded based on themes found inside of data; key data will be reported in the open coding process. For the coding process, I used strategies as Charmaz (2000) suggested, the simultaneous collection, comparison, and analysis of data and memo writing to construct conceptual analyses.

I begin with reviewing the Zoom meetings recordings to take notes while reading the transcripts. Rev.com, a transcription service, provided the transcriptions. In the process of constant comparison. I then uploaded the transcripts to NVivo to capture the first level of initial

coding while I watched the Zoom meeting recordings. What was clear to me was that I wanted to touch the data. So I moved from a technology-based analysis to a more hands-on analysis. I printed the focus group transcripts while listening to the audio portions of the recordings. I repeated the data analysis listening sessions with the transcripts for coding throughout the writing process.

Data collection of focus group data began during the focus group sessions. I took notes in a notebook during each session and my review of the recorded Zoom meetings. Additionally, I also took notes of their themes during the coding process. Coding was an essential element of the data analysis in that the codes appeared and reappeared in all of the conversations with the participants, which led to primary, secondary, and tertiary themes arising as seen in the findings.

Coding is an interpretative process (Saldana, 2011) in that it is based on the interpretation of the research, which requires me to be fully present as a researcher because as a fellow Black women audience member, expert, and fan. Corbin and Strauss (1990) state that grounded theory "seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions but also to determine how the actors under investigation actively respond to those conditions, and the consequences of their actions. It is the researcher's responsibility to catch interplay" (pp. xx). Coding the focus group discussions and finding the themes present, as it relates to their collective viewing and individuals' reception, also means that I am not only shedding light on the phenomenon of parallel identities but also providing more understanding by which we come to know the impacts of Black women's biopics on Black American women audiences.

The next chapter discusses the themes that were identified from this grounded theory analysis: first, 1) the persistent invisibility, erasure, altering of Black women's stories found inside of production and creation stage where [in]authentic reflection of Black women life;

second, 2) another view of BWBs as resistance, defiance, and celebration of Black women's lives; next, 3) the critical, cultural, collective consumption and engagement of the BWBs that can lead to the [re]education of family and friend groups; 4) and last, the ever-presence of joy and pain inside of the socialization of Black women's strength where the interpretative and critical reading of Black women's representation occurs.

The focus group data is discussed as it was most integral to understanding the phenomena occurring between Black women and Black [nonfictional/fictional] media. A key goal of focus groups is to recreate natural conversations (Hatfield, 2011) inside the safe virtual spaces of our individual homes and offices with the accompaniment of technology. Within the last six years, Black women researchers have called this type of methodology sista circles (Hall, 2020); these sista circles also impacted how data is analyzed regarding constructivism, with the women's intersectional identities and histories coming to the forefront of the dialogue.

Introducing Sista Squares

My positionality and identity were key to the dialogue, data collection, and analysis because I was a part of the group I was studying: Black, American, adult, woman, viewer, fan. I asked my participants to tell us (read: me) their stories. I wanted them to recall their memories with the media; I wanted them to share life stories with us, with movie examples becoming the timestamps of our shared experiences. This is important because these BWBs can mark different eras, movements, and struggles in our society. Gathering these women also connected me to BFT as an epistemological approach where their individual and collective stories in responses to the media and representation were presented as knowledge production or ways of knowing. First, I discuss the history and usage of sista circles methodology and then introduce the virtual settings

of sista circles being transformed into sista squares where teleconference tools brought us together through virtual video settings like Zoom.

A large portion of the dissertation conceptualization and data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the pandemic separated many of us and kept us in our homes and our home offices, all of the focus groups met online using the Zoom virtual teleconference software. According to the official website, Zoom is a cloud-based video communications software that connects people around the globe; and it did just that for my participants and me.

Initially, I believed I was conducting just a virtual focus group interview with fellow Black women, but what was revealed throughout the study was more closely aligned with the sista circle methodology. Because of the identities of participants present, the types of questions I asked, and the ways in which I wanted to converse with my audience, I believe a new methodology evolved from the virtual meetings. The empowering nature of the virtual focus groups with Black women and the lived experiences and memories as knowledge production helped co-construct reception as we knew it. To introduce what I am called sista square methodology, I first want to describe and define the sista circle methodology.

Sista Circle Methodology

Dr. Latoya S. Johnson, the creator of the methodology, states in her dissertation, Using Sista Circles to Examine the Professional Experiences of Contemporary Black Women Teachers in Schools, that the sista circle methodology (SCM) is "simultaneously a qualitative research methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women" (Lacy, 2019; Johnson, 2015, p. 43). Johnson goes further to state that the "primary aim of the [SCM] is to assist in the development of 'culturally relevant, gender specific' research methodologies

appropriate for studying Black women" (Johnson, 2015, p. 44). Though her dissertation was based on the experiences of Black women inside of educational institutions, the relevance of this methodology informs this current study's discovery of the usefulness and effectiveness of Black women gathering in these types of research settings.

In her dissertation, Black Graduate Women's Self-Defining Process Using Media and Sista Circle Methodology, Marvette Lacy found that "Black women … made meaning of self by interpreting, implementing, and interrogating messages received from family, particularly mother figures, Black women on television, and from their Christian socialization" (2017, p. i).

In line with the findings of my study as I theorized the call and response of Black women biopics with Black women audience members, the discourse around Black women's identity-making, both historically and in contemporary examples, has been informed by Black women. Lacy found that Black women educators and graduate students create space for themselves. By using this "critical narrative methodology called sista circle methodology," Lacy found that the communal spaces where sista scholars discuss media depictions were not only a space to interrogate their own identity formation (Lacy, 2017. p. 9) but also their own socializations and understandings that lead to identity development.

According to Johnson's work (2015), there are three distinguishing features of SCM: communication dynamics, the centrality of empowerment, and the researcher as a participant. Communication dynamics: In this feature, communication is described by its nonverbal and verbal elements. Lacy describes the communication dynamics as a spiritual thing as Black women communicate with their own beings (2018). The second feature, the centrality of empowerment, describes Black women's lived experiences as/is knowledge or a "how we come to know what we know." This epistemology of sista circles connects Black women to each other,

their past, and their own knowing. The dialogues between them/us the epitome of sharing is caring, and sharing is knowledge. In the last feature, the researcher as a participant helps to eliminate the power dynamics usually present between the researcher and the researched and replaces it with open and reciprocal dialogues.

Moreover, the sista circles and sista squares that we created and curated represented a portion of the community but not all Black audiences. As Dr. Lemesha Brown (2020) describes in Hall's *Focus Groups: Culturally Responsive Approaches for Qualitative Inquiry and Program Evaluation*, "it is important to recognize that while [I] may share the same identity (i.e., Black woman), [our] experiences are not the same. We have multiple privileged and marginalized identities that impact our everyday experiences." (p. 183). Additionally, and in line with their multiple identities and experiences, I view my participants as their cultural producers of knowledge because of their experiences with Black media and public memory of Black women. From this perspective, my participants take on a scholarship of lived experiences; put in context with sister circle methodology, their stories produce knowledge. Sista circles are culturally responsive in that they incorporate how Black women are, communicate, and make meaning together (Brown cited in Hall, 2020, p. 181). The stories shared in the space helped me process narrative and thematic analysis to deduct the major themes discussed below. Their stories and responses reflect their individual and collective media consumption and representation in the films discussed in this study. Their stories reflect their identities as Black women living in American society and subject to a lifetime of good and bad media representation.

In this methodology, the participants' meaning-making is just as important as the researcher. Lacy adds in her online posts that "there have also been sista circles done online by some researchers" (2018). This is where I revisit the methodology that is central to this current

study and answers the research questions concerning how Black women read and understand Black women's stories inside of Black women's biopics as it was not only important for me to ask the question about the production of BWBs but also how Black women read, not just what they saw in the stories.

Virtual Focus Groups as Sista Square Methodology (SSM)

Virtual focus groups work like sista circles methodology in that they curate safe space for collecting data and talking back with one's whole self. In creating the safe research spaces for Black women, I desired to create pseudo classrooms, living rooms, and dining rooms tables where Black women would gather as sista circles (called sista squares hereafter). In these culturally rich spaces, I aimed for all of us to glean from each other and build bonds for rich data collection. According to Dr. Venus E. Evans-Winters in *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry* (2019), to share our stories, in oral or written form, requires mutual trust between 1) "the person sharing the story, 2) the listener of the story, 3) and the audience receiving the story" (p.71).

Evans-Winters goes further to explain:

> Black women's shared stories and interpretations of our lived experiences convey a sense of sympathy and empathy of Black girls' and women's multiple realities. In the storytelling process, there is a sense of feeling respect and compassion for another woman's experiences . . .. Methodologically, we want to produce emotionally stimulating texts alongside culturally affirming texts that serve to affirm our humanity. These cultural productions strive to capture vulnerability and resistance. (2019, p. 70)

With Evans-Winters', Hall's, Lacy's, and Johnson's work on focus group and sista circle methodology, I build and introduce the sista square methodology. Within this methodology, I identify four elements: a virtual setting, Black women as co-constructors of identity and meaning-making where the open dialogue of lived experiences produced knowledge, individual

and collective identity markers available through the participants' shared square, and researcher as co-participant.

In the virtual setting, Black women gather much like they would if it were face-to-face, but online. In the virtual, web-based, cloud-based teleconference setting, the focus group meets to answer questions and discuss organically the topics that arise between the participants. In this virtual setting, focus groups can log in from anywhere as long as they are connected to the internet. Additionally, their access is granted because of their self-identified status to the password-protected and sacred space that we co-created together. The virtual space permitted each of the Black women to bring themselves, their whole selves, to the space. In the next elements of the SSM, Black women brought their identities into the conversations in multiple ways. Inside of the squares, each participant chose a new name but retained their stories. The settings on virtual call also permit the women the option to choose their own name. Some chose pseudonyms that were meaningful to them, and a few decided to choose their real name. Inside of their squares, the Black women's lives were on display or as much as would be allowed in the frame. Some showed their children, homes, partners, offices, and any other identifying markers. This methodology can be compared to walking through someone's home or historical landmarks in that what they want to share and memories they want to recover are all available within that square, with each woman having the ability to frame their own life at the imagined table/realized gathering.

In the next element, Black women as not only co-constructors of reality they lived but their lived experiences and reception to media in a specific study, is centralized. In line with this element, the researcher was a co-participant, much like the sista circle methodology. This featured my ability to act as a participant on occasion and let Black women lead their

conversations where they may go. The conversation was semi-structured because I did have a set of questions to ask during the focus groups meetings, but also the groups moved in and out of those questions and even prompted their own questions. I loved being able to join the conversation with my insights, not to shape the conversation but to add my own experience to the mix, in hopes of building identification with my participants.

In conclusion, I draw upon the Black feminist epistemology, interpretative qualitative methods, and ultimately the sista square methodology to code and understand better the codes from the focus group discussions. By highlighting, centering, and exposing the Black women to other Black women's stories around them and on screen, we made space and opportunities to truly investigate the research questions concerned with the reception of BWBs. In the next section, I describe how the sista squares methodology impacted the group dynamics.

About The Groups

Each focus group presented its own unique collective identity, which helped to shape and steer the group discussions each night. Each focus group highlighted the different ways in which identity impacts reception. I emphasize their voices and experiences here:

Focus group #1 comprised four individuals, two from Houston, one from Florida and one from outside of the states whose data will not be included in the overall analysis. These women were each in higher education (three were doctoral students, and one was a teacher) and had experiences and affiliations with the Black church, which became frameworks for how they viewed the Black media featuring Black women's stories. For this group, nostalgia and representation played a large role in the conversations as a whole. Channing, Grace, Lovel, and Khadijah each engaged in conversations where they agreed on experiences while also allowing each other to disagree with interpretations. Black women are not monolithic, so their experience

helped me better understand how these Black women's biopics were received and used by Black women.

Focus Group #2 comprised six participants with their ages ranging from the early 20s to mid-40s. Angel, A.L. Riley, Ana, Aniyah, Amanda, and Kim joined me to discuss a few key topics to shape the findings as well. Those topics included watching Black films with non-Black viewers, using Black women's biopics for teaching students and children, and understanding the differences between Black trauma, slavery porn, and Black historical dramas. These women came with various experiences in regard to spirituality, education, and career.

Focus Group #3 comprised seven participants who ranged from 19 to the mid-50s. Many diverse, intersectional identities and relationships with others impacted the group dialogue as well as their careers. Also present for the conversation were two infant sons whose presence added to Black mother's conversations using Black women's biopics for familial viewing and learning. The group comprised undergraduate and graduate students, PhDs, therapists, engineers, and writers. These women were very in touch with their identities and how those identities worked as frames for their viewing of Black women's biopics. Many of them discussed their intentionality with Black women's biopics and the need for well-rounded, authentic characterizations.

Focus Group #4 comprised seven participants, including students, PhDs, and professors whose ages ranged from the early 20s to the mid-60s. This group spoke much about their relationships with other people and how identity influenced their viewing choices and purposive collective viewing. Four of the seven participants spoke about their viewing experiences with the mothers, siblings, friend groups and other relatives as being their go-tos for more information about a topic seen in Black women's biopics. Another highlight from this group was how they

connected their geographical identity to the Black women in the films to build deeper bonds with the stories' authenticity. Michelle, one participant in Focus Group #4, discussed how she identified with Tina Turner's biopic, *What's Love Got to Do It,* because she is also from St. Louis, Missouri.

Focus Group #5 comprised six participants, including college students at every level, business owners, filmmakers, and ministers (also daughters of ministers). This group spoke the most about our critical consumption and the production of Black women's biopics. They were hyper-aware of their identities and wanted the Black women's biopics they consumed to be an honest reflection of an experience they knew to be true. Another key point from this group was their upbringing as a frame of reference for how they consumed and understood the lives of these Black women seen in the films. Sadie Belle, from New Mexico, spoke about how her upbringing away from large Black communities was vastly different from her peers and impacted the entertainment she engaged with as a result. She said:

> I grew up in New Mexico. We have a total of 9% Black population in the entire state, and all of them were not in the city that I was in. They were down in Hobbs because that's where they had a history of the post enslavement land grabs and stuff. . . . I felt how Belle moves through that film of like, "I have no idea where I am, in my own environment," and the way that she has to make her and her own identity. I felt that. And so, I feel grateful for having grown up in New Mexico a lot of the time because since there were so few Black people, I got to make my own identity. I got to be just a weird kid who was black versus being a Black kid who was weird. So I think there's a lot of freedom in it, but it felt so unmooring because Blackness is so based in the community. I often felt really distant. And so, I love biopics, like *Dreamgirls*, but that's... At the end of the day, they have a Black community. They grew up in the church; they grew up in Motown.... Oh, they didn't grow up in Motown, but they grew up in Black culture, so I don't get that. So I feel closer to that. I feel as if *Belle* resonates closer, even though I don't particularly care for the content, because it's just, it gets to that feeling of like, "What does it mean to be black, when there are no other Black people around?"

For Sadie Belle, the film *Belle*, though it was different from her Black experience as an American woman, presented the feelings she felt as a Black woman without a community to lean

on or an identity that matched the community she was a part of. Sadie Belle resonated with feeling like an outsider, much like the main character despite the differences in the characterization and ethnicity. Sadie Belle's conversation of identity-making and meaning-making with these biopics depicts how intimate and deep the reception is for Black women reading and gazing upon historical Black women figures. The intersectionality that is identified in conversing with the participants made clear the visibility of oppression for the women when viewing these BWBs.

Overall, each focus group's identity as individuals and collectives revealed a range of similar and contrasting themes in response to the semi-structured interview protocol. Because each conversation was based on their experiences with Black media and specifically Black women's biopics, the emerging themes highlighted below display the depth at which Black women viewed Black women's biopics. The storyline, scene staging, wardrobe, and finite things like how the actresses walked or carried themselves all impacted how the participants interacted with the films.

Next, I discuss the themes that emerged from the conversations across each focus group, with some of the themes reappearing in each of the dialogues adding to the salience of both the production's impact on storytelling and the intersectionality/oppression of Black women.

Research In the Time of COVID-19, Trump Era, and the Black Lives Matter Movement

As a part of the data collection for this project, I asked my participants to complete a short demographic survey including some background information, self-identifying phrases and watching preferences. This survey information showed that more than half of the participants were from the South or had lived in the Southern parts of the United States at some point in their lifetime. Those regions and regional identities impacted how the Black American women viewed

themselves and their media choices. Before we started with the focus groups, I wanted to know how the women would describe themselves to others. Some of those answers are described below (See Appendix B for full description):

> Independent, authentic, positive. - KRS
>
> Tired - Sadie Belle
>
> Dark-skinned, multifaceted, ambitious, driven, open-minded, educated, caring, passionate. I would describe myself the same way, as well as resilient, strong, and a support system to other Black women as well. - Aria
>
> I am a Black Woman. I carry a heavy load. - J.A.
>
> I'm a Black, female, Christian screenwriter from a beautiful, tough city. I'm smart, intelligent, and like to have fun. I believe the true meaning of sisterhood is allowing others to express their individuality and appreciating them for who they are. - Jasmine
>
> African American woman committed to my community - Servant Leader

I include some of these quotations because they depict those things that are important to my participants, which also showed up in their analysis of the Black women biopics. For example, Servant Leader describes herself as an "African American woman committed to [her] community," and the community aspects were also discussed in her viewing of Black media with family as a tool for teaching and family pedagogy. Sadie Belle's description is also one that is worth mentioning here; she described herself as "tired."

This survey was completed in November 2020, while still in the middle of the pandemic and after many Black people were killed and filmed. These images were disseminated for mass consumption while we all still showed up for ourselves, our families, and our communities. This fatigue is intersectional in that there is no way to tease apart the burdens felt by Black women, especially those who showed up for the research.

Why do BLM, COVID-19 and racial unrest during a presidential election season matter to an audience reception study?

Many different aspects of identity, culture, and society were at play during the study's data collection, including all of the previous events like the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and a long list of Black people during 2020, including celebrity deaths non-related to the pandemic. During the focus group interviews, my participants, who were safe-at-home, were exposed to a plethora of media that suggested Black life was and has always been under attack. From hate-filled political rhetoric during the November elections that spilled over on the news and social media platforms to the protests and cry for justice for the entirety of 2020 and 2021 when court cases were being displayed for all to see while Black women's biopics were continuing to be released simultaneously. The mixed messages of Black women's life, strength, and worth rest not solely on film representations but also on the discussions Black women have with themselves and their peers. The women, who may or may not be aware of the language of intersectionality they were describing, were aware of the interactions they felt because of their complex identities.

Overall, according to their responses, these Black women were concerned with their well-being and freedom and those of others. They wanted [to see] joy. They saw themselves as smart and easy-going women with a plan. In the same breath, a few also reported their strength. Strength is important to discuss because strength is mentioned as a recurring theme found in Black women biopics and a major theme found in the next section of the study. The parallel of finding strength in themselves and the characters is not to conflate this strength with the Strong Black Woman trope that often gets perpetuated in the media and society to erase Black women's toiling, resistance, and resilience. In the findings chapter, I describe the many ways in which

Black women's complex identities become a framework for the reading of the films and source of knowledge productions for those left with the media text as public memory.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter expands upon current research of Black women's audience reception to the true stories by examining how Black American women consume and engage with Black women's biopics as constructed Black women public memory. This chapter discusses the emergent findings related specifically to Black women, their intersectional identities, and their responses to media production's depiction of historical Black women figures.

The goal of gathering Black women together, even virtually, was to understand better how actual audience members make sense of the stories and images within Black women's biopics. This data shaped the findings of this study in multiple ways: 1) to understand the major, consistent, and salient themes across Black women's biopics, 2) to visualize the process and patterns beginning with creation and production, then consumption and engagement, and 3) finally interpretative intersectional reading.

Strong Black Woman Lens

Although the Strong Black Woman (SBW) trope (Davis & Afifi, 2019) was not explicitly verbalized by the participants in discussions, it plays a critical role in the identity-making and meaning-making of the participants. The dialectic of fatigue vs. strength was present in the self-definitions that the women describe in the pre-interview survey and their virtual sista squares. The internalization of the strong Black woman stereotype is woven into a history of film and television representations. By definition, the strong Black woman trope is a controlling image that pressures Black women to maintain a facade of strength (Winfield, 2021; Davis & Afifi,

2019; Davis, 2014). The trope is also referred to as super Black woman and super-strong Black mother; all of them are bound in the Black woman's strength and resistance to society's harm. According to Davis and Afifi's study, The Strong Black Woman's Collective Theory, the image of strength prescribes an unattainable standard of invulnerability and independence that Black women are expected to uphold in their everyday lives (Davis & Afifi, 2019, p. 1; Collins, 2000). These representations of strength became elements identified by the participants as themes in BWBs. However, the sharing of the BWBs helps deconstruct those notions amongst Black women who viewed the stories with their experiences at the forefront.

The concepts of intersectionality, strong Black woman trope, and other controlling images facilitate answering the research questions that shape this study listed below. The Black women as participants brought these ingrained concepts with them to the virtual room (sista squares) into my analysis and findings.

Research Question 1: How do Black American women regard themselves in relation to Black women's biopics?

Discussing BWBs Themes

I begin answering the research questions by discussing the themes present in the Black women's biopics. I asked each of the five focus groups what themes they saw across each of the Black women's biopics they had seen in their lifetime, as well as those films that had most recently been released at the time of the focus group meeting. One hundred individual themes were coded across the five groups. Upon viewing an additional time for the second-level analysis, 25 codes were present. What became apparent from the data was how the process of creating, consuming, and responding to Black women's biopics impacted Black women audience

members most intimately. It was clear that there was an assortment of emotional and visceral responses to BWBs, but upon a closer look, three overall categories were present: positive, negative, and neutral. Those items in the positive included: empowerment, hope, inspiration, strength, ambition, spirituality, exceptionalism, deviance & rebellion, defiance, victory, and reflections of Black life. The positive themes in BWBs were easily identifiable in the five focus groups and were present across each group. When a group identified a positive theme, this usually pointed to a historical Black woman striving through racist and sexist American society and coming through the tides of injustice victoriously.

The negative items in the BWBs themes included: long-suffering, trauma, violence, betrayal, infidelity, heartbreak, sacrifice or sacrificial love, dangerous, unconditional love, erasure/edited/altered/exaggerated reality, white saviors or lynchpins, and white gazes. These negative themes were discussed regarding the participants seeing an overexposure to cruel treatment that Black women had to endure in the historical films. Each film seemingly has included positive, negative, and neutral items available for audiences.

The neutral items in the BWBs themes included: exceptionalism, deviance, rebellion, defiance, emasculation of Black men, taking care of Black men and Black families at the expense of self. While these themes may seem on the surface negative, many of these themes, when applied to Black women, speak to their character as a group fighting to be present in the history and the public's memory of the past, such as deviance, rebellion, and defiance.

Many historical films were connected to the major themes found across the response. *Hidden Figures* (2016), which all five groups mentioned, presented one of the themes "deviance" from the social norms for Black women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Another example mentioned by the participants was the emasculation of

Black men for Black women's ambitions found in several of Black women's biopics. According to the responses of the participants, the theme was present in films like *Netflix's Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker* (2020), *Nina* (2016), and *Bessie* (2015). Some of the main characters had to deal with infidelity as a response to their ambitions or loneliness to their rejection of mistreatment by loved ones and society. Like the women, the themes identified by the focus groups were much more nuanced than a surface-level view would reveal. In the end, the themes that were present for the women were themes that at times mirror the Black woman's experience in America. Those themes were recognizable because they have been lived.

Different theorizing emerged from the interpretive analysis after identifying the three categories of positive, negative, and neutral codes from the Zoom video interviews. This theorizing and themes were present across the Black women biopics. Some themes spoke to the Black women's identity and then themes that represented the process of reading the Black women's biopics with the collective and individually. What was apparent was the presence of the positive, negative, and neutral themes that depicted the film topics, emotions, and meanings that Black women recognized and interpreted in the historical figures. Moreover, their group conversations also spoke to the reception of the Black women's stories, identities, and experiences. Those themes in line with the reception provided the foundation for the theorizing that follows.

In the analysis of the focus group data, it was apparent that multiple elements were at play when considering how Black women audience members engaged with the BWBs. The different elements (production, consumption, and interpretative responsive reading) were different from resistance, representation, and the themes of Black womanhood in the film. This chapter distinguishes between and discusses the theorizing of Black women's reception to

BWBs, and the cinematographic themes they recognized in the films as different but concurrent phenomena. Distinguishing between the two phenomena helped to curate the findings for this study and its theoretical and methodological implications.

Who is asking Black women how they want to be represented?

After viewing the BWBs in preparation for this dissertation and discussing these films and their impacts on Black women viewers, it was clear that when the biopic's production company, directors, writers, producers, and actors considered the person being featured, Black women resonated and enjoyed the film much more. Even though they could not identify with her fame, the participants identified with her personhood. Table 2.1*, The Content Analysis of Black Women's Biopics from 1972 - 2021*, offers a deeper look at who has been presenting historical Black women's stories. After reviewing the Black women's biopics listing with the participants, I wanted to speak to them about the stories they resonated with the most, even if that was not the BWBs.

> Jasmine said:
> I would say for me, none of the movies that I've seen so far have been...resonate too much with me. I can agree with Savannah and Sarah about *Hidden Figures* and that I can relate to it a little bit. But I think for me to say, "Hey, that character is like me," has really come more from television and seeing *Different World* or *Living Single*, or those shows... or *Girlfriends*, or something where you're seeing fictional Black women written better and more accurately, than movies that are biopics about Black women, that is like, "Did you even ask this woman or her family what she went through?" Because *Nina* was a prime example of, this is not anything that this woman would have co-signed, that she went through or had gone through. And even, *What's Love Got to Do with It*. Tina Turner was hand in hand with that, but there's some things that the studios moved out of her own hand, about her own story. And so, it's like you don't really get to be yourself in your own biopic, and what's that? Just to go back to your earlier question, Asha, about why is it that we recall the men's one a little bit faster? It's because we can look at the woman's want to go with them. That's not right.
>
> But we can look at a story like *Nina*, or we can look at *Bessie* or even *Josephine Baker*. And it's like, I don't know if that's really how that woman would have

> wanted her story told. And so, there's always that part that's like, "Is this really it? Or is it that this isn't really it? This is kind of it. We're dancing around it.

Jasmine, a fellow storyteller's analysis of the BWBs vs. fictional films, helps bring the reception home, to the living room, and to the dressing up room where the reckoning begins and is grappled with on an individual level. These terms are discussed more in detail in the next chapter, but Jasmine's words helped to ground this work substantially. The women brought a wealth of knowledge to the sista squares, and that knowledge was based on their viewing and co-viewing histories, their backgrounds, and their reactions to those media texts. It is with that knowledge production that the research questions were addressed.

Research Question 1a: What meanings, themes, and interpretations do Black American women (audiences) bring to and take away from Black women's biopics?

The first theme present was the persistent invisibility, erasure, and altering of Black women's stories seen by Black American women in these biopics. For this dissertation, I define invisibility and hyperinvisibility as the intentional erasure of Black women's truth and existence even in their own stories by production's hegemonic, elite, and racist ideological power structures in Hollywood. Based on this examination, participants acknowledged the production company's misuse of Black women's films for their marketability and myth of a post-racial America. The post-racial American society myth is often used when attempting to convince society that our nation has come such a long way from our racist and violent past to differentiate ourselves from outright perpetrators of our American past. In her book, *The Post-Racial Mystique,* Catherine Squires sees the term used both in the widespread and ecumenical sense, which surged during the historic 2008 election with more media outlets making statements about the declining significance of race (2014, p.6).

Regarding the production of BWBs, this post-racial America and white racial framing are two concepts that are interesting to take up together as we look to better understand the power of production over Black women's stories and public memory. Some might argue that the increasing number of BWB films alone is enough to argue that Hollywood is more diverse and tells more diverse stories. However, the presence and number of BWBs do not equate to Black women being included in the public memory of their own stories or others. Many Black women in these focus groups saw erasure and altered Black women's stories and implied they knew something was missing from the story. For example, Dr. Maxine said:

> These are the details of the stories that I'm happy that I now know as an adult. But it would have been cool to know as a child, too, because maybe changed] my perspective on going into doing hair full-time or building an empire share alone or things like that. And just knowing her story, I think, is something that was missing. Even if there are other Black women who have done things within entrepreneurship, I feel like there's no story. At least for entertainment value, like there might be a news article or something like that, but there's nothing to educate us in a way that's also entertaining. And I think that we definitely need that as a culture.

Dr. Maxine is a 30-year-old, Black woman who described herself as "Author, Entrepreneur, Educator, Creative, Black woman with a Ph.D." in the pre-interview survey. She identifies as a Christian. Her goals are to be in higher education administration while also running her own nonprofit organization. At the beginning of our focus group discussion, she mentioned that watching Black media with which she can identify is something that she is currently "paying attention" to. The parts of Dr. Maxine's identity that parallel Madam C.J. Walker's Netflix biopic series were the parts that she enjoyed the most if the acting and storytelling felt authentic to her experiences as well. Having that visibility impacted other members of the same focus group who responded to the reality of Black women's stories. Michelle, another focus group participant, also discussed reality and visibility in the BWBs. Michelle said:

> One thing that... I think Dr. Maxine, you said that you were always looking up like doing research on the biopic, and I'm the same way. It's like when I watch a biopic, I go and do research. And one of the things that frustrates me, and this is about biopics in general, is when they fictionalize things that don't need to be fictionalized and make stuff up that doesn't need to be made-up data. Life brings enough drama as it is. If you just went with the truth, then you could still have entertainment value, but you feel the need to make things up and create drama that doesn't exist or didn't exist when there's other things you could have built up. I think about the fact that they adopted someone for their family to have a legacy to pass on. They could have talked about that a whole lot more. I want to know about that. That's fascinating to me. Some of the other things that are fictionalized, I was going like, "Okay, it's interesting, I guess." But there's many other things that happened in real life that I would've wanted to know more about.

Michelle, a 40-year-old from the Midwest, who describes herself as “Intelligent, kind, caring, high standards,” addresses the thirst and desire many Black women have regarding knowing about these historical Black women figures. BWBs may not be enough to quench the thirst for knowledge that many women have for knowing these identities, and because BWBs are not enough, they find more information where it may be available. Because Michelle is a well-educated person, her want to know led her to do more outside searches following her consumption of BWBs, which revealed the exaggerated storytelling that often occurs in the production of BWBs.

The Black women who participated in this study know that a part of BWBs was to introduce certain historical figures to the world, but another side of the biopics was doing their research on the topic and person to find out what portions of the film were true, exaggerated, or completely falsified. Upon doing their research, they often found that BWBs kept secrets of themselves and others, told the secrets of others, protected themselves or others, and were vulnerable to the counterstories presented. However, if the participants knew of historical Black figures, their own identity became a frame of reference for understanding the film and critiquing it, as seen in the quotations of Dr. Maxine and Michelle.

Shadow of the White Gaze vs. Shadow of Black Men

In some cases, the shadow of the white gaze appears to overshadow the realities of Black women's stories. In another photographic and videographic example, shadows work cinematographically for some stories to make them more appealing. But like most visual concepts that make stories more palatable, they do not work well for Black women because they leave the story incomplete and the reception altered.

Shadows are the representative of being placed not in the forefront but only in proximity to the object in the light. The Oxford dictionary defines shadows in one way as being used in references to proximity, ominous oppressiveness, or sadness and gloom. When critiqued by the BFT and, more specifically, Black feminist spectatorship, it becomes much clearer how Black women's images have been shadowed and silhouetted by Hollywood's production. This current study depicts Black women's collective and intimate intersectional readings of Black women's media representation particularly, the historical figures, through focus group discussions.

Many focus group participants discussed seeing other historical Black women as "in the shadows" and "overshadowed" in their own stories. But more interesting, in their reading of the films, they also compared themselves to the same overshadowing. In the last focus group discussion, Savannah, a 29-year doctoral student from New Jersey, who identifies as an Afro-Latina Black woman, discussed wanting to know more about the Black women who are often placed in the shadows of Black men. The shadows cast over them left them secondary and supporting characters in history and memory, as depicted in the listing exercises.

Savannah suggests that:

> I guess, also similar to Sadie Belle. I don't know if there's anyone that I'm particularly really waiting for. But I think one story that I would be interested in learning more about is Dr. Betty Shabazz. Talk about a woman being overshadowed by her husband, you

know. And to think about all the things that she did when Malcolm died. How many daughters did they have? Four or five, and she went to school, and she got her doctorate. And all she's known as is Malcolm's widow. And I would like to know more about her.

Savannah was not the only participant who noted how Black women are often in the shadows and overshadowed by the white gaze, or what I refer to as overexposure to whiteness and underexposure to Blackness. In the Friday night focus group, there was a similar discussion of shadows amongst the women. These women, whose work was in higher education and social justice, appeared to also have grievances with Hollywood's version of Black women and history.

Michelle said:

I would love to hear more stories about African-Americans in general, but definitely Black and African-American women outside of slavery and civil rights and sports and entertainment. It kind of feels like it boils down to one of those four categories. And there are people in those four categories I will love to hear more about, but we've contributed a lot more to society than just being slaves, the civil rights movement, being athletes and entertainers. So I would love to hear more stories outside of that.

Tanya added:

And out, and also outside of other people's shadows.

Michelle said:

Yeah.

Tanya:

People know that Black women be the foundation of a lot of things, but they don't want to acknowledge Black leaders. And unless there's something else. So they are like, "Oh, look! There's that shadow." But here's what we're really focusing on. So...

Michelle :

I don't know if there's a term for it. I know that there's, and we are talking about Black biopics. Sometimes I go, "Okay, is it a Black biopic? If it's an anti-racist white hero movie. "And is there's like a word for the same thing when it comes to women, especially

> Black women?" Their job is just to support and be like the magical solver of problems. Not having their story in another themselves.
>
> Tanya:
>
> Black women's struggles aren't really touch light. Like I noticed, I didn't... We talked on it before, earlier in the session, about how Black women are always the moral support and they're expected to be strong all the time, but not much attention is paid to what they go through and the pain and what they have to put aside to help the cause and stuff.

These participants wanted to know more about the Black women being portrayed. Often what they found was Black women, and Black women's work was minimized. Michelle brought an important thought to light about this. She asked the group if what we were consuming was actually a Black biopic or "an anti-racist white hero movie?

In one last discussion, the conversation moved from seeing historical Black women in the shadows to feeling in the shadows ourselves . . . in real life. One young woman also noted feeling in the shadows she felt in her life. KRS, a college student, highlighted it by saying, " I resonate with [a particular] character [because] I feel that I'm always in the shadows. This shadowy feeling is reflected in the participant's lives as well as the Black women's lives being portrayed on screen.

While there is a difference between shadows and silhouettes, the lighting and focus in cinematography matter most for the storytelling. But what does it mean for Black women to feel in the shadows and to see Black women in the shadows of their memory?

Black women scholars have previously studied this issue. In line with BFT, Black feminist spectatorship also shapes the methods for the study. D. Soyini Madison (1995) noted:

> In viewing a film, the Black feminist spectator gazes at images, plots, and meanings unfolding before her through a lens formed out of an awareness that race, gender, and class are inextricable as sites of struggle in the world and that they operate variously in all symbolic acts. As a spectator, she sits before the screen, all the while reading what she watches through a consciousness of the profound confluence of what it means to be underclass, to be woman, and to be Black.. . . [she] carries her ideology with her and is

> focused on the interworkings of these "isms" -- projected or masked -- on all human representation and action. (p. 224).

The participants were speaking to representation and also the visibility that they saw in the BWBs. The women discussed seeing Black women while also being fully aware that their stories, whether in film or in reality, have been altered or shadowed by someone else with more power and place in history. In line with visibility, I also discuss a topic that was present in each of the focus groups, seeing Hidden Figures as inspiration while also seeing its flaws based on the Black women's identities and knowledge.

The Visibility Problem With Hidden Figures

While a few movies were mentioned frequently in each focus group, like *Self Made* (2020), *The Clark Sisters* (2020) and *Harriet* (2019), one film seemed to resonate with the Black women the most. When asked, Which Black women's biopics are most memorable for you and why, many participants recalled films that reminded them of themselves, whether their hometown, occupation, lifestyle, or other social/spiritual affiliations. Of the movies that the participants mentioned, the 2016 film, *Hidden Figures* was mentioned in each focus group discussion and several post-interview surveys.

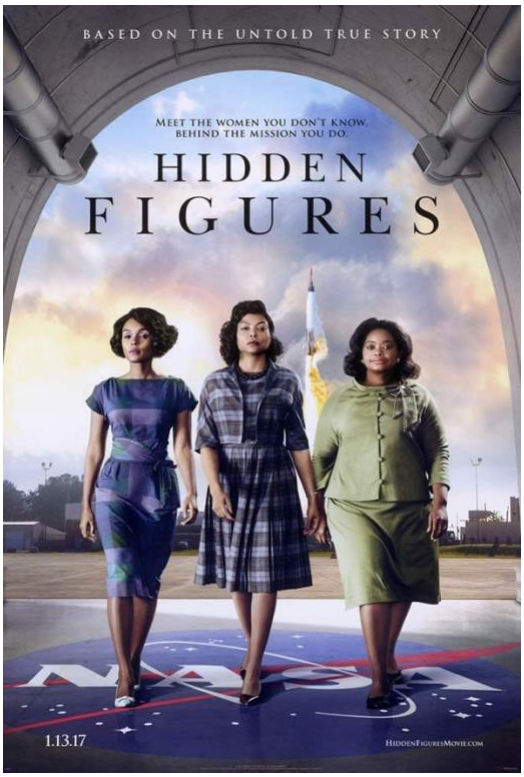

Figure 4.1. *Hidden Figures*, 2016 (movie poster)
Image of Janelle Monae, Taraji P, Henson, and Olivia Spencer as Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson and Dorothy Vaughn. (Photo by HiddenFiguresMovie.com)

While it may or may not be considered a full biopic because of its storytelling and focus, it had major impacts on Black women as audience members and participants. Hidden Figures is an interesting case because its director, Theodore Melfi, admitted in this interview that many of the award-winning scenes were completely fabricated (Burks, 2019). In one interview, he stated that "There need to be white people who do the right thing, there need to be Black people who do the right thing. And someone does the right thing. And so who cares who does the right thing, as long as the right thing is achieved" (Burks, 2019).

With this kind of deceit present in Black women biopics masked as creative liberties, the erasure of Black women's strength and agency continues to be perpetuated through development and production. Black women are robbed of another inspiring experience when non-Black

directors reimagine history and public memory with racially charged scenes to insert the white savior trope instead of presenting the truth in Black women's rebellion and defiance of the racist status quo. However, even with misinformed images of Black women in this particular film, the intersectionality of Black women's existence still resonates with the participants. In the third focus group comprised of engineers, Ph.D., students and mothers, there was an overwhelming reception to the story. For example, Nicole said:

> I just was going to say I kind of agree a little bit with Rose. So I'm in a different field, but I do feel just the identity of being a Black scholar; it's really hard to get recognized for things. And then I feel even when sometimes when we do something that really is phenomenal, that white people really try to take credit for it, or they will take our words and our work. So, that's what Hidden Figures .... It was just, to me, a good reminder of how smart I am.

Researcher/Asha added:

> I want you to think about your own identity . . . And I want you to think about the Black biopics, the Black women's biopics that we've listed.

Finally, Kristin Long said:

> In my opinion, I feel like we're just being left out of the conversation. There's many things like, for example, we are *Hidden Figures*. Look how long it took for it to come out. We should have, that biopic should have been out before they celebrated the anniversary, this 60th anniversary of the launch, they should have been put that biopic out. So, I feel like we are being left out of the conversation. And I feel like if we are not under the light, where with care like there was mentioned earlier, caretakers, or that woman that we can be, they can romanticize us. Then they're not going to talk about us or cover us in, anyway, that's how it comes off to me.

These two participants, though from two different fields (psychology and communication), both found the dialectic of visibility and hyperinvisibility to be one that often occurs in BWBs, leaving Black women wondering how long would Hollywood erase Black women from history or public memory. In this partial visibility of Black women's stories, there was still this collective appreciation of BWBs when they were finally released. The films' release, dissemination, and consumption showed Black women audiences that they could exist in the

spaces as true themselves, especially those spaces that were never intended for them to be in the first place.

Nova said:

> I would definitely have to agree with Rose. The film that I identify most with is *Hidden Figures*. I'm also in the engineering field, my bachelor's was in engineering, and now my master's focus is in engineering. And often times since my field of engineering is male-dominated, I'm in classes with just strictly males. I used to be kind of nervous and/or shy to answer certain questions, even though I knew the right answer. I would often let my classmates answer the questions. And then after seeing *Hidden Figures* and seeing how the women spoke up even when they felt intimidated, in a sense and being right and just proving people wrong. I started to do that more in my classes. So, I could really note that change to that movie. I really feel like it really speaks to me, and it basically represents my story.

Kristin added:

> It kind of confirms or reconfirms what I feel. For example, I thought it was wrong for me to feel a certain type of way and want to do my own thing. But then I watched the movie; I was like, "Wow. They went through the same thing that I am going through, and they still turned out okay and successful." So it just kind of confirms that, "Hey, Black woman. It's okay; you're going through these things. We went through it; we made it out. You can make it out too."

Nova and Kristen were speaking to the phenomena of seeing themselves in the experiences of those featured in *Hidden Figures*. Seeing the women, reading their stories against their own experiences, placed the participants in a position to gaze at their own external existences through the eyes of another's construction of Black women's identity. In that construction of identity and ultimate representation, participants said they felt inspired by the authentic parts and informed by its story. April said:

> Yeah. I feel like it adds onto the informational aspect of everything because it's a true story, so it's just like Kristin said . . . It adds on to the informational aspect because if it's a true story and you're already reading and researching about this certain thing, and now you're watching a movie that confirms pretty much everything, then it just adds on to your knowledge and makes you way more knowledgeable on Black women and their stories.

As a fellow consumer, researcher, and Black woman, what was clear for me was that this was a conversation not solely about visibility but also about the intersectionality that Black women felt when viewing the burden of racism and sexism in white male-dominated spaces like their workplaces and educational institutions. Their experiences as Black women living and working in different sectors impact how they read other Black women in the media. Jacqueline Bobo describes Black women as cultural readers and the interpretative community. In line with this language, I refer to them as the critical collective whose identity and personal experiences become a lens through which they view the world and the entertainment that represents it.

> Dr. Maxine said:
>
> As far as movies go, it's more recent, but I really liked *Hidden Figures*. Absolutely. I feel so disappointed in myself for saying this, but I did not know that story. I've heard about it, but at my high school, they didn't teach us.... We didn't have an African-American history class, and they didn't want to talk about slavery and the Holocaust because they said it was too sensitive. It was really important for me to go to an HBCU for undergrad, which I did, and it was probably the best experience ever because I was able to learn more about my culture and finally have a Black history class. The *Hidden Figures* story was just rather amazing.
>
> Michelle added:
>
> But I feel like *Hidden Figures* resonates with me a lot because these women carry the whole project and made it happen. And the men, the white men, were so quick to write them off or to put their names on it and not recognize who really put in the work and who really had the skills that it created the lane and their own skillset. So that one for you.

While connecting the stories found in *Hidden Figures* to their own lives, Black women also recognized that these inspiring stories were altered and intentionally left out of school curriculum and histories. Why would Hollywood take away these opportunities to story the past, to color it with the Black women who made great strides? These were missed opportunities to learn more about one's collective and historical memory, with so many participants saying that they were ashamed to admit that they had never heard of many of these stories in these films. But it begs

the question, who are the gatekeepers of this knowledge, the crafters of this visual who refused to share the space in history because its contradictory narrative was inspiring to Black women. Channing and Khadijah from the first focus groups engaged in a conversation about this.

Channing observed:

> . . . but movies like *Hidden Figures*. I walked away from that, inspired. And I don't think that always happens to me, but that one, in particular, we just had a connection. I think just because they were being smart, it wasn't like you had to be on a stage and win a crowd over. They were being smart. They were overcoming intimidation. They were working hard for their own ownership. And so that's even in my Ph.D. program now I'm like, you can do this, sis. It's okay. You can do this. So it's just more encouraging to see academic success in Black movies as well.

However, Khadijah had a counterpoint:

> I think I know this probably sounds weird because I literally started this out saying that I feel empowered by films that are centered on narratives of those that have been enslaved, but there's something that I get a little bit annoyed about. And I guess I noticed it with the biopics that we've named that feature Black women, where there is this expectation of excellence or exceptionality. Like you have to be exceptional, you have to endorse some sort of like rags to riches trope. You have to suffer, whereas there are people outside of that framework that have very good lives. They get a chance to be soft and demure or a damsel. And there's like a hardness that Black women have to take on to even be recognized with a biopic.

The most interesting part of this dialogue from the first focus group was that even with Hidden Figures, there was an expectation that Black women have to be outstanding to get a mainstream film, but all of their excellence and resilience would still not be displayed for the masses; it would be hidden even in her own story. This dirty mirror into society has existed for over a century now, so while participants made notes of inspiration being a theme based on their own identities and career aspirations, we also noted certain types of stories as marketable, palatable, and palatable sellable by production companies. Many participants noted that they could not

identify with Black women's biopics in the ways that I was asking; instead, they resonated with Black women's stories and struggles as it relates to their own lived experiences:

> Researcher Asha asked:
>
> Which Black women's biopics are most memorable for you and why? These can be Black women's biopics that you've seen at any point in your life.
>
> Nova responded:
>
> I enjoyed *Hidden Figures*. It was very memorable because I could identify with the women because of my field of study, which is engineering.
>
> Savannah added:
>
> *Hidden F*igures; because as someone completing their doctorate, there are times when I am either the only or one of the only Black women in a particular setting. I appreciated that the movie highlighted this experience and obstacles that women in these positions have to encounter.
>
> Last, Channing said:
> *Hidden Figures* - it was so bright and colorful and celebrated the intelligence of Black women. *What's Love Got to Do With It* - this was one of the first grown-up movies I remember watching; it just showed me that Black women face battles that are seen and unseen no matter their fame.

The participants expanded upon the discussion by sharing their experiences with the group by contemplating how their identities intersect and intermingle with images on the screen. Part of the intimate readings and reception felt by the Black women participants in the study was seen most clearly by how they connected their careers to the Black women figures. Nicole, a mental health professional, was always connecting her reading back to her career and the impacts viewing certain stories had on one's being. In the same conversation, Rose said:

> I feel like *Hidden Figures*. I feel like this might change depending on what's going on in my life. But right now, … I work in engineering at a university. My background is in engineering, and I feel like I'm home. I just had a baby this, well this year, I had a baby. I'm young, I'm black, I'm a woman. And I feel like that's something that I can really relate to being, or feeling like I'm doing the work, but I'm not getting not necessarily rewarded,

> or I don't need a shout out, but just my credits, my recognition for what I've earned, I don't want something to be, give it to him or her.

Rose continued in her identity storytelling:

> But if I've earned this and y'all are quick to acknowledge a man or Dr. So-and-so who is in their sixties while actually their Ph.D. student or their grad student, or whoever is actually doing their work, writing their papers and all of this stuff. But I feel like *Hidden Figures* resonates with me a lot because these women carry the whole project and made it happen. And the men, the white men, were so quick to write them off or to put their names on it and not recognize who really put in the work and who really had the skills that it created the lane and their own skillset. So that one for you.

Each of the women, at this point, was using their identity to guide their reading of the BWBs that were most salient to them. The focus group participants struggled with several things inside BWB's presentations, one of which was the themes overwhelmingly presented in these films that make them marketable and palatable to mass audience consumption. On one side of the struggle, there is the inspiration and empowerment felt by Black women audiences when they engage these stories with their identities and experiences as a frame. On the other side of the struggle is knowing that there may be additional oppressions added to the film while other real histories are omitted to add the sellable white savior trope to the story, which felt a little less inspirational to some participants in the study.

Channing noted:

> I think going back to how these women get movies is because that's who they are, but I don't go into them thinking that I'm going to be the people that I see because obviously there's something very, very special or unique about that person. So I guess I'm not going into these now more realistic movies that are based on everyday life. I might say like, "Oh, they're trying to reflect what we're supposed to be like," but when I'm watching something like Madam C.J. Walker or Harriet, I'm not thinking I'm about to put the whole race on my back and carry, you know? So I guess that's the difference. You can look at it and be motivated and encouraged. I'm not the most optimistic sometimes. And so, I don't think that everything is achievable the way that they are in movies, especially because there's some drama added to the movies and based on a true story. And so there's other obstacles that they put in the way. So I'm not thinking that that's truly what we're going to live up to.

Khadijah got the point:

> I get the idea behind what sells tickets. I just feel like there's something about Black women's stories, and maybe it's just the ones that I'm remembering from that list. Oh, Tina Turner, you're an icon, but look what you had to deal with that old Ike. And Oh my God, Harriet, you're a heroine. And it's like your husband left you, you went back and saved everybody and look at you. Okay. Can't even get on a $20 bill. It's still a struggle about that. It's just me. It's me. I know it. I'm sorry.

The inauthentic and authentic representations of BW's lives in mainstream media are seemingly always a site for contestation. A struggle exists to accurately reflect what has happened versus a moving story that production companies feel is relatable, palatable, and sellable. In this tension of and search for authenticity in BWBs, Channing and Khadijah, both previous communication majors in their education, discussed the boundaries between looking for inspiration in a story and knowing that there was added drama. From the persistent invisibility, low visibility, hyperinvisibility, and altering of history through biopic films move this study deeper into what the participants actually believed they were consuming — the [in]authentic reflection of Black women's lives.

[In]Authentic Reflections of Black Women's Lives

The foundational literature for the study depicts the many ways in which representation of Black women has often left the audience wanting. The struggle for representation has been fought tirelessly by and for Black individuals and groups for more than a century. Notwithstanding, there have been programs where the media representation seemed to mirror reality more than others -- times where the care and attention exhibited for the women's character development inside Black women's biopics.

Each focus group sheds light on similar and contrasting media examples where the reflections of reality were central to the conversation. I begin with Focus Group #2's discussions

because of their willingness to connect their identities to the media they consumed — this was their contribution to understanding critical engagement.

Demographically, Focus Group #2 comprised public and mental health professionals, writers, teachers, undergraduate and graduate students from Texas, Georgia, and Indiana. These women in their 20s, 30s and 40s reflected on the consumption of Hollywood's construction of historical Black women figures. I note in the following conversation how a history of inaccuracies is one of the many reasons that these Black women feel compelled to do their own research after and while watching Black biopics. On the occasion that the participants discovered that Black women were a part of the filmmaking process, they felt supported and less traumatized by the depiction of the real-life story:

Amanda said:

> I actually looked it up afterwards just to see the accuracy because we just have to do that because we can't fully trust Hollywood with our story. [I] Love Octavia Spencer, and she produced it. It was her project. I think that was awesome. I would say this year overall, some of the Black female biopics to me just in general felt lower level, and when I say lower level, I mean I wasn't emotionally upset. Maybe it's a good thing. They were inspirational, they were kind of lighthearted, and it was good to see, like the Clark sisters, see all those sisters sticking together, well, except for Denice. We all got one of those in our family, but it was just really good to see that camaraderie and have that feel and understanding those stories.

Amanda, one of the counselors and PhDs present in the focus groups, made great points about the Black women producing Black women stories, becoming the storytellers and griots of the contemporary BWBs. It was considerations made by Black women creators for Black women that made the difference in the reception of those films. Furthermore, for participants, these kinds of careful considerations for Black women's biopics meant greater impacts for Black women audiences — from the wardrobe to songs sung, the soundtracks, the locations, and the familiarity that could be labeled as care — it was authenticity needed to make the story feel real. In another

example, Channing from Houston, Texas, stated that representation always means seeing these Black women make choices that seem real. While all the choices made in the film, Dreamgirls may not have been the best or have the best outcome for the Black women inside the story, real choices and consequences were equated to an authentic representation for the Black women viewers. Dreamgirls was not a biopic, but it was a historical story based on real Black girl singing groups of the time. This story seems to resonate with one of the participants in the focus group.

Researcher Asha asked:

What about *Dreamgirls* does it for you?

Channing responded:

I think I liked the idea of seeing a lot of different... Not only a lot of different personalities but a lot of different ways that people can start off the same and have different paths or different choices that they make that lead them to other places because I think that's a reflection of reality. It's not realistic to think that all six people you went to kindergarten with are going to have the same path 20 years from now. So, to kind of see the journey, which I felt was true reactions, this theme with Effie going off about feeling left out and overlooked in that, you're going to love me, and goes off and has this secret child. It's just a lot, but when you think about people's business, it's usually a lot package in somewhere you might not see it. So, I think I liked it. It just looked like a reflection. It looked like a realistic reflection of a group of people.

Researcher Asha queried:

Can you all think of any movies that, any Black women's biopics, where there is no like rags to riches? You got to be abused in order to succeed?

Grace said:

Hidden Figures. I don't necessarily think that was rags to riches. There was no trauma like an abusive husband or anything. They were facing racial trauma, which we are still facing today. So I didn't see it in that one. Now, was that one a Disney one? Because, of course, they had to fix it up a little bit. But like Channing said, with that one in particular, because I was a math teacher and I saw it while I was still in the classroom, it inspired me to make sure I continue to push them and things with my girls, particularly with my Black girls. I mean, that's why I got into education in general. I wanted Black girls to see

> that you could be Black, female and really smart at math. I didn't see it with that one, but I think we all have struggles, and it's about continuing.

The mixed critiques of the representation of reality and how those representations can be used in society was a conversation that occurred in each of the focus groups. Black women audience members have a unique perspective and understanding regarding the reality of Black women, and these biopics offer a visual into the "double burden" described in Feagin and St. Jean's (1997) text. The double burden refers to the sexism and racism that African American women experience in society. Participants in this current study found that *Hidden Figures*, even with its exaggerated and falsified scenes, was still a great example of the strides Black women made in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields and continues to make in current day society.

In the end, because of so many historical inaccuracies and the sheer interest in the truth of the story, Black women audiences are led to do more research to distinguish between Hollywood's version of the past and Black women's versions.

Alternative View: Representation as Resistance, Defiance, & Celebration

The next section covers the second major theme present in the focus group discussion, the Alternative View: Representation as Resistance, Defiance & Celebration. Notwithstanding, BWBs present an opportunity to expose mass audiences to stories of Black women that have been previously unavailable through many sources because of the controlling nature of white racial framing and the powerful racist elite supremacy where ideology has shaped Black women to be seen in a very one-dimensional way of viewing. On these rare occasions, BWBs present an alternative view of Blackness with regards to our intersectional identities. The participants saw

inspiration and celebrations in those authentic presentations even when their experiences vastly differed from historical figures.

Anna commented:

> I know starting off with Black biopics, I look at them as a celebration of life. While you might still be saying some of the real things that happened. I still look at it as more of a celebration of life versus the trauma . . . And I look at Black biopics as you walking out, or when you're done with the movie, you feel inspired by their story. Even if you do see the hardships, you see how they overcame the hardships. So it makes you feel like, "Man, I can't do this."

Anna, a 23-year old STEM graduate student from Georgia, brought out a rich point that became a major theme for this study. On occasion and sometimes despite the framing of the BWBs, Black women still found inspiration and a reason to celebrate these historical figures because of the films that were disseminated and consumed. Anna made it very clear that there was a difference between slave movies or trauma porn, historical dramas and BWBs. The difference for Anna and many other women in the focus groups was how the films left the Black women feeling after consumption. The emotions lead to expression and sometimes even behavioral changes. To be introduced to a historical Black woman through a near authentic portrayal was meaningful to the participants.

For Anna and many other participants, BWBs should leave the audience feeling encouraged and inspired and feeling as if they can attain what was attained, gain what was gained and overcome what was overcome. Those stories became roadmaps for success in a problematic society for Black women. But they were not always as positive as some audiences may assume. If BWBs are meant to leave Black women with identity-affirming feelings as a response to the film, then some of Hollywood's iterations may miss the mark while others hit the target with their honest and meaningful depictions.

Seeing Black Women Through The Lens of Trauma

The focus group participants also discussed the meanings they take away from BWBs that felt more traumatic than inspirational and empowering. Merriam-Webster defines trauma as a "disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury; an emotional upset; or an agent, force, or mechanism that causes trauma" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Sometimes recovering and recuperating America's history and treatment of minoritized and underrepresented racial groups can lead to a traumatic experience, a traumatic consumption. More specifically, there are times where BWBs, like most historical dramas that take up Black stories, leave Black audiences feeling a multitude of emotions based on the graphic nature of the film -- the violent nature of racism and sexism in reality.

Because there have been several slavery-based films released in the last decade, Black audiences have been exposed to what Bradley (2015) refers to as an economy of pain. This kind of experience is not one that many of the participants are not interested in engaging in. In Bradley's article, *Reinventing Capacity: Black Femininity Lyrical Surplus and The Cinematic Limits of 12 Years A Slave*, he states that biopics such as *12 Years a Slave* are a "'spectacle of sufferance' or 'embrace of pain' that engenders pleasure in the viewer. A certain line is blurred between what happens on-screen and our libidinal investment in an economy of pain that comes to stand in not only for a history of Black subjugation but also of anti-Black violence" (p. 162).

While I question which specific viewers enjoy the "sadomasochistic gaze" described above, I realized that for Black women, even without articulating it as such, trauma, violence and erasure are also very gendered. Those gendered and racialized experiences are not only seen but felt by the women in the study.

For example, Anna noted

> The difference between trauma and slave, for me, is literally just the time period. If we're being honest, I usually view slave movies as trauma movies. *Harriet*'s a little different. Like I said, I view that more as a biopic and uplifting, but most slave movies, for me, are pretty traumatic. And I can see that because slavery in and of itself is a very traumatic experience. You cannot depict slavery accurately without it being traumatizing because it's that pain and that evil. So, I think those two somewhat crossover just because slavery is something traumatic. Just wanted to point that out.
>
> A.L. Riley added
>
> I never watched that one. I also, I don't know if this was true, but I heard something about Harriet and listening to you ladies talk about how good the movie was, now I want to watch it. But I had heard something about Harriet, and I'm like, "I'm not going to watch it." Because they said something about, they were portraying a white man, doing something like taking more of, I guess, credit than *Harriet*, I don't know. I didn't see the movie, but I had heard something about . . . they were going to portray a White man doing most of the work of Harriet. So, I was like, "I don't know." Maybe it was just a rumor. I don't know. I've listened to you ladies say it was a good movie. So, I might go and watch it. There's something else. Oh, *This is Us*. Yeah. I ended up watching that, but I didn't want to, but trauma movies are real, like Fruitvale Station set with me for a long time and *This is Us*, that's going to. Because it's so real, so many Black people deal with that, being accused and unapologetically losing their lives for something they didn't do. So, yeah.
>
> Last, Angel said:
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> I know for me, *Harrie*t was the first slave movie I watched in a long time. Because I had said that I was not watching any more slave movies. I said I'm not watching my ancestors be beat on screen. I'm not watching that anymore. And more so because I get so emotional when I think about what my ancestors had to endure and my great grandma picked cotton. So, that's not that far away from me. And I know what we see on screen is watered down. I know that things were a lot worse. We know they were raped, beaten, just treated like property. And so I watched *Harriet*, and I actually felt inspired by *Harriet*, and that's what I felt. And yeah, some things were dramatized, we're aware of that. But I left out of the theater like, "Man, okay. I feel inspired." Versus other slave movies that I watched, and I'm just like, "Oh my goodness, this is heavy, and this is traumatic for me to sit and watch." And knowing that modern-day slavery is still happening. And so, yeah.

At this point in the conversation, the lines were drawn between how slave and trauma movies versus Black women's biopic made the Black women feel during and after consumption. The participants' engagement required them to be exposed to the graphic and explicit treatment of Black people and specifically Black women for the sake of entertainment. That act was troubling

and lacked the inspiration that the BWBs contained. In answering the RQ1, it became clear that themes and meanings linked the Black women's experiences in film to the participants' vulnerabilities and reminded them that they were not too far removed from racism and sexism explored in the storylines.

Anna said:

> [In] the trauma movies I found, there's no celebration. You leave the movie theater, or you finish the movie heavy. You don't feel uplifted by the person's story. You feel like, wow, we really have made no progress because a lot of the times with trauma movies for myself, I can see that that's just like around the corner or that that's still happening. So for me, trauma movies usually are things that you have to decompress from. If you see them late at night, there are things that might take you a minute to fall asleep because you're trying to digest all of the things that you just saw. . . I don't feel that way about trauma or slave movies. Honestly, they both make me feel like we're not that far away from it. Even though in time, technically, we are supposed to have progressed, watching those movies makes you feel like a lot of those things in this movie I still see in everyday life.

Kim added:

> And I can see that because slavery in and of itself is a very traumatic experience. You cannot depict slavery accurately without it being traumatizing because it's that pain and that evil. So, I think those two somewhat crossover just because slavery is something traumatic. Just wanted to point that out.

A.L. Riley agreed:

> I think that slave movies are definitely trauma. They can be a crossover. I think, though, slave movies are a depiction of the past, something that happened in the past. So, current trauma movies are based on what's going on now, like *Fruitvale Station*. And I consider, I don't know if any of y'all seen the movie Precious, but I would consider that as a trauma movie only because of what I went through as a female young girl. So, that would be a trauma movie for me. And probably for any other woman that experienced those things. But biopics, like who was it? Let me see, like Anna, is it? It's someone's life, and you can see their life and what they went through and hopefully get something good out of their story. So, I think that's the difference.

Kim and A.L. Riley are both 40-year-olds from Beaumont, Texas. These two professional women are mothers who use these films to learn from and teach with, but also discuss avoiding the trauma experiences of consuming images of Black reality, both of the past and present. In

this same conversation, Amanda, a 34-year-old counselor from Houston, Texas, shed light on her reconstruction of identity in the context of America and Hollywood's long racist history. The difference for her was seeing the victory and defiance in Black women's stories, even those seemingly slavery-inspired.

> Amanda said:
>
> I agree with a lot of what's been said. Because I think the institution of slavery is in and of itself one of the definitions of trauma. And for me, I think it's hard to separate them because slavery, to me, is America's second sin. So, the genocide of indigenous and native people, the first. Slavery was the second, and neither one of those sins has[inaudible] or in any way attempted to deal with. So, you're going to see those symptoms of the sickness that we've never dealt with.
>
> Amanda continued:
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> So, for me, I really had to do some work to reconstruct my understanding of what it means to be Black, how hard it was, the victory in our people, the victory in our story that even today, despite literally every type of systematic oppression that you can throw at a group of people, we have experienced. And yet, even us in this room are still here. So, to me, the victory is just in our very defiance. So, the trauma piece comes to me when I know there's an emotional connection to what I'm seeing. Regardless of the story, biopic, regardless of slavery, whatever it is.

Some of Hollywood's goals are to present the myth of a post-racial society, one in which the audience can assume that America has moved so far from its deeply racist past. But for Amanda and some other participants, it revealed that not much has actually changed at our core. For them, this was more traumatic -- to be reminded of the proximity to Black deaths even in their entertainment.

> Regarding this, Amanda said:
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> But I think it's just that what we oftentimes are reacting to are the things that haven't changed. One of the illusions of white supremacy is that we have moved when in fact we haven't. . . .This system has just evolved because every time there is Black progress in any way, shape or form, then there is white rage in response. So to me, the system is just evolving. We are thriving in it, but I think oftentimes, for us, it's just hard to see the

> things that we have been through. And I think Black trauma is real, and it's not something that we're taught or made aware of. We just know how we feel, and we just know we're mad, and we know we're angry, and we just know it's not fair. So to me, it's different, but it's all the same because there's victory in all those stories.

Not all Black films that the Black women viewed were ones they felt they could identify with. Whether it was part of their personal and individual identity or part of their collective identity, something was gained from the stories consumed. There were victories to be celebrated. The victories despite the harsh mistreatment of Black women during several eras in our nation's history taught the participants about our collective trauma while also teaching about the significance of these conversations for the sake of coping, historical and higher education, and a better understanding of societies' oppressive placement of certain identities.

As we moved from the delineation of slavery and trauma films into identifying with Black women-centered media like Black biopics, other media types were also mentioned. Cartoons, old fictional films that became Black cult classics were discussed. I asked the participants which stories they had seen that resonated with them that were not slave films. It was important for this study that I examined which stories were their favorites in addition to the films that they felt like they saw themselves inside of the storyline. The Black women often felt that they did not see themselves, but they saw something inspirational.

A.L. Riley said she did not have one.

> …I say that because we watched a lot of movies in the house, whether it was Disney or Black movies or any other genre movies, but I never saw a movie where I felt like the person looked like me or had my lived experience. And so I think for me, there's no movie I can think of because a lot of the movies where you did have curvier women, they were either sexualized, objectified, or just called fat or ugly or those types of things. So there was no movie that I saw where I was like, "Oh, I feel inspired. And this is who I want to be when I grow up." So no.

Amanda agreed with this observation.

> I've seen a lot. Well, I don't know if it was the time period of when I grew up because it's like I remember Cinderella with Brandy, but that was when I was almost teenage. So it was a cool story, and I liked the singing more than anything, but I feel like, within the last ten years, a lot of the stories have come out. So as an adult, a lot of the stories that have come out, like seeing inspirational or powerful, or really just show that Black girls can. But it's hard because I saw those as adults. I think maybe if I saw them as children, it would feel different, but a lot of the . . . Especially in my childhood, it was like, yeah, that was really when you were saying that you were literally like, Miss Jane Pittman, like a slave, which I don't have a reference for that or the diversity in our stories just wasn't there a lot of times, or it was something that was way beyond my age that as a child I could reconcile with.

In summary, the focus groups grappled with the Black media they had consumed over their lifetime as we constructed meanings and interpretations around the placement and stories of the Black women inside. They wrestled with themes of trauma, victory and celebration while also discussing the visibility of historical Black women. In many ways, the participants' identity became a lens by which they viewed the authenticity of the BWBs. The participants' backgrounds added to the conversations of reception and all of the ways in which text can be read and seen. Overall, inspiration was a theme that kept recurring in the focus groups. In the moments where they felt like they could not see themselves in the historical Black women's stories, they saw their experiences represented. That representation and visibility were meaningful under certain circumstances and the care of the production teams. Moving forward, to better understand what meanings, themes and interpretations that the women were bringing to the focus groups, I needed to investigate more deeply the frames applied when reading the Black women on screen. The following codes were informed by Bobo's seminal work, where she also asked her focus groups about their religious affiliations because of the elements in the films.

"The Black Church" As A Lens For Viewing

It was apparent from the first focus group that the Black church played a crucial role in how these Black women participants viewed themselves and consumed Black women's

biopics. This part of their background and identity spoke to the intersectionality felt of Black women. I refer to the Black church as the culturally, racially, and historically rooted spiritual institution with the fabric of African and African American experience at its core. Keri Day tells us that the Black church is not a monolithic entity, instead it is composed of various histories, identities, textures, and expressions that make up the collective and regional traditions (Day, 2012) Indeed, the Black church is a Christian collective made up of several denominations and doctrines that outline its members' identity and exercises, especially its female congregants inside and outside of the body of believers.

In his most recent text and PBS documentary, *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (2021), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explores the "400-year-old story of the Black church in America." In the film, audiences are introduced to the Black church not as one singular church or building but as a collective made up of Black congregations. The Black church has influenced "nearly every chapter of the African American story, and it continues to animate Black identity today, both for believers and nonbelievers" (PBS, 2021). The Black church has greatly influenced Black women's identity regarding respectability politics and racial uplift in the early 1900s.

Brittney C. Cooper, in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, argues that the race women at the start of the 20th century were, at times, also constrained by the politics of the Black church. The institution of the Black church continues to shape Black women's identity-making and negotiations of gender performance so much so that even when consuming media, they rely on their experiences inside of the institution to read BWBs in search of authentic portrayals.

This section discusses how the Black church transforms into a lens that Black women, inside of the Black church's body of believers, use to grapple with the representation of other historical Black women, who are also a part of the church, and how the Black church and the women inside are represented mattered as much as the scenes shared to the Black women participants.

In the first focus group setting, two women discussed being Black women inside the Church of God In Christ (COGIC) denomination, one of the largest predominantly Black church organizations across the United States, with which I am also affiliated. These women, Channing (29) and Grace (32), both from Houston and the COGIC, discussed their reading of one film, highlighting Black women's unique but not rare experiences in this church in conjunction with the biopic, *The Clark Sisters: First Ladies of Gospel.*

Grace said:

> *The Clark Sister*s, I'm glad somebody said that earlier. That was one that I was particularly excited to watch, and we watched it as a family. And of course, with that one, because I've grown up in the church, I've grown up in The Church of God in Christ. These are people that I see often. This is music that I listen to. These are stories that I've heard anyway, growing up. And so, to see... I was interested to see what would be confirmed in the movie. What would they kind of hide? And I think that was it, as far as women are involved, that I consciously watched this year. There's some stuff I know that it's just too heavy for me to take, but for sure, I needed that joy in the pandemic.

Grace brought out a great point on what parts of Black women's stories are hidden, revealed, exposed and how those stories confirm, validate, and authenticate the experiences of the Black women watching who are a part of those institutions. Telling a Black woman's story is not just about her storytelling but also the stories of those around her. This includes the good, bad, and ugly parts of society, the church, educational institutions and relationships.

Researcher Asha asked:

> Can you talk a little bit more about it? And I'll go deeper with everybody, but can you talk a little bit more about The Clark Sisters and even your own identity? What characters, what scenes, what songs really resonated with you, and why?
>
> Grace responded:
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> Oh, there's so much with that movie. But one, again, I've grown up in The Church of God in Christ all my life, hearing them talk about Memphis and convocation, I know what all of that meant. The scene with her in front of the general board, although it wasn't . . . . Some of the individuals weren't cast well; I know what that is. I know what it is for women in the church and how oftentimes they are told to be quiet. They want to be more ambitious. The husband, there was a scene where he told her basically, she was too ambitious. That kind of stuff is... even in 2020, it is still going on. The fact that we don't have women that can be licensed like the men can. I, in particular, was one that wanted to go and get my license in ministry, but one of the stipulations is you can't have children under nine. . .
>
> Grace continued with her reading of the Black and the COGIC church:
>
> I connected with it. I was appreciative of them being transparent about those moments because we're finally at a place where... I guess in the last five or so years, we're at a place where we can talk more about mental health and mental illness in the church, but it's still taboo in some areas. So, I was happy to see that come to life on the screen. My favorite scene was when Jackie showed up in pants, and she was basically like, "If you wear pants, you might as well smoke weed." Those types of things were funny to me because, again, that's what it was, for some people, that's still what it is, but to see the background of Mattie Moss, and what she put in, and how she kept pressing in, how she was... I liked that they portrayed her as a human, someone who was flawed.

For these two participants, viewing The Clark Sisters biopic was multi-layered. On one layer, the participants were consuming the film as Black women watching Black women but intersecting that layer is their experience as young married women, professional women, and women who grew up in The Church of God in Christ with knowledge of the group. In another focus group, more women grew up in the Black church and specifically this religious denomination who spoke about their reading of the film:

> Angel said:
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> So I guess with the Clark sisters and thank you for bringing that up because I totally forgot . . . I think with the Clark Sisters, in particular, growing up, Church of God in Christ, some things I saw and I'm like, oh, you all watered this down for TV because

> some of this stuff would have been a lot more intense in real life because I remember when Dr. Mattie Moss Clark went to go talk to the board of directors or the board of bishops. She wouldn't have went in there and talked to them like that because women didn't have a place to do that, and I think some things just seemed a lot more dramatized for TV or even at the funeral scene people were like, well, how did they all know we're white?

Angel continued with her analysis of The Clark Sisters biopic through her knowledge of The Church of God in Christ and its placement of Black women because of her own experiences and knowledge surrounding the religious organization.

> And it's like, well, that's what people wear to funerals. Just certain contexts that wasn't added in, and I think the movie was really condensed. I think they didn't give us a lot of space to learn more about Karen Clark Sheard and her music or even with Dorinda experiencing suicidal ideation actually had an attempt and like, they didn't go into that or even with Twinkie. . . . They touched the surface, and I think they touched the surface because they were trying to protect the church and I think that's what it boiled down to. And so they felt a lot more comfortable airing Niecy's dirty laundry and putting her out and talking about her having all these kids and that type of thing. She was married once she ended up having all of her children, but that time there was no positive with her. And so I think that even with that, they had to have a really good scapegoat instead of just really telling the story really honestly, to me and my opinion with that.
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> Researcher Asha asked:
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> Do you think it was as honest as they felt comfortable for production?
>
> Angel responded:
>
> Yeah, I think so.

While Angel was grappling with the realities of Hollywood and Black women sharing their own Black women's stories and revealing their intersectionality inside well-done, BWBs still created their own complexities that would have been read as protagonists versus antagonists that could be systems and family members alike. In another example, Kristin Long, a Ph.D., a mother, and a wife, took the group deeply by recalling a particular scene and character from The Clark Sisters' biopic.

Kristin said:

> Okay. So the movie that I identify with the most would be the Clark Sisters. That's because I understand my religion; we're in the same religion, which is the Church of God in Christ Pentecostal. I understand what it's like to have parents that are heavily in the church, and they pass down that expectation on you and expect you to be the same way when you have other things that you want to do in life. And so, that really resonated with me. Going off to college, going to grad school. All the way through the end of all of my schooling, the things that the sisters went through when they had to leave their house when Dr. Mattie Moss Clark told them, "No, you need to do music." I have to go through the same thing and kind of prove to my parents that this is not what I want to do.

Kristin continued with her reading, moving back and forth the film to her personal experiences.

> And even to this day, I still struggle with things like that. Because now, at 33, I'm still a member of my father's church, I'm still active in his ministry. And so it's kind of hard to go and do your own thing because you don't want to let your parents down, and you don't want to have this regret. Say something happens to them; you don't want to regret it and be like, "Well, did I do everything that I could while they were living?" So that's a movie that I really, really identify with, and I really know what it's like to have to work in a ministry and feel this pressure. You want to do your own thing with the world, but your parents have these expectations for you.

Researcher Asha responded, asking:

> That's awesome. When you all think about these true stories about Black women, how do you think it impacts other Black women who are watching it? And that's from the oldest to the youngest. Do you think that there is an impact? Has there been an impact on you? Whether you could identify with it because of your own job, practice or career? What are your thoughts?
>
> Kristin said that it confirmed and reconfirmed what she feels.
>
> For example, I thought it was wrong for me to feel a certain type of way and want to do my own thing. But then I watched the movie I was like, "Wow. They went through the same thing that I'm going through, and they still turned out okay and successful." So it just kind of confirms that, "Hey, Black woman. It's okay; you're going through these things. We went through it; we made it out. You can make it out too."

It is confirmation and validation that continued to come up for the participants that are worth noting. Good representation leads to reception that produces a validation in the participants' lived and known, public and private experiences. That is the reception of the Black women's biopics.

In another focus group, a participant who named herself Madam CJ Walker, a 24-year-old

woman from Atlanta, Georgia., also discussed her reception to The Clark Sisters biopic. Her identity as someone who grew up in the church and as a preacher's kid (also known as PK) impacted her reading of the storyline in the film.

> Madam CJ Walker said:
>
> I would say, for me, the Clark sisters biopic. I grew up in a very religious family. Both of my parents are pastors, and I recently accepted my call to ministry as well. And my mom experienced a lot of discrimination as a woman, accepting her call to preach. She was outcasted from my great-grandfather's church, and he didn't accept her call until he was almost on his deathbed. He passed away this past year, and he was 93 years old…From late in his 60s, when she first accepted her call up until in his 90s. It wasn't until he got to his 90s when she finally received his approval, and that's when my family started... Her side of the family started to accept her as a minister. So just seeing Dr. Mattie Moss Clark, all that she went through for just performing with her daughters and showcasing their talent and trying to explain that their talent couldn't just be concealed to the COGIC church.

Madam CJ Walker continued with her connecting her life with the representations of Black women in the church with The Clark Sisters' biopic: Because she also recognized that some of the same sexism and discrimination that she witnessed in her life was present in the films she saw, particularly this biopic. This reality of how Black women were treated in the Black church in many Christian denominations was recognizable to her and became the parts that she resonated with the most. She said:

> I resonate with that a lot. And I also resonate with Twinkie Clark in particular because I'm my mom's oldest daughter but my dad's youngest daughter. So, there's six of us total…. Out of their marriage, they had two kids, and I just feel a lot of pressure on me as the youngest. I was the first one to get a master's degree in my family. And my sister is estranged, so I'm the first in my mom's kids to go to college. And my brother will be the first out of the five, my five brothers, I mean four brothers, to graduate from college. So, it's just I feel a lot of pressure on me, and I had to go away to Cleveland to get rid of those still shackles of pressure, and become my own woman and figure out who Christie is, outside of the pastor's daughter, or Jay's daughter, who is... Madam CJ Walker.

A couple of things were salient in this conversation: the secrecy of BWBs and the protection of the BWBs through the dilution of the storytelling. Angel is a 26-year-old from Indiana with a

master's degree in public health and health services management. Because of her personal, professional, spiritual, and educational experiences, she brought a deeper understanding of the conversation around mental and physical health and the insights of COGIC. It was clear that the Black women's spectatorship provided a deeper knowledge of the characterizations inside of the BWBs. The participants cared about the storytelling, the characterizations, and the lessons that the Black women's stories provided. Furthermore, it was implied in each focus group that the participants used their personal experiences as a tool to measure the truthfulness of the story. Angel mentioned this in her viewing of The Clark Sisters.

While The Clark Sisters' biopic was not the only BWB that featured the Black church or the only film where congregants became spectators, it was still salient with the participants because of its recency. Many of the other biopics mentioned by the participants highlighted the Black church experience, which was identifiable for the participants because of their personal knowledge and experience with the organization and institutions.

Seeing Beyond the Themes

` Another interesting point to add to this discussion of themes is how Black women responded to the presentation of authenticity. Like with no other genre, authenticity appears in biopics as the storyline that recalls history through very specific memories and very particular accounts or perspectives. Authenticity looks different in the fictional than in the perceived non-fictional presentation of Black women's history. One participant, Jasmine, gave us some insight into her view of BWBs. She said:

> I thought the Clark Sisters was probably the best one that has come out as a made-for-TV movie. But a lot of times, for me, when I'm looking at characters in biopics, in particular, I don't see myself. I see who people think a Black woman should look like. And I think we're used to that more on TV where "Okay. Well, this is the trope that we're all a little

> able to push back from." But I feel like in TV, even again in fiction, you get to see a little bit more layered Black woman, and really get to see, some days you can agree and disagree with who that person is. And they're successful, or they're nice, or they're not nice, or they're trying, or anything. And that, to me, hits a little bit closer to home than these other films do.

This quotation from Jasmine, a 34-year screenwriter from Philadelphia, brought the study full circle. She indicated not seeing herself in these biopics when compared to fictional films. The layered and complex identity-making characterization appeared more often in the fictional than the non-fictional, according to many of the participants whose differentiation of real films and feeling real was constantly blurred. Feeling real to these participants means feeling authentic to their lived or known experiences from which the stories are read with.

While real can be synonymous with actual, living, or authentic, in this context, I refer to real as people who lived or existed in the very non-fictional sense. I refer to the reading, interpreting, and internalizing their public memory by Black women as an intimate act that takes up history, belonging, space, and politics. Memory and remembering connect to representation and reception through meaning-making and identity-making. Mediated stories like those in Black women's biopics incite storytelling in the Black women who viewed them. Those conversations revealed their diverse and complex identities and their unique meaning-making because of their personal knowledge and experiences within American society, the Black church, and White male-dominated industries.

In summary, the study participants brought their personal experiences to the virtual conversations on BWBs. With their personal experiences acting as knowledge production, the participants were able to critique the history of Black women's biographical films with and against their understandings of historical and contemporary events. In answering RQ1, the findings revealed that Black women do more than identify a range of themes present in the films;

they also pull from a different lens in their lives to read the media. One major framework for viewing and engagement was the participants' spirituality intersecting with their racialized and gendered identity. For them, authenticity was not just based on their further research, but their experiences inside those systems that help socialize like the Black church. The persistent altering of Black women's stories, the differentiation between celebrating Black women's stories and recognizing the overexposure to Black pain versus victories were also discussed as major findings. In the final chapter, I discuss the impacts of the participants' collective and individual consumption of Black women's constructed stories.

Selling vs. Telling Historical Black Women

As a facilitator and participant in this study, listening to the women discuss selling Black women's images was of particular interest as I coded for the language of production and creation. Put into the context of selling and controlling Black stories, the commodification of Black women's images, bodies, and stories is one that Black women had not historically had the power and agency to change on large scales like box office films as those images were "owned" by the powerful and elite men, families, and companies who sold and bought them. There were images connected to those stories to make them more or less desirable. As the previous chapters in this dissertation have shown, those images were controlled by White men, and in the production of Black women's biopics, they are controlled today in the current media landscape. I also recognize that Black women are more likely to alter those images significantly in the contemporary composition of Hollywood creatives than ever before. Additionally, Black women have taken up space to change and nuance many historical images because of how Black women were seen.

One participant, Angel, made the point clear when discussing a recent Netflix film, *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker* (2020).

> And we're going to talk about Self-made, but I had a lot of feelings about that as well. Like, Oh, you are going to have this race war in this movie, and it's just like, colorism is a real-life thing. But these Black women y'all are pitting them against each other in this movie to do this, to sell this movie, instead of actually telling the story.

The theme of selling vs. telling Black women's stories ran deep with each of the Black women's biopics mentioned during the group discussions.

Angel was not the only participant in the conversation with "feelings" about how Black women's stories were being produced or the creative liberties that their films took to advance other conversations in the Black community, such as colorism and business competition among Black women to sell the movie. The participants were much more interested in Madam C.J. Walker's actual story and her resilience through racism and sexism during the early 1900s. A Black woman with a notable directing reputation directed this film, so other factors must also be considered in the story-making decisions that left some of her story in the light and other parts in the dark.

In the same conversation, I asked the participants what their motivations were for supporting these films -- supporting these clearly altered media constructions of Black women -- if they knew the stories were edited to fit a certain societal agenda and yet told with such life gaps.

A.L. Riley replied

> My main motivation is to support Black women, but I am interested in, and I consider myself an actress, even though I am not acting. I'm a teacher, but I just think it's interesting to know where someone came from and their stories of how they came to their acting. But I think my main motivation is to, so just to support Black actors at that time, but I think I would love to know other people's stories. So yeah, it's just my interest.

Amanda said:

> A big part of the motive of supporting is for the film to make money, or even if it goes something, it goes straight to DVD. Purchase it just so it makes money, just so they can see and that they can know, okay, this is profitable. We can continue doing it. Because a lot of times, the excuse is it's not going to sell enough tickets, it's not going to cross over in order to get those dollars that come over for stuff that every race can go and see. And so making sure it makes money so they can continue to do it, but also I think there's a relatability there, people that look like you, people that you can relate to more because as a Black woman, seeing another Black woman, just that commonality that you don't always see when you're watching other films because you don't see anyone that looked like you.

These Black women saw their support of BWBs as their due diligence. It was their support of Black women's stories, regardless of the racial trauma, historical inaccuracies, and fabrications, that equated to the financial gain and greater evidence of the sell-ability of Black women's stories. As Amanda points out, it is not just the wanting to show Hollywood that Black women's stories matter to the world, but those stories and that visibility (though altered) matters to the Black women consuming them.

hooks (2003) work on the Black female spectatorship and oppositional gaze allow the study to better frame how Black women view these constructions of Black women's identity throughout time and the changing media landscape. Future research should investigate how Black women are resonating with BWBs directed, written, and produced by Black women to grapple with the trajectory of Bobo's (1995) concept of the interpretive community.

In the end, I question: do Black women create their public memory when one Hollywood constructed for them no longer serves them?

Family engagement as the [re]education of Black biographical media texts also appeared as a ritual for the families:

As Dr. Maxine noted:

> We make it a point; we do have conversations. When it's biopics, I like to do research while I'm watching stuff. So, asking questions. We're pausing to Google things. We make it a full experience. For me, I also really enjoy music-based biopics. Anything that has to do with entertainment is very interesting to me and how stories overlap. So, I'm always trying to figure out the more concrete details of the story. It just makes it more of a well-rounded thing, at least in my household.

Dr. Maxine, a recent graduate of her doctoral program in education, shared her experiences with viewing Black media, and specifically Black women's biopics, as a point of ritual, but also for learning. Throughout the conversations, it was clear that Black biopics were generally more enjoyable and meaningful (also full of meaning-making) when they were consumed with one's Black family. It allowed for questions amongst the group watching and an engagement of historical and extant policies, laws, and treatment of Black people. One could assume that Black biopics are for the entire family and are effective for this type of pseudo group teaching.

Support + Responsibility: Black Biopics are for the family

In a different conversation, Kim, 41, a mother from Beaumont, Texas, discussed how the recent movies were ones that she was intentionally watching with her family, instead of by herself, leisurely. Kim said:

> I can say that, for instance, the movie *Harriet*, whenever I watched that, I made it a point to watch that with my children because it was a Black film, but it also was history. And it showed us in such a positive light because oftentimes, as Black people, our worst is used to depict all of us, and with other people such as Caucasians, their best is used to depict them. And so, I try to combat all of those negatives that my children see about us because we are awesome. And so, that and stuff like that, I watch with my children, I made it a point to the other films that I've watched. I typically watched it with my husband.

Kim brings out a great point mentioned in the literature review; Black women's films typically depict them negatively instead of depicting all of their positive contributions (Chatney, 2016). Additionally, she is intentional about making sure her children and husband see different images

of Blackness. In this example. Like the other mothers in this study, Kim represents the teachers of Black history through the memory constructed by Hollywood. They are also left feeling responsible for the learning and debriefing that takes place following the consumption. This responsibility is felt in the debriefing of the young families of their racial history and the responsibility to Black people's stories when they are released.

Amanda said:

> But for me, I think the last, I would say few years, I have made before COVID-19 really tried to make a conscious effort to go to the movies to support Black films, put money, to show that our stories are valuable. So every opportunity, pretty much every Black film that I've seen, I would go to the movie theater. I think I went to see *Just Mercy*.

Kristin added:

> Personally, I've never really said to myself, oh, I'm not going to watch that movie. I feel like if I come across an opportunity to watch a Black movie, I'm going to watch it because I want to be informed. And I want to know what Hollywood is putting out there for our people. I've never really just had a moment where I say, I'm not watching a movie. I've given pretty much all the Black movies a chance because I just really want to know, what message are they sending out there about Black people? So I make it my business to watch all of it.

Their identities needed to be considered to examine the reception and production more deeply with the groups. Additionally, their backgrounds and lived experiences, as the BFT suggests, became a frame by which we would understand how these media images represented their realities. Inside the focus groups, we concluded from our construction that our reception to BWBs was based on our experiences, identities, and the production's care of Black women's stories. The fullness of their stories and their ability to share the realities of others attached to their stories made the stories real for the viewers. They found inspiration in the victorious stories of Black women even if they could not see themselves in the plot.

Responsibility, Rituals, Relearning & Reteaching

Rituals like families gathering for television and film watching have existed since televisions were introduced into the home. These rituals exist for families watching Black media, and specifically Black biopics. It mirrors and at times can initiate “the talk” conversations among Black children and parents. Cherolyn, a 32-year-old psychology doctoral student from Rhode Island, discussed her memories of watching these types of programs with her mother.

Cherolyn said:

> . . . I remember back in the day with black and white TVs, she's like, “come in here," and I was like, okay. What is this? I don't want to watch this, and she was, now you need to. I don't know; maybe I was eight or nine. It was scary at that moment to like, watch that. It almost felt like she was forcing me to watch this, but as I got older, I really appreciate her because we didn't just watch it. We talked about it. Talking during the show, we talked about it; there was a discussion about Black people and how we're being betrayed, how we're being mistreated and how it was not something that just ended and how it's still going on.

Nicole, a 32-year-old psychologist from Texas, added:

> For me, I typically watch movies at home or in movie theaters. I kind of grew up watching Black movies at home with my family. So sometimes me and my siblings, my parents, we get together, and we watch TV. Growing up in my household, we had an “if it doesn't have Black people in it, we don't watch it” rule.

In another meaningful example, Servant Leader, as she affectionately named herself, gave us a beautiful heartfelt anecdote of how her children and grandchildren watching Black media with her. Her perspective as a grandmother, educator, and highly educated Black woman working in high education impacts her current engagement of Black media generally and Black women’s biopics specifically. She said:

> Well, currently, I am struggling with Black media on several levels because I love the people many times, but I don't love the way they portray us. And I don't love the way we betray us. So, for example, I think that Tyler Perry is extremely talented. I have enjoyed Madea, but I think he's lost his mind right now, and my daughter tells me I should keep that to myself because she says I have an old lady's perspective on that, and I'm just not with it. And that's quite all right. Okay.

This “old lady perspective” that Servant Leader speaks of is what is most needed in the living room pedagogy or discussions that mirror “the talk” for Black families. The diversity of Black identities and perspectives leads to learning from one another and shifting the learning to and from the participants in the focus group and real-life with their social groups. This gathering place presents a space with old and new perspectives to become the bridge that permits pedagogy to happen, linking knowledge production to memory and memory to the interactive nature of media engagement. The similar and contracting readings of Black media co-construct a curriculum using the Black biopics as the historical lesson. Servant Leader continued in her critique of Black media:

> But I am committed now because my goal is to watch everything that Chadwick Boseman did because I thought that he was absolutely fantastic, and I loved the historical pieces. So, *Marshall* is one of those, got to do Wakanda forever, got to do that because of what it says. And what's going to be coming out is *Ma Rainey's Bottom*. And that's a historical one too, and that's going to be coming out soon, and of course, yes, as mentioned earlier*, 42*, he was just an amazing young actor, an amazing young man. And I want Black media to highlight forces like that because whenever I watch the commercials for *Sistas*, I'm clutching my pearls. I want you to know I'm clutching my pearls because I can't do *Sistas*; I can't do it. But Boseman is my focus right now.

Servant Leader makes it clear that she is not as committed nor interested in engaging with new fictional characters that may problematize the historical controlling images of Black women. She is, however, diving deep into the opportunities to share Black history and shape Black memory with her children and grandchildren. In another example, she shares a story about watching Black media with her grandchildren and knowing that those moments are monumental as they lay the foundation for and plant the seeds of pride in one's Black identity.

Researcher Asha said:

> That's probably one of my favorite parts that I'm missing now, is just that call and response. There's nothing like it. I wish we could've all been together when we were

> watching Us because there were Black people in the theater saying, we don't do that. What are you doing? And that's the part I miss. I have a follow-up question for those of you who said that you watch movies with your family members. As it relates to Black biopics, and specifically Black women's biopics, can you walk me through the feelings or even a level of loyalty or responsibility you feel to those Black biopics that you may be watching with family members or just any thoughts and feelings that come up around making sure you are watching this with family?

Servant Leader responded:

> And I like to work with my grandchildren when I get an opportunity. So, for those movies that have a little bit more mature audience desire, that's what the 15-year-old grandson, because he's into microaggressions now. So having wonderful conversations with him is exciting. And then, of course, watching with two baby girls, a six-year-old and a nine-year-old, and Princess Tiana is definitely high on the list, definitely high on the list, and anything about little African-American girls and at home, at home.

Servant Leader continued:

> My daughter, of course, is sitting, everything does not have to be a lesson and family values, and babies just enjoy the movie. Absolutely not. Absolutely not, because I want to plant these seeds because so many of us do not know who we are because the movies have given us these messages about who we are.

Black Living room pedagogy for Black families viewing Black women's biopics means families are transfigured in different roles during the collective viewing process. How does it work: first, families are gathered together with the intention of collective consumption of Black media, in this case, Black women's biopics? There is a call and response aspect between screen and viewers during the film -- a conversation where encoding and decoding are understood to take place. The individuals gathered are viewing the media from multiple lenses as it relates to their own intersectional identities as well as prior information that students have gathered from other sites of learning Black history.

After the film, students (family members) can be found asking questions of the teacher (family member) where the family member's experiences with the media text and knowledge can help to bolster the film's content, diminish the storyline or curriculum, or complicate the

identities seen on screen. In addition to the call-and-response and debriefing that follows Black historical media consumption, audiences may also share conversations with other viewers outside of the living room classroom (e.g., call friends, share thoughts in online spaces, etc.).

In one comical example from our friend, Foxy Brown, a 45-year-old mother and business owner from Mississippi, discussed her conversations with her children and her choice to use Black biopics as a supplement to those conversations:

Researcher Asha asked:

> Where do you watch your Black films, and who do you watch your Black films with and why? And so, I want to put this in a little context. I do understand that we are all doing the COVID thing right now, but before that, who would you typically watch your Black films with and why? Take us back there.

In response, Foxy Brown said:

> Okay, this is fun. So, my daughter was going through a phase where she did not want to date any guys in the Black race. So, I ordered Roots, the old and then the new generation and *Queen*. And we looked at it all because I had to have her understand that White folk got bad credit too, to not count all Black men out. So, we had to do some major [rethinking]. I mean, it was like, you know how the little cartoons have little eyes just going, we're doing Roots because I need her to understand that Black is beautiful, love yourself, everything you don't like about Black men can also be in other races as well. Give your own a try but don't just put one stigma on us all. So, I had to Blackinize my child because I just needed her to understand.

We did not get a definition for "Blackinize" from Foxy Brown, but we can assume the term refers to reintroducing her daughter to the beauty in Blackness, Black culture, and specifically to Black people as suitable mates. If the saying, you are what you eat, is true, then Foxy was determined to feed her children historical Black popular culture with the expectation that they would appreciate it more deeply.

She continued her example:

> So, *Roots*; my children just depend on what it is because I have one child, she is dark-skinned like I am, and she gravitates towards the lighter skin people. And then my son, he's high yellow. People thought he was from a White man because he was high yellow

> with green eyes. And I'm like, no, it's so much in our genes, in our race, the spectrum from one end into the other. And now my son, I have to have more shows, I sit down with him about, because little White girls, little Hispanic girls and I had to tell him, you don't like the dark-skinned girls, so you don't like your mama because I'm as Black as it gets. So, it depends on what it is. But yeah, my kids, I'd be like, come on.

This co-viewing experience can happen with multiple kinds of Black media, but it was truly a central aspect in analyzing the five focus group conversations. Participants discussed the functions of Black movies more broadly and, on occasion, including the genre of Black biopics. Overall, it was apparent the effectiveness of engaging Black media and Black characters for familial [re]learning and [re]teaching; this is of particular interest when these stories are not popularized and supported by school and institutional curricula. In the next chapter, I discuss the impacts of family viewing and learning together through Black women's biopics.

Overall, the concern of "what messages are they sending out about Black people" and wanting to "know what Hollywood is putting out there to our people" has come as almost a natural response for some of the participants. The desire to know more and know through consumption placed the women in group settings to engage the media as a part of culture. Chapter five discusses why this study, and its findings matter to this study's participants, Black women audiences, future curriculum, and studies.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, & CONCLUSION

Overview

As discussed throughout this dissertation, the literature on Black women's biopics among biopic research is significantly low due in part to its novelty. Moreover, with an increase over the last twenty years in several developmental film projects on historical figures, the literature that does exist often erases Blackness and gender from foundational texts on biographical pictures, with women's biopics being almost erased from these conversations completely. As a researcher and consumer of this genre, I needed to facilitate dialogues with Black women audience members to capture their lifetime reception of these images surrounding historical Black women as meaning-making and identity-making processes. Once the coding commenced, a larger component representing the phenomenon of Black women's consuming Black women's biopics was revealed. These findings represent both the collective and individual engagement and reading of the identity constructions.

Theoretical Implications

These theoretical implications contribute to a growing body of work around audience reception studies and expanding our understanding of memory as reception. In the end, this study builds a foundation for a biopic by exploring the Black biopics through Hollywood's construction and disseminations of real women's stories. Growing literature discusses audience reception, specifically Black women's reception to media's contemporary fictional portrayals of Black women (Tounsel, 2015, 2019; Click & Smith-Frigerio, 2019), but not much regarding the nonfictional depictions outside of reality primetime programs (Boylorn, 2008). This study

answers the questions: how are Black women responding to the representations and stories of real Black women in film? Do these constructions of Black women's identity impact the Black women audiences consuming and engaging them?

While it was apparent that the participants in the study were not looking to see themselves in the famous Black women who were depicted, they were hoping to resonate with the truth of her intersectional existence. Many of the women discussed finding inspiration in some of the visibility, but the invisibility of the story left Black women searching for the truth in other places. With a group that toggled from symbolic annihilation to invisibility to erasure, stories are important for identity-making. Meaning-making is impacted by identity-making. Identity is one of the most interesting, most important, and yet the most fickle concepts studied. While it is deeply and historically rooted, it also can change and often does throughout a person's lifetime. The dynamic and complex construction of identity can be intensified by film representations, particularly when a person's racial history has been intentionally masked and shadowed by dominant groups. The resonation and interpretation that was co-constructed with the participants and led to key research findings below.

The overall purpose of this research was to explore how Hollywood's construction of Black women's identity through Black women's biopics impacts Black women's public memory as audience reception. The discussion of the findings facilitated answering the final question of the research.

RQ2: How does the construction of representation for Black women's biopics impact the engagement and reception of these films for Black American women audiences?

This section discusses the findings from the focus group discussions. It presents a process beginning with the constructive media production of Black women's identity, moving to the

critical collective consumption, and finally ending with the interpretative responsive reading of the BWBs where an even more personal and intimate reading of the constructed stories occurs. For the sake of this dissertation and as a theoretical implication, I offer the intersectional call & response model as a major contribution. The intersectional call & response model depicts the theorizing in three parts as discussed and identified by the participants and I's co-construction of what happens when Black families and groups gather together for co-viewing. In this particular case, we utilized Black women's biopics as the media texts, but it was clear that this model was used for other fictional genres. Figure 5.1 offers a visual iteration of the theorizing below to understand better the phenomenon the participants described.

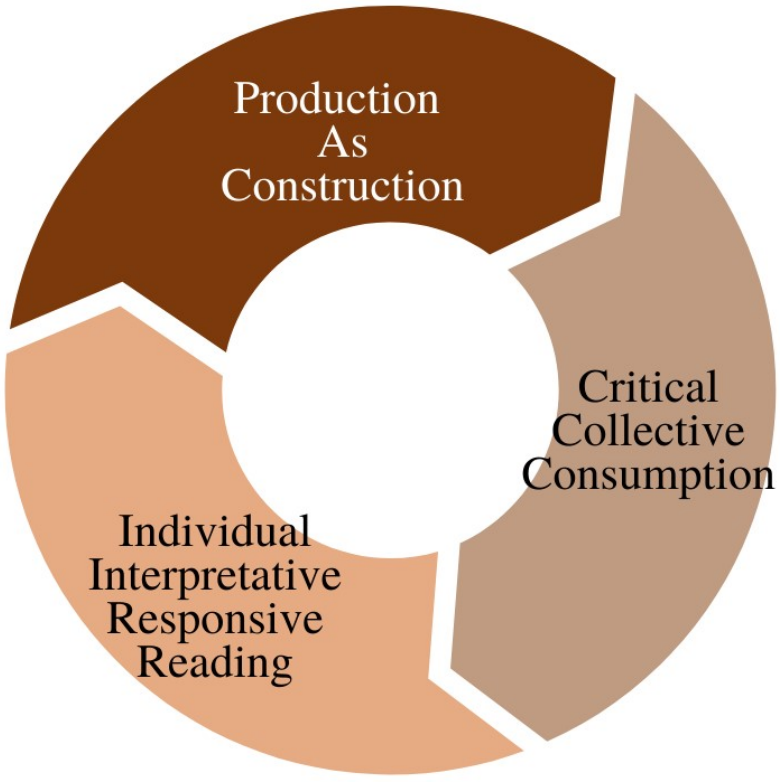


Figure 5.1. Theorizing The Intersectional Call & Response of Black Women's Biopics

This visual representation of the thematic coding depicts the process of Black women's spectatorship, reading, and gazing upon historical Black women figures. What is read by the Black women participants is greatly impacted by Hollywood's conception of identity, which is often deeply rooted in society's flawed ways of seeing. First, the construction of identity and memory through BWBs must be considered.

Constructive Media Production of Black Women's Identity

Table 5.1 presents a current list of Black women's biopics based on historical, real-life Black women figures who were known for their career and or place in history, along with their directors' race and gender, created through an extensive online search of Black biopics. This list informed the study in several ways. One was the recovery of Black women's biopics.

As Table 5.1 shows, there has been a steady increase in BWBs, and audiences have found a consistent release of films in both offices and made-for-television formats. It is also critical to consider who is creating the public memory and where Black women's stories appear. This appearance or distribution of Black women's stories also speaks to the sell-ability/marketability of Black women's biopics to larger audiences.

Table 5.1. Overview of Black Women's Biopics Includes Historical Dramas (1972 - 2021)

	Name of Film	Year	Distribution & Production	Director	Race/ Sex of Director
1	Lady Sings The Blues	1972	Motown Productions, Paramount Pictures	Sidney J. Furie	W/M
2	Wilma	1977	NBC, TV	Bud Greenspan	W/M
3	A Woman Called Moses	1978	NBC, TV	Paul Wendkos	W/M

4	I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings	1979	CBS, TV	Fielder Cook	W/M
5	The Marva Collins Story	1981	Hallmark, CBS, TV	Peter Levin	W/M
6	The Josephine Baker Story	1991	HBO, TV	Brian Gibson	W/M
7	What's Love Got To Do With It	1993	Touchstone Pictures	Brian Gibson	W/M

Table 5.1 (continued)

	Name of Film	Year	Distribution & Production	Director	Race/ Sex of Director
8	Ruby Bridges	1998	Disney, ABC, TV	Euzhan Palcy	B/WM
9	Introducing Dorothy Dandridge	1999	HBO, TV	Martha Coolidge	W/WM
10	Livin' for Love: The Natalie Cole Story	2000	NBC, TV	Robert Townsend	B/M
11	The Rosa Parks Story	2002	CBS, TV	Julie Dash	B/WM
12	Life Isn't A Fairytale: The Fantasia Barrino Story	2006	Lifetime, TV	Debbie Allen	B/WM
13	Hope & Redemption: The Lena Baker Story	2008	Laughing Crow, Schuster's Cash	Ralph Wilcox	B/M
14	Winnie Mandela	2011	Equinoxe Films	Darrell Roodt	W/M
15	Taken From Me: The Tiffany Rubin Story	2011	LifetimeMN, TV	Gary Harvey	W/M
16	Abducted: The Carlina White Story	2012	LifetimeMN, TV	Vondie Curtis-Hall	B/M

17	CrazySexyCool: The TLC Story	2012	VH1/Viacom, TV	Charles Stone III	B/M
18	Betty & Coretta	2013	Lifetime, TV	Yves Simoneau	W/M
19	The Gabby Douglas Story	2014	Lifetime, TV	Gregg Champion	W/M
20	Aaliyah: The Princess of R&B	2014	Lifetime, TV	Bradley Walsh	W/M
21	Bessie	2015	HBO, TV	Dee Rees	B/WM
22	Hidden Figures	2016	Twentieth Century Fox and Chernin Entertainment; Box Office	Theodore Melfi	W/M
23	Nina	2016	Fragile Films. TV	Cynthia Mort	W/WM

Table 5.1 (continued)

	Name of Film	Year	Distribution & Production	Director	Race/ Sex of Director
24	Toni Braxton: Unbreak My Heart	2016	Lifetime, TV	Vondie Curtis Hall	B/M
25	The Real MVP: The Wanda Durant Story	2016	Lifetime, TV	Nelson George	B/M
26	Surviving Compton: Dre, Suge, & Michel'le	2016	Lifetime, TV	Janice Cooke	B/WM
27	Love Under New Management: The Miki Howard Story	2016	TV One Swirl Films, Made for TV	Christine Swanson	B/WM
28	When Love Kills: The Falicia Blakely Story	2017	TV One Swirl Films, Made for TV	Tasha Smith	B/WM
29	Roxanne Roxanne	2017	Netflix	Michael Larnell	B/M
30	Whitney	2018	Lifetime, TV	Angela Bassett	B/WM
31	Courage to Soar: The Simone Biles Story	2018	Lifetime, TV	Vanessa Parise	W/WM

32	Harriet	2019	Focus Features/Martin Chase Productions	Kasi Lemmons	B/WM
33	Self-Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam CJ Walker	2020	Netflix	DeMane Davis Kasi Lemmons	B/WM B/WM
34	Stolen By My Mother: The Kamiyah Mobley Story	2020	Lifetime, TV	Jeffrey Byrd	B/M
35	Genius:Aretha	2021	National Geographic: Made for TV	Anthony Heminway	B/M
36	RESPECT	2021	MGM; Box office	Liesl Tommy	B/WM
37	The Clark Sisters: The Ladies of Gospel	2021	Lifetime, TV	Christin Swanson	B/WM
38	Robin Roberts Presents: Mahalia Jackson	2021	Lifetime, TV	Kenn Leon	B/M

Table 5.1 (continued)

	Name of Film	Year	Distribution & Production	Director	Race/ Sex of Director
39	Salt N Pepa	2021	Lifetime, TV	Mario Van Peebles	B/M
40	Wendy Williams: The Movie	2021	Lifetime, TV	Darren Grant	B/M

Note: B = Black, M= Man, WM=Woman, W= White; List does not include international Black films.

As stated in the previous chapters, director George Lucas grappled with global marketability in creating *Red Tails*, a Black biopic featuring men during World War II. The marketability or ability to gain production and distribution support for Black stories has always been a battle on top of the struggle for meaningful historical representation. Producing Black women's stories has been even more challenging for multiple reasons (family support, legal rights to tell stories, financial support for the films) (Obenson, 2017). However, since 2011, there

has been a consistent production of BWBs released on all three platforms. The ways in which stories are produced significantly impact the storytellers' ability to alter the Black women stories and thus the Black women viewers' reception of those stories.

In this process of theorizing, other components must be considered when analyzing what historical and biographical information the women have been consuming. The small changes in development, production, and filming make differences in storytelling and reception, as described previously with *Hidden Figures* when the director, Melfi, altered key scenes and thus changed the public memory of Black women. What has yet to exist for Black biopics generally and BWBs specifically is the visual that captures the trajectory of historical films and their directors and producers. This visual would provide the audience a deeper look at the creators of Black women's identity in mass media via film.

Cultural production must be considered to speculate upon and consider the phenomenon of Black women reading the construction of Black women's stories through film. Cultural production has been defined as the collective production of skills and practices which enable social actors to make sense of their lives, articulate an identity, and resist with creative energy the apparent dictates of structural conditions the nonetheless reproduce (David Brain cited in White-Ndounou, 2014, pp. 15-16). White-Ndounu goes on further to say:

> Cultural production generates cultural memory and preserves the methods for transmitting cultural values. Manipulating Black culture through characterization, form, and narrative content significantly affects perceptions within and of the culture as well as the ways it is transmitted (p.16).

Production is the construction that impacts Black women's public memory. Production can create a consumable image that the identities of its creators and America's patriarchal, hegemonic, and racist society highly influence. The white racial frame impacts the production of BWBs and the receptions of the film because it impacts public memory.

For most public memory scholars, memory has been attached to the production of a Black woman's memory, especially given that not many of Hollywood's historical dramas have focused on Black women. At every step from creation to distribution, the possibility of infiltration exists in which those with executive power can alter the story, thus altering the memory and the reading of BWBs.

Hollywood's top-down approach to dictating every aspect of production is known as vertical integration. Vertical integration ensures that film content and cultural values remain in the hands of a select few, which happens to be predominantly white males (Ndounou, 2014, p. 10). Vertical integration describes the process of movie-making from development to dissemination. This occurrence did not go unnoticed by the study's participants. Like folklore that gets passed down through generations, the women knew the impacts that Hollywood, and specifically some networks, have had on the accuracy and authenticity of Black women's stories.

For example, Aniyah hinted at the impact Hollywood has on Black women's stories during our conversation around the production of *Self-Made*, a biopic about Madam C.J. Walker. She states, "[It] was really good. I didn't know the full story in that much detail. And, of course, it's Hollywood. So it's slightly different, but it was definitely cool seeing how Madam C.J. Walker's story played out."

Although jokingly mentioned, the fact remains that intersecting Hollywood and BWBs meant there would be "slight differences" from reality when presented to mass audiences. There is a deeply embedded meaning attached to Hollywood altering Black women's stories to the point where Black women audiences expect a story to be altered before they consume it which

leads them to additional information. This slightly different version of reality is a "dirty reflection" that mirrored society, continuing to portray history with missing pieces.

The images that many participants saw in the films were used for [re]learning in the absence of other curricula. Other times, the participants felt that Hollywood had rendered historical Black women unrecognizable in the storytelling. This is seen in Khadijah's response to the adversity inspiration and those of other participants who questioned the Hollywood version of reality and history. In Khadijah's "hoodwinked" explanation of construction, one must ask how films brought to market that center Black women's stories still find ways to overexpose Black audiences to whiteness.

Centering Black women appears to be a most challenging task for Hollywood's biopics. These biopics frequently depict Black women in the periphery of their own stories by highlighting the white saviors, making Black women's stories a bit more palatable and sellable to mass and mixed audiences (White Ndounou, 2014). Constructing the socialization of Black women through the sometimes negative and often transparent moments of intersectionality can be read differently by the participants who want real stories centering Black women without the excessive violence for entertainment.

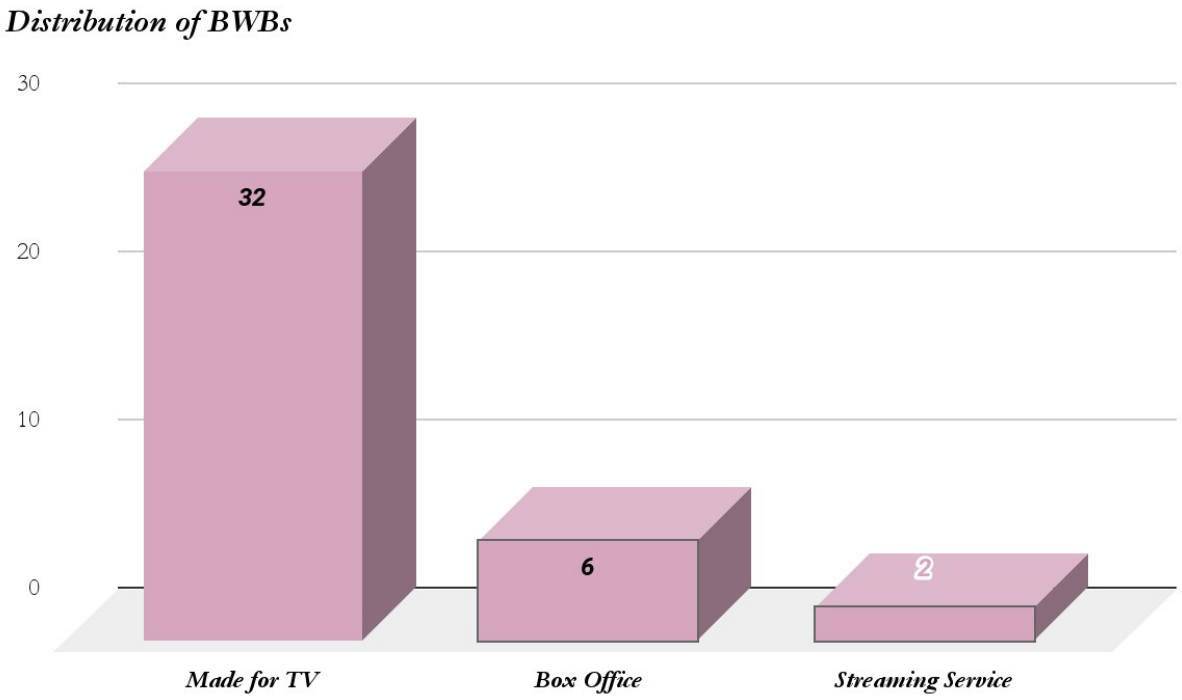
Socialization, or the act of learning a culture through social norms as acceptable and deviant behaviors, may not begin with movies and historical films, but it is extended by the culture of media (Greenberg, 1982). As other scholars have suggested in previous studies, the media, and specifically the film, have the power to influence and teach their viewers. What is taught and shared must always be considered, particularly for underrepresented, marginalized, and minoritized groups.

Many of the positive, negative, and neutral themes come up in the construction of identity and the socialization of Black women through media portrayals. Whether this construction of Black women's identity is a mirrored image or altered reality built by the controlling images or Hollywood, what is apparent is that Black audiences are reading these images very differently than any other audience. Cultural production's role in socialization through media can alter how historical and present-day Black women are viewed by other groups while also impacting how Black women believe they are viewed. It could also impact how Black women view themselves, as discussed previously with the controlling images.

Since 1972, just under 40 BWBs have focused on historical and famous Black women. Other historical dramas centered on special events where Black women were the focus were not included in this study. However, a deeper look into the table also reveals that Black women's stories were more likely to be released as a made-for-television film or series. Additionally, until recently, non-Black individuals were directing and writing BWBs, which also impacted public memory because of their power and ability to change scenes. Changing or rewriting scenes is like rewriting history for those who are not motivated to research the topic.

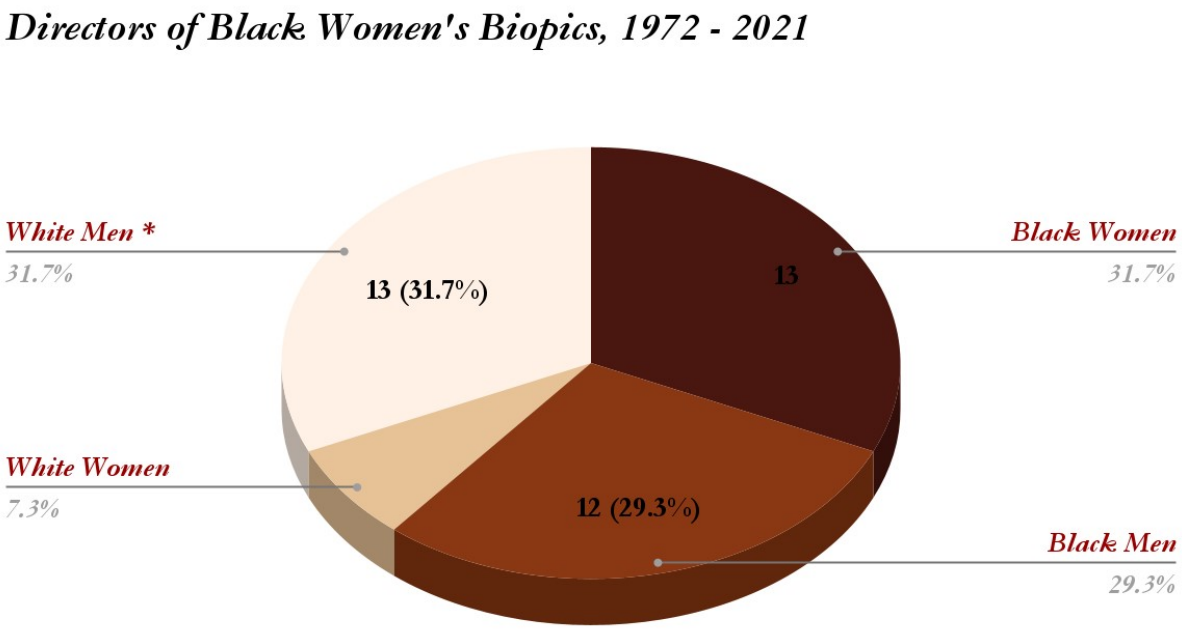
Figure 5.2 shows the staggering difference for where Black women's stories are released. Made-for-television includes premium channels like HBO and the cable networks like ABC, CBS, NBC, VH1 and Lifetime. One can also question what it means that most Black women's stories are primarily available to audiences through television but are not seen as marketable or worth box office releases for larger, global audiences.

Figure 5.2. Distribution of BWBs



After the release of Nina (2016) and Hidden Figures (2016), a surge of Black writers and directors was seen more or less dominating the production side of BWBs. Figure 5.3 shows the trends from 1972 to 2021. It would appear that the upsurge of Black directors might mean that more meaningful, nuanced and complex characterization would be present in the BWBs, but many other factors must be considered in the reading or Black female spectatorship (hooks, 2003) of a film.

Figure 5.3. Directors of Black Women's Biopics 1972 - 2021



Some of the films that Black creatives have directed in the last two years include *Wendy Williams: The Movie* (2021), *Genius: Aretha* (2021), *RESPECT* (2021), *Salt-N-Pepa* (2021), *Self-Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam CJ Walker* (2020), *Robin Roberts Presents: Mahalia Jackson* (2021), *The Clark Sisters: First Ladies of Gospel* (2020), and *Harriet* (2019). Black directors, writers and producers were all a part of the creative processes. Many living characters played a role in conceptualizing how the Black women would be remembered on film. Even with this familial inclusion, everyone was not pleased with the outcome. However, audiences mentioned Harriet and The Clark Sisters' films as two of the most memorable ones they had seen. While part of that conclusion may be due to the film's recency, another factor may be the inspiration found in authentication and validation in representation and visibility.

When looking over the last 49 years of Black women's biopics, many trends are worth discussing. First, the directors of these films have changed significantly since the turn of the millennium. The last film directed by a non-Black, white director was *Hidden Figures*, a box office success earning about $236 million. Several reasons may have led to its success. It was informed by the living legends of the events who were Black women, produced by large production companies, and there was a book version before the film adaptation of the story. However, it could be argued that the highly doctored scene where Kevin Costner's character destroys the "Colored Women" sign at the bathroom entrance erasing Black women's agency and power, might not have been included if a Black director were involved. Second, the platforms where Black women's stories are featured are more often made for TV than box offices. Last, Lifetime, owned by A&E, has produced more Black women's biopics than any other production company. This was problematic for the participants because Lifetime has an "interesting" reputation among audiences with their handling of reenactments of true events.

A look at the directors shows that Black men and women directors have shared about the same number of BWBs. The gender demographics are a bit closer among the Black directors, where they are almost divided down the center, where White men and White women are drastically different. White women are least likely to direct a BWBs, as in the 40 films mentioned, only three were directed by them. Future research should investigate the writers and producers of BWBs more closely as they play a crucial role in developing certain stories and perspectives that Black women audiences are consuming as historical truths.

Production as Construction

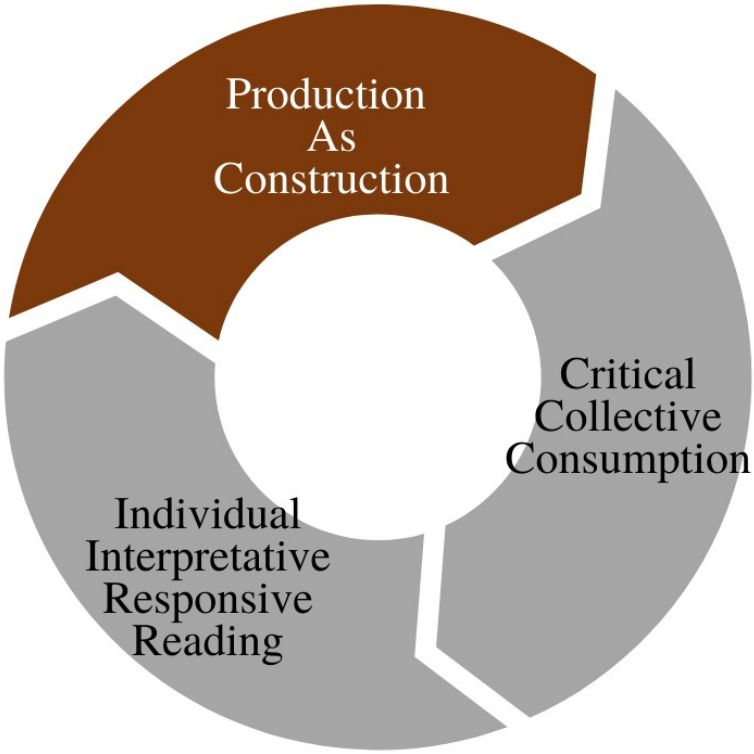


Figure 5.4. Production As Construction

According to scholars, the media is largely White-owned and controlled and has historically been and remains rooted in oppressive racial ideology (Griffin, 2013), leading to a White gaze. Yancy and Ryser described White gaze this way: "Whites became the gazer, those who controlled what was seen and how it was seen while people of color became the looked at not the lookers" (2003, p. 732; Griffin, 2013). How then does the production of BWBs that are powerful White elites largely own (Feagin, 2013) impact the Black audience and Black audience research? Can Black women-centered media ever be free of this control in film, and if so, will it render a successful production/construction of her story and ultimate public memory?

Black feminists remind us that we cannot use those same tools to take control of our stories and images. Lorde's (2012) essay, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", Audre Lorde (2012; 1984) helps us to better understand how Black women's images are impacted by the platforms or tools that are used to share their stories with the masses.

What sticks out the most is the consideration of production and creation and their place in consumption. Lorde argues that the "master's tools will not dismantle the master's house." Does this mean that Black women's biopics cannot dismantle histories, ideologies, stereotypical representations of Black women with their creation and dissemination alone? Does this mean that Black women should be the only creators of Black women's biopics to dismantle a very long and negative media representation legacy with the true and authentic retelling of Black women's lives?

Audre Lorde states that poetry gives names to those ideas that are nameless and formless, about to be born but already felt and that distillation of experience from which true poetry springs forth thought, dream births concept, a feeling births idea, as knowledge verse and precedes understanding (p. 1). Lorde says that poetry is not a luxury; instead, it is how we give a name to the nameless so it can be thought (pp. 2-3).

Birth and creation are associated with dismantling and creating Black women's biopics is a type of birthing, but what has been presented has been malnourished by hegemonic whiteness and overexposure to whiteness in Black women's stories. Lorde asks us to consider this: "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (p. 17). The narrow perimeters help shape public memory and the means of production births and constructs representations of one's life in and through memory. As Lorde argues (2012), "They

may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact only threatened those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support" (p. 19). Many Black women are now hungry to create their BWBs of their/our foremother's stories. So, when box office feature films are not viable for BWBS, their hunger leads creators to create documentaries, autobiographical books, Black biopics, interviews, and other media types where the unadulterated *truth* is available for consumption.

Theoretical Implication: Seeing Controlling Images vs. Controlling the Images

In many ways, controlling images have been discussed as stereotypes, caricatures, and tropes because of the power these images have to shape the identity and perception of identity (Collins, 1989). powerful elite men created these stereotypes (Feagin, 2013) perpetuated by the production company's elite, racist, patriarchal, and hegemonic ideologies to keep Black women in place and know their place in society. Controlling images were intentionally designed by the producers of racism who use media images to plant the seeds of disdain for Black women on news and entertainment media screens.

The theoretical implications of the dissertation are to challenge how controlling images have been fixed in society and particularly the media and to move us beyond stereotypes in fiction and reality television, and ask the question: who is in control of creating these narratives about real Black women and their stories? And how do those creations impact the meaning-making and identity-making for those constructing their identity from their Black biopics?

As discussed in the initial examples with Aretha Franklin, The Clark Sisters, and Nina Simone's biopics, Black women and their families and close friends must be a part of the public memory. The true construction of Black women's public memory lies in the stories and

experiences of those who knew and loved her intimately; they must be a part of her narrative and the creation of her story for mass audiences. It is vitally important for Black women's stories to be cared for.

This care encompasses birthing, creating, and planting because these films work as their type of curriculum for all of those who will consume them individually and collectively; this is one major way mass audiences come in contact with and learn about historical Black women. Accurate film presentations, thoughtful storytelling, and historical accounts must take precedence over compelling storylines and white racial frames that mask the true contributions of Black women. Unlike any other genre for any other group of people, Black women's stories should not be exaggerated for financial gain or to make the story more palatable or more sellable to mass audiences. Black women's stories can and should stand on their own.

For participants who viewed these films with loyalty and responsibility, their support of these historical films may be conflicted by a closer look at production, revealing a more intentional placement of Black women and their stories. The theoretical considerations for this study make clear the need for Black women to be a part of Black women's storytelling through BWBs.

Future research should take up a content analysis of the existing BWBs with media interviews from the writers and directors of the films to understand better the relationship directors have to authentic representations of historical Black women figures in today's society. Whose stories are being shared, where are they being shared, and what is being enhanced in the stories by those with power and agency to alter public memory?

The next sections discuss the second major finding in the theorizing: how Black women view and engage BWBs as this impacts the research question of what meanings and themes

Black women bring to and take away from BWBs. Meaning-making in the critical collective consumption stage is impacted by history, knowledge of history, individual interpretations of the media presentation, and conversations with social groups about the stories following the consumption.

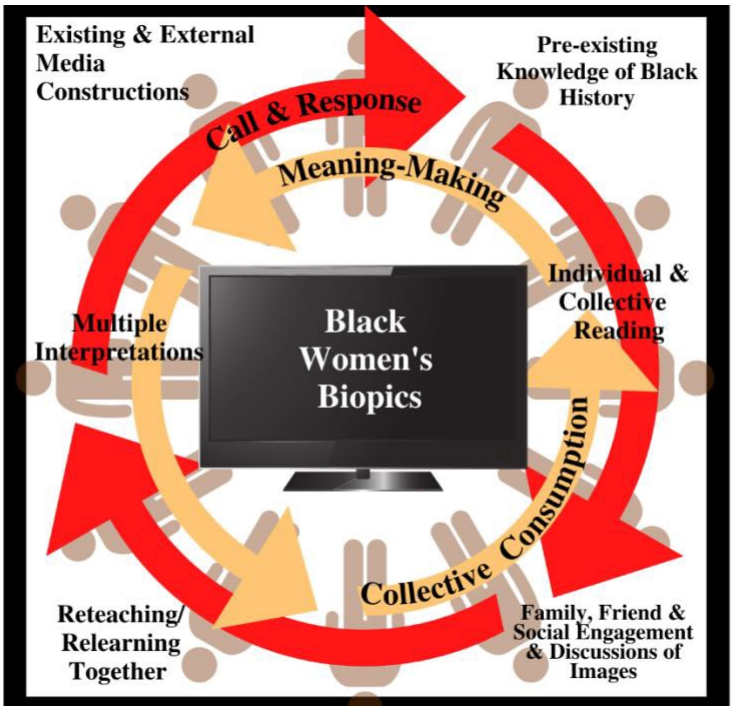


Figure 5.5. Critical Collective Consumption Challenges Black Women's Public Memory

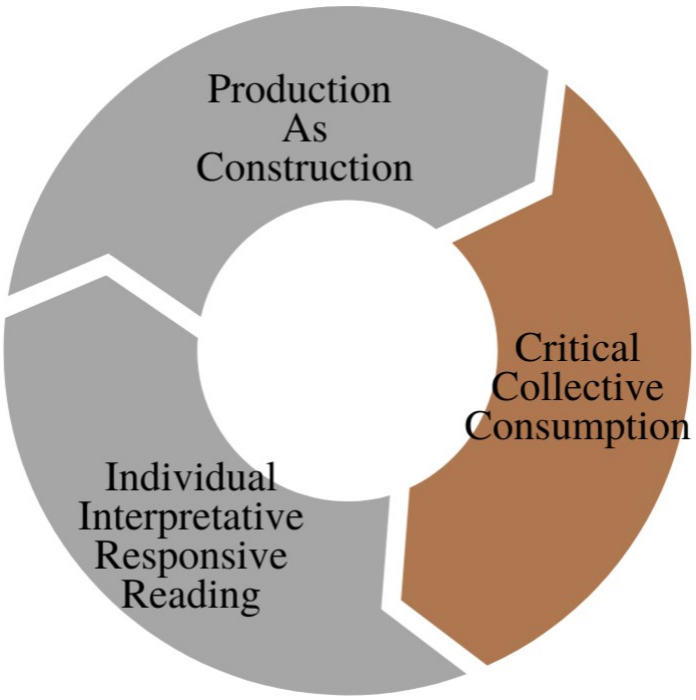


Figure 5.6. Critical Collective Consumption

Critical Collective Consumption of Black Women's Memory

One of the most intriguing concepts that the focus group participants discussed was the concept of collective watching. For the sake of this dissertation, I term this group of concepts the *Theorizing of Call & Responses*, the critical collective consumption of Black women's stories. In this step of the process, the production side of the media's construction of Black women's identity was first considered. In this portion of the theorizing, the participants spoke about watching Black biopics with their family, friends, and even work-related groups like their students were teachers or their children if they were parents.

One of the most impactful of the critical collectives appeared to be the family. Family consumption of BWBs permitted the participants to utilize the films as tools for education or reeducation of a historical event or figures. Conversations marked these moments during and

after the consumptions for larger conversations and research into what was consumed. This was their engagement with the text.

Memory as Reception, Reception as Memory

This collective viewing of Black women's biopics creates space for audiences to accept, challenge, or critique Hollywood's construction of public memory. In many ways, the participants' intentional engagement of existing media examples, personal knowledge of Black history, debriefing conversations with social groups, and their individual reading of the BWBs was the re-creation of public memory. This concept of Black women's public memory has no hypodermic effect on consuming media and believing them without question. Instead, it is a concept that must be and is continually being grappled with in combination with a history of media's controlling images, the changing media landscape, and the increase in Black women-centered media. This intertextuality of interpretation and meaning-making acts in concert with the participant's group meaning-making in the focus groups discussions and the co-constructed meaning in the interviews. What was produced by adding all of those elements amplified the intimate connections that Black women have with their nonfictional historical ancestors through biopics. Their public memory was their audience reception to the stories. Ultimately, the participants never arrived at memory as reception based on the media's constructions alone. The participants were not passively consuming the stories; reading those representations was always loaded for the participants. This collective consumption created viable grounds for learning and transforming these biopics into tools for pedagogy.

The Black Living Room Pedagogy, The Mis/Re/Education of the Black Collective As Ritual

In general, Black media is used as an introduction, reinforcement, or counter to Black life and Black stories. Fujioka's (2005) famous study found that when dominant groups have little contact with minority groups, they rely on the media presentations of those groups more heavily. Moreover, even some Black biopics introduce, reinforce, and counter Black history through historical, social, and cultural memory production through storytelling. As discussed in this dissertation, production, when left in the hands of mainstream media, can alter the images Black audiences are left to consume. But regardless of those stories, Black biopics present a particularly unique opportunity to teach Black families about Black life and Black history using Black media. It is a unique teaching and learning experience, but not necessarily a rare one in that Black families have "the talk" or some iteration of it using media since our first Black representations in the disparaging and racist film, Birth of a Nation (1915).

Black families have historically used their lived experiences and the ones mediated on the screen to teach their children and to learn for themselves. Many participants in the study mentioned inspirational viewing and the informational aspects of Black women's biopics specifically. Using media with social groups like family and friend circles has been heavily influenced by African American and African diasporic storytelling practices. The storytelling and learning do not cease once the consumption is over; it may, in some cases, have only just begun. In this instance, curriculum is used to discuss the pedagogy function of Black women's biopics because it is not just the lessons learned that are important for the discussion, but also how families read with and against the media to empower their families with great knowledge. Hall's encoding/decoding (1980) was important for discussing these findings in the context of

learning from the Black women's biopics as curriculum and a media text filled with codes and meanings.

Curriculum can be defined as the amalgamation of honed and careful teaching skills, tools, objectives and outcomes between instructor and student. The work of curriculum theorists uses the language of curriculum to describe as "a story that reconstitutes the past and imagines the future, as redolent with autobiography and the performance of identity, as tentative and provisional, a temporary and negotiated settlement between the lives we are capable of living and the ones we have" (McKnight, 2016, p. 223).

McKnight is informed by Black women scholars like bell hooks, Patricia Williams, and Stacey McBride-Irby to discuss how Black women color in, go beyond the lines, transgressing, changing and complicating curriculum (p.223). Black women inform this research in those same ways, highlighting their experiences as knowledge production, which is useful for language. In this context, the ideas of Black women's biopics were used as a critical Black curriculum for this type of pseudo-home school environment that many participants found themselves in during the study's data collection.

Critical Black curriculum studies force students, scholars, teachers "to confront the reality that Blackness is world-making and Black people are world-makers" (Othito & Coles, 2021, p.25). Critical Black curriculum studies can be seen as an orientation to, or rather a desire for, Black beholden-ness, ensuring the futurity and sustainability of Black curricular life and Black curricular space/s (Othito & Coles, 2021, p. 28) where learning and unlearning can happen inside of the collaboration and collectivism of Black traditions.

Pedagogy is defined as the method or practice of teaching. Aware that these terms of curriculum and pedagogy are meaningful and heavy for those whose work unearthed the realities

of youth and adult learners, these terms were used to match the seriousness of the "living room" classroom with Black families, as mentioned in the focus groups/sista squares.

Curriculum and pedagogy were concepts that came up in the focus groups where mothers and grandmothers discussed how they use Black women's biopics and Black biopics generally as a tool for teaching their children and grandchildren about the Black American historical figures, movements, moments, and memories. Though they did not describe their experiences with family members as curriculum or pedagogy, these terms apply to many of the conversations with participants. Not only were these Black women transformed into griots of their own making and style, but they also functioned as classroom/homeschool teachers.

This phenomenological moment may be termed Black living room pedagogy (BLRP). In the Black living room pedagogy, Black women become the proponents of Black women's biopics in the home, and lead conversations with their family, friends, and social groups as they engage the story, characterization, representation, and authenticity of the construction of Black history. Their pedagogical moments are where Black women's public memory can become contested and challenged individually and collectively. The BLRP conceptualizes critical collective consumption and the group engagement of teaching and learning from one another's knowledge; this captures Black women's collective media engagements toward Black women's public memory. While the BLRP does not always occur in the living room spaces of home, it does occur in the comfortable spaces where Black people can occupy, challenge, and accept meaning-making about representation and identity. The space is intentionally and beautifully Black, full of knowledge and experience and a desire to know more. This reflects a need to learn from the elders and story keepers of our families to share their knowledge as they recapitulate collective memories of American history. It is a call-and-response between the media and the

viewers, and the viewers with each other; it is a space that may be described as free to be messy, unneat, unorganized, organic, and natural as Black women and their families dare to gaze in opposition upon these historical representations (hooks, 2003). It is even more meaningful when the depictions of Black womanhood are ones that the participants could identify and resonate with because of their own identities. These rituals of watching and talking back to the screens and each other, and now social media, is one that each focus group discussed.

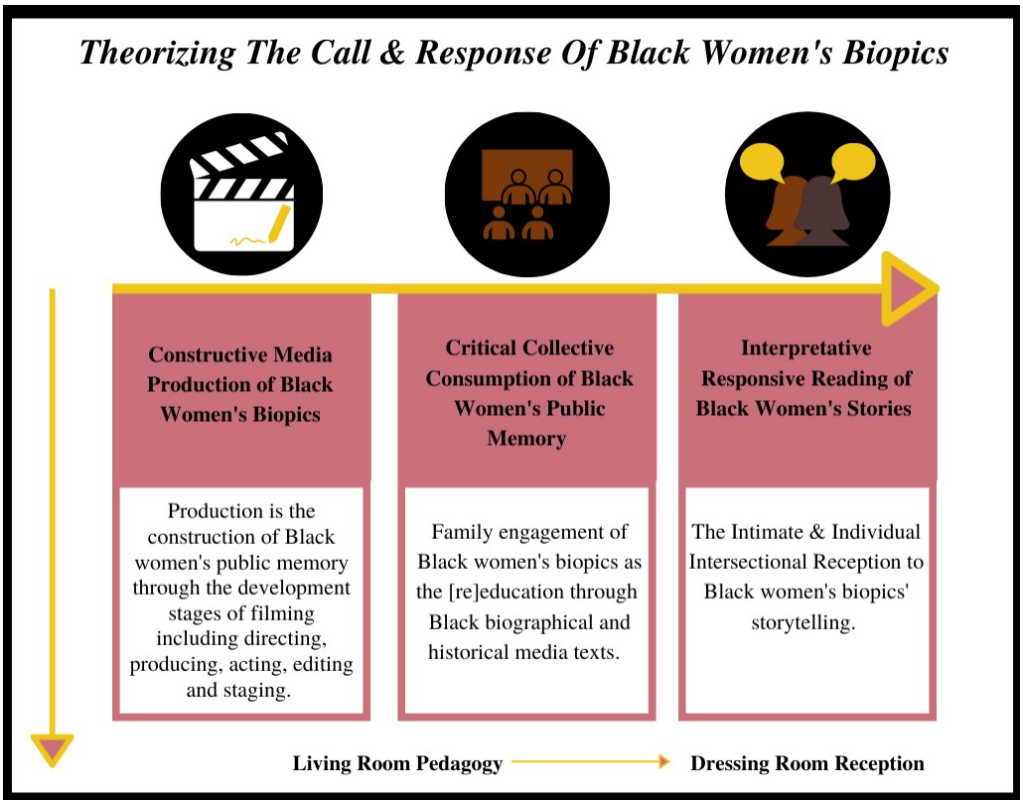


Figure 5.7. Introducing Black Living Room Pedagogy & Dressing Room Reception

Looking For Mama: Mothers As Teachers

During the analysis of critical collective consumption, it was clear that sometimes and under certain circumstances, BWB are their own type of knowledge-production and therefore produce information about Black women's existence and lives. They become lessons and tools

for teaching, as the participants in this study noted. In the emergent data from the analysis, participants who identified as mothers used these films to teach. Mothers in these groups played a significant role in the data collection, analysis, and findings. For example, there were moments when the mother had to tend to young children during the sessions. However, even the addition of children added more to the conversation and the Black women's identity-making. There was a Black mother present in each of the five focus groups (FG1 - Grace; FG2 - A.L. Riley and Kim; FG3 - Foxy Brown, A.J. Gomollion, Rose and Kristen; FG4 - Servant Leader; FG5 - Monte Carlo), and this element of their identity had a significant impact on the findings in regard to the reading and functions of Black women's biopics.

The Black mothers who participated in the focus group discussions pointed to the significance of watching these historical films together with their families. Their intentionality with collective viewing and selection points to their intentionality in choosing the "curriculum" of the forgotten. This truth-telling is built on not only educating the younger generations and teaching them what is possible. Many of the Black mothers revealed that they watch these films in their living room and expect a debriefing with their children and friends following the films. It is a learning experience that is collective and dependent on what information is available.

Another part to consider is that many Black women participants were mothers themselves, but many of the participants looked to their mothers as they read through these BWBs. Black women were the memory keepers, instructors and re-constructors of Black women's media images. Their memories of Black women included the stories their mothers told them before, during and after consuming historical media text.

Interpretative Responsive Reading of Black Women's Biopics

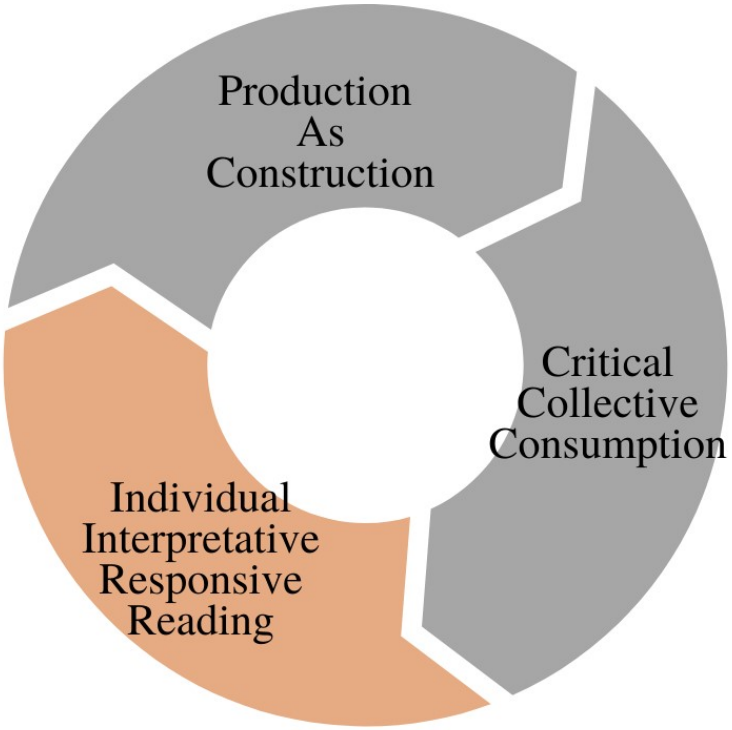


Figure 5.8 Individual Interpretative Responsive Reading

The previous section on theorizing discussed the critical collective consumption that happens when Black women intentionally engage in BWBs with their social groups and families. Beyond Black women becoming teaching of Black women's history and the storytellers in their homes, the participants pointed to a deeper. This section moves through the media construction of Black women's identity, beyond their collective consumption into this intimate space where inspiration, empowerment, and other positive themes were mentioned. I toggle inside and outside of this theorizing as a facilitator and a consumer of these media images of historical Black women with other Black women in this study.

As we co-constructed meaning with each other in the five focus groups, I also looked across each group to see their use of language as they describe who they see. The groups moved from "we" and "us" to "me" and "I" to grapple with personal understandings and readings of these biopics. At some point in the collective engagement, the participants began to ask if they could see themselves in the stories they were presented. There were mixed responses to their personal audience reception seen in their intersectional Call-and-Response storytelling. This type of storytelling refers to the Black women participants highlighting certain parts of their complex identity to relate to the BWBs. With more BWBs, Black women have a greater potential to resonate with more and diverse stories.

This last part of the theorizing looks at the production side again because reception and memory flow through it. With more Black directors, writers and producers constructing Black women's public memory through BWBs, there is a wider variety of Black women the world has access to see; those Black women get to gaze upon. Lifetime has led the way with this and has also placed Black directors and writers in the seats of the constructors of public memory. In a recent online submission from Hollywood Reporter, Rebecca Sun interviewed actress Angela Bassett, whose comments beautifully connect the production to engagement and the intimate reception Black women's biopics hold. Bassett said:

> It's exciting to see Lifetime stepping forward to tell the stories of extraordinary, groundbreaking Black women, particularly those who may not have wider name recognition, such as gospel greats Mahalia Jackson and The Clark Sisters . . . By doing so, it offers those who are familiar with these women an intimate, compelling glimpse into the complexity of their lives behind the curtain, but also introduces their inspiring journeys as artists and women to new, more diverse audiences. . . .A certain portion of our audience only knows of Martin Luther King because he's the one the white media and history focused on. So when we look at iconic figures, what's the story of the woman standing next to the person the light is shining on? I want to make those women the feature of what history is forgetting.

It is the "compelling glimpse into the complexity of their lives behind the curtain" and featuring "what history is forgetting" that is worth another look. Those compelling stories of Black women in the biopic form impact Black women in ways that it does not impact any other group. They read these films and interpreted the meaning based on what they knew -- their knowledge production resulted from their experiences. The interpretative responsive reading introduced the final element of the theorizing of call & response. As I moved beyond the living room pedagogy into the intimate spaces of memory as reception, I recognized this as figuratively moving through the home to the heart in the dressing-up room when trying on identities like wardrobes in the mirror.

Mirror, Mirror: Playing Dress-up with Memories & Nostalgia, A Private Reckoning

> Our memories of the civil rights movement can also play a critical role in shaping our personal, group, and political identities . . . identity and memory depend on each other. Author Unknown (The Second Killing of Sam Cooke Documentary)
>
> Forgetting is the true death. (Dr. Koko Zauditu Selassie in "In Our Mother's Gardens" Documentary.)

After co-constructing meanings inside the biopics, the women contributed their insights into the representation with and against their own identities. The participants provided the ability for men to theorize the communicative interactions of encoding and decoding at work in present-day representations of the past then to go deep. What does it mean for Black women to reckon with the biographical images of historical Black women figures with and against their own stories? Or to move the reception from the front stage to the backstage, from the living room to the dressing room of their home where they try on the stories for size? Or for their knowledge production to be motivated by the stories inside of collective and public memory, ever-changing individual identity-making through their lifetime, and the mediated constructions of Black

women's identity? The findings of this study were framed using Black feminist thought, public memory, and audience reception studies.

A deeper look into the construction of Black women's biopics revealed the many profound ways that Black women read these films. On one level, the women read these films in concert with their families for social meaning-making to be co-constructed. But on another level, as pointed out by the participants, their internalized narratives, and celebrations of Black women's lives beyond their societal contributions are experienced more deeply. The women in the study created a discourse amongst themselves about the inspiration, empowerment, and validation they felt to finally see someone who looked like them go through the things they were also going through.

In line with this reckoning was also the realization and acceptance that Hollywood will not portray the Black female ancestral representations or their representations with complete accuracy. There will be flaws, and flaws are expected, but the Black woman's story is worth knowing and sharing. As a Black woman gazing upon Black women on the film screen and those in the virtual focus group setting, I noted how they discussed their Black womanhood amongst each other as those themes were recognizable to me. The reflected images of reality were like unto a looking glass self (Cooley, 1902) where the symbolic interactions between audience members, society, and media images were all acting and reacting with and to the participants' ways of knowing.

For the Black women in the study, the BWBs were sites of commemorating and remembering legends; these films were the sites of commemoration, and the collective conversations that followed consumption both face-to-face and online were sites for epideictic

rhetoric when resonating with Black women's stories became their public memory even in the very private spaces of Black women's identity-making.

The individual interpretative responsive reading is the reception to Black women's biopics. Ultimately, these films cause us to learn, teach, and remember: We remember the historical Black figures in our bodies. We remember them in our language. We remember them in our fields of study and our methodologies. We remember them in our teaching. We make space for their stories in our stories. I speak of living room pedagogy when describing how Black women's biopics function as a teaching practice for families, and the dressing up room is where the intimate details of Black women's biopics are pressed into Black women all the more. It's where those lessons become character, and character becomes an identity.

Hollywood's Historical Silhouette of Black women: Are Black Women Invisible In Their Own Biopics?

In the end, I ask the question: is the phenomenon a matter of Black women's public memory or Black women's silhouette? This section introduces the metaphor of the silhouette to better describe what occurs when the Black women participants discussed consuming Hollywood's version of Black women's stories through Black biopics. For this theorizing, I coined the term Silhouetted Representation.

> Merriam-Webster defines silhouettes as
>
> a likeness cut from dark material and mounted on a light ground or one sketched in outline and solidly colored in; the outline of a body viewed as circumscribing a mass; outline, contour, profile mean the line that bounds and gives form to something . . . suggest a shape especially of a head or figure with all detail blacked out in shadow leaving only the outline clearly defined (Merriam-Webster).

Silhouettes leave their subject without nuance, complexity, or definition. When BWBs do not provide inspiration and information, they reveal the nature of some cinematographic choices on the production side that ultimately impact the viewers.

Because I am positioned deeply in this study, not only as a Black woman, but with my intersectional, dynamic, and complex identity fully engaged, I also utilize my knowledge as a photographer to help me give language to this current theorizing. As a photographer and videographer, I recognize that there are multiple reasons why a filmmaker would metaphorically use silhouettes in the cinematography of the storytelling. However, I also recognize that the process of creating a silhouette closely mirrors the metaphorical process by which Black women have been represented in their own stories.

While there may be a thin line between silhouettes and shadows, depending on where the subject and the light are being cast by the director, historical Black women tend to fall betwixt and between both concepts, leaving them underexposed in their own stories. Many scholars have spoken about Black women's hyperinvisibility (Johnson, 2019; Williams, 1990; 2008) in the media. In addition to this concept, silhouetted representation is offered to describe how Hollywood casts intentional light off and on certain sellable Black women's stories through mainstream biopics.

First, I offer the technical process of creating a silhouette before pivoting to the metaphorical uptake of the concept. To create a silhouette, a director must place the subject in darkness. The subject receives no direct, fill, or soft light. The subject is placed in front of the camera with no identifying characteristics available to the audience other than their outline and story. In the background, there is usually a white backdrop that is overexposed by multiple light systems to differentiate between the darkened subject. In most cases, the whiter the background,

the better the silhouette. In some cinematographic choices, voices are also distorted, names are not revealed, and details of the subject are as minimal as possible. In those cases, it could be life or death if those identifying details are uncovered. Typically, silhouettes will outline the figure of a person or their facial profile.

I offer two examples from my own photography collections. Figure 5.5 below displays four examples: Top Left: medium shot silhouette of a Black women's figure; Top Right: medium shot silhouette of a Black woman in action; Bottom left: medium shot silhouette of a Black woman's profile facing left; and Bottom right: close-up of a Black woman's profile facing right. Each of these examples shows the ways that Black women have sometimes been a silhouette in their own stories. At times, their shape is known and is recognizable to some; other times, their occupation is revealed but not the measure of the work and worth. Then at other times, her outline as a person with characteristics is in view but the fullness of her existence. These examples can be seen more often when non-Black directors, writers, and producers construct the stories (e.g., Nina and Hidden Figures).

Figure 5.9. Black Women Silhouette Examples

Next, I want to connect the technical to the metaphorical as the foundation for the silhouette representation concept. Like the examples provided, silhouettes lack the distinctness needed to identify a person beyond the outline of their existence. The silhouette lacks the complexities of Black women's unique and nuanced history and progress in contemporary society, exhibiting to audiences that a white racial frame can only produce a silhouette of history, leaving Black women with an incomplete public memory. When examining as a Black feminist spectator (hooks, 1992), the silhouette representation exposes the audience to the omnipresence of the white gaze. Whiteness is often privileged in the white gaze (Griffin, 2014). When the Black women figures are not in total silhouette, they would appear to be in the shadows of those around them, even supporting others in their feature films.

In the literal form, artists who create silhouettes connect and impose meaning to silhouettes in several ways that can also relate to the representation of historical Black women figures in mainstream media. As one artist expressed online, “You would think that eliminating all detail from a shape and reducing an image to two essential colors would make your experience of the image all the simpler, but in fact that was not the case; silhouettes seemed to me to be carriers of numerous possibilities for meaning” (Winter, 2017). While this may be the case of some easily recognizable silhouettes by popular culture, they may not need to be additional elements in certain mediated images, unknown and unsung Black women require more light -- figuratively and cinematographically. For some media creators, using silhouettes to define characters and situations in an elegant, crystallized visual portrait heightens the drama, creates shock and awe while also showing the weight characters carry (Winter, 2017).

This argument does not work for every group nor every story. It is applicable no matter how romanticized the language of representation is. If a group has been framed in one way for over a century, the focus must be on their stories; to have them undeveloped and unexposed in their own stories is an injustice to their public memories. Not only is it white racial framing, but there is a silhouette representation present in the BWBs, particularly when there is an overexposure to the whiteness instead of authentic Black stories and the women’s role inside.

Building from other scholars' work on the visibility, invisibility, absence and presence in film and history, I mention here the work of Aisha Durham and bell hooks. Durham discusses absent presence “ . . . where our bodies are always used to define someone else” (p.79). This is an important note for the silhouetted representation theorized in the findings of the study. As Durham claims, “silence or absent presence calls attention to spaces of knowledge production in dominant society that Black women still do not command or control when it comes to telling our

stories (p. 79). “bell hooks suggests Black women have always had to read against the grain to consume products where our bodies are misrepresented or absent (hooks, 1992, pp. 115-132). Durham’s view of (re)membering was especially useful for this study as it pointed to how Black women audiences' memory is threatened in Hollywood’s cultural productions, which make some Black figures more visible than others by the light it shines on their stories.

In future research, I hope to integrate my own layered accounts into the conversations. My interpretations were present in the framework and the highlighting of certain overarching themes and conversations above others. Still, I denied myself the much deep-diver of seeing how my memories played a role in discovering identity and memory with and alongside my participants.

CONCLUSION

> The lion cannot tell the giraffe’s tale - An African proverb.
>
> Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story. (Collins, 1991)
>
> The longing to tell one’s story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. It was the longing to release that compelled the writing but concurrently, it was the joy of reunion that enabled me to see that the act of writing one’s autobiography is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one’s life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present. (bell hooks, 1998)

This dissertation project sought to dive deeper into the media landscape of biopics. More specifically, the study sought to understand how Hollywood's version of Black history was produced and impacted by Black women’s public memory inside Black women’s biopics. Study participants assert their identities as Black women when consuming the messages about historical Black women figures and Black womanhood during certain eras in American society.

Ultimately, this dissertation explored how Black women as audiences construct Black women's public memory by collectively and individually consuming this media. Black women's biopics are not only historical texts where memory is contested but are also tools for meaning-making and identity-making for Black women and their families. With this as the focus, I asked the questions: What themes do Black women bring to and take away from Black women's biopics? If Black women's biopics are a construction of Hollywood's Black public memory, how does that intentional framing and production impact the audience?

To answer these questions, I utilized Black feminist thought (BFT), audience reception, public memory studies and white racial framing (WRF). To answer the question, I paired BFT and audience reception studies to empower the voices and experiences of the Black women audience members as participants in the study. By asking Black women how they read Black women's biopics, I situated them as knowledge producers and not just critics of the media.

To answer the second question of production, I paired public memory and white racial framing to theorize how Hollywood's historically hegemonic, racist ideology has perpetuated controlling images even in the nonfiction realm of film production. More recently, when Black women's biopics were produced, directed, and written by Black creatives, and endorsed by the historical Black women's family, the films deeply resonated with Black women audience members.

In this final chapter, key research findings are discussed via the focus groups discussion where Black women responded to Black women's biopics, including the theoretical and methodological implications. The chapter concludes with the study's limitations, opportunities for future research, and recommendations for Hollywood and consumers of the historical and contemporary Black women's biopics. This dissertation provided evidence for how Black

women used their media text to remember and commemorate historical Black women figures and a tool for teaching and learning a curriculum that is not often available in certain educational institutions and contexts. These biographies via Black biopics make space for storytelling.

Black Women Telling Black Women's Stories

After viewing The Clark Sisters biopic, it was clear that when telling one's own story, Black women choose topics that tend to reveal their gendered and spiritual battles as it is wrapped into their racial identity. Many of the key informants for this study were drawn into the Clarks sisters' lives because of their similarity to their religious, racial, and gendered experiences in past and present times. Identity is found in their truth-telling. The differences between a true story, a sanitized version, and incomplete gospel certainly impact public memory surrounding Black people's place and power in history. Counter-stories work for Black women in ways that they do not for any other group in that the narrative recreates an inclusive history placing and positioning Black women in the storyline and not behind the line. Some Black women's biopics work in the same ways that eulogies do -- they create space for memory, celebration, reflection while allowing us to struggle with realities -- some new and some old.

However, something truly interesting happens when Black women are in charge of retelling their own stories. What gets included is just as important as what does not, which characters, dialogue and moments, songs, and relationships are all key to the storytelling of a real event. Collins (2004) states that today's popular culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas, "in particular, mass media like movies, television, music . . . and new technologies have greatly expanded possibilities for information creation and dissemination" (p. 122). She suggests that global mass media circulates images of Black femininity and, by doing

so, ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Collins (2004) continues to argue that Black popular culture and their representations of African Americans became important as "sites of struggle" where men and women resist racism, class exploitation, sexism, and/or heterosexism (p.122) impact on controlling images.

Final Considerations

At the end of the data collection and analysis, the study provides a few takeaways based on the findings and discussion. First, memory & [in]visibility work hand in hand in the reception of Black women's biopics. Visibility occurs when bodies are represented in media in ways that lead to a fuller understanding of the human experience (Johnson & Boylorn, 2015). Representation occurs with a high frequency and complexity, resulting in less likelihood that narratives lead to stereotypes. Knowledge production, epistemology, ontology - who gets to tell Black women's stories, who gets to represent their truths as history, how then does it become an othered memory are topics that must be examined for the BWBs and the audiences viewing them to represent the subject of the media text and audience accurately. The struggle and interaction between the two are complex and messy, satisfying and quenching, while at the same time lacking depending on the storytellers and the identities of the viewers.

Next, Black [women's] public memory as knowledge-production is pedagogy. At the beginning of this study, I discussed the difference between BWBs, slavery movies, trauma porn and Black trauma. I also discussed how those films made the audiences feel. From inspired to informed, the participants saw the themes and read them against their personal lenses, like the Black church and society. What was left was the reception of the BWBs of the Black public memory that was negotiated in the Black living rooms (physical, metaphorical, and virtual). The ways the Black women learned and unlearned using Black media became a curriculum for the

living room pedagogy, transforming many of the Black mothers and grandmothers into teachers of American history and society.

The Near Future

It is not very often that Black women have the opportunity to tell their own stories and mainstream media. More often, Black women's stories are left to the care of those who are more worried about selling her story than telling her story. In the beautiful case of Aretha Franklin's biopic with MGM, Respect, she cared enough about naming herself, and writing herself into history in her own way before she transitioned from this life. She chose what stories she was willing to share and which ones did not need to be in this biopic.

While I had hoped to write this biopic into the dissertation as a conversation with the participants, what was clear was how much the production company believed this story could sell. So much so that it pushed back the release date which totaled more than a year in the delay due to COVID-19 restrictions in theatres. Even when it could opt for a streaming service release and theatre release, the production decided to wait. And wait is what we all did. Many Black women's biopics were released on streaming services and cable television in the midst of our waiting, including a biopic on Franklin. What is important to this study is knowing that how Black women's stories are cared for impacts Black women viewers and their realities though they are different from our famous legends.

A [New] Black Public Memory & Black Women's Public Memory

Though several different scholars and researchers have used it, Black public memory has not been defined in the context of media representation or audience reception. It has not been defined in the context of memorializing Black American women's contributions to society

through the texts of television or film stories. These conceptualizations left me lacking, and with great effort, I have provided reasons throughout the findings and conclusion why memory work must be gendered and racialized to capture the fullness of intersectionality and Black women's knowledge production. Many public memory scholars refer to the term "Black public memory" without explicating; instead, the term is referred to in scholarly articles reifying its existence without exposing its elements or how we can use the term beyond slavery. How is post-slavery Black public memory shaped inside of the visual text like film?

In another search for the term African-American public memory, I was introduced to a body of literature that referred to the commemoration of the remembering and the contestation of the site seen and unseen that celebrate and commemorate spaces and places where Black Americans lives have encountered historical moments or what we know as historical moments. Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that public memory is living and no longer can we consider memory something that is only tied to one place, one street name or one center where a collection of artifacts is housed with our ancestors' stories and testimonies. Instead, I ask that we consider Black public memory as the living stories that are dynamic and shaped by the mediated and the familiar stories shared by the media and complicated by school curriculum and Black living room pedagogy. I argue that Black living room pedagogy is where Black public memory is contested. Our Black mothers and Black grandmothers are positioning their descendants to consume material not made of proteins and vegetables but of cultural collective and historical tales that shape one's identity and meaning-making in the living room. Lastly, Black women's public memory is the deliberate and intentional search and recovery of Black women's contributions to global and specifically American society through her life, career, leadership, and defiance of the American status quo.

Black Women as Storytellers, Artists and Quilters of Identity

After analyzing the data, a few things were apparent. First, a true Black woman biopic is an act of defiance and resistance. Second, without the white savior or great race man present, Black women can tell their true stories without being in the shadows of others' light. This does not mean that great men were not present, but they are not centered. Last, Black women can exist in biopics and other films without struggle, abuse, trauma or other acts of violence. But if those elements exist, they do not have to be palatable to be enjoyed. Black women audiences appreciate an authentic story. They use it for historical teaching within their family and friend groups.

Black Women Show Up For Black Women

What became increasingly clear through the data collection process was the support of Black women on the research of Black women by a Black woman. One particular day yielded more than just results but a realization. On Thursday, November 12, during Focus Group #3, I looked around the Zoom room and was overwhelmed with these Black women's support. They were professional women with lives and busy schedules, but they made time to participate in this study. Some were cooking dinner; some were doing their hair, and others were tending to their children. Actually, of the seven women present, half of them were mothers. Two of them were mothers to infant sons, and their babies were also seen on the screen. For me, these powerful moments reveal our intersectional identities and make virtual focus groups useful for understanding identity or the framing of it as it relates to being invited into participants' personal space and lives even beyond their interviews in the zoom conference setting.

Inside of these sista squares, I watched Black women unfold and reveal themselves. I watched them tend to the children, nurse their children, and address their partners. I watched them twist their locs and spin in their office chairs, and I felt closer to them. Beyond their involvement as participants, we became friends and co-researchers, fellow scholars as we worked together to co-construct an authentic reality for each of us individually and collectively concerning our histories, memories, and differences. Reflexively, these moments displayed the richness of the wealth of knowledge present in gathering, even virtually. But it also depicted the richness of the virtual focus groups settings of the sista squares.

Limitations

Technology Brought Us Home & Kept Us There. Like most research projects, especially those executed during the COVID-19 pandemic, this dissertation had limitations in the conceptualization, collection, and analysis phases. Some limitations altered how the project was envisioned, and other limitations, which initially appeared as a hindrance, opened new avenues.

This dissertation began in its primary stages in the Fall of 2019 with the pilot study. I began the articulations and this specific iteration of the dissertation just as a global pandemic began to spread, leaving many of us home with our television sets, phones, and computers. So, in the beginning stages of this project, I envisioned meeting with women in the south at their homes, at their businesses, at their schools and in their offices, but that did not happen. I envisioned meeting with church ladies and Greek letter organizations to discuss how we were all viewing Black women's biopics and how they are viewing impacted how we view ourselves in relation to public memory and the history of Black women on American soil. That did not happen.

What I was able to do in light of the global, state and local regulations concerning COVID-19 and its devastating spread meant that I was going totally virtual. At first, I saw a virtual as an option with limited reach but what I found in the data collection of this study was the ability to go beyond physical spaces and other sites of engagement. I found myself still in the homes of Black women, in the offices of Black women, in the hearts of Black women; what we were able to do together in the five focus group sessions was beyond what I had envisioned, and it allowed me to have conversations with women who have never been to Texas or this college town. Using Zoom for the virtual focus groups allowed me to meet with women all over the nation and, specifically, the South, to have deep, interesting, and hearty dialogues about the media we were consuming.

Recommendations & Future Research

Audiences can look for several BWBs to be released in the next year or so as the call for her stories is ringing even louder through major production companies leading the way with mainstream, alternative, and subaltern media platforms. Many mainstream media outlets are continuing their commitment to Black women's stories, such as Lifetime, BET, VH1, HBO, with streaming services following suit (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Video, and HULU).

Lifetime had and continues to lead the way with Black women's biopics in the last decade. According to an article in the Hollywood Reporter,

> Mahalia is Lifetime's third biopic of 2021, all of which focus on Black women (*Salt-N-Pepa* bowed Jan. 23, followed by *Wendy Williams: The Movie* a week later). In all, 22 of the network's 68 biopics since 1993 have centered the lives of Black women. That's nearly a third — far above the demographic's 3.7 percent share of lead or co-lead characters among theatrically released films (according to a study released in March by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and USC, which examined the 100 highest-grossing films each year from 2009 to 2019). In an era in which inclusion can be received as a begrudging mandate, LOM's development process reveals a blueprint for a more organic path.

Lifetime has given the audiences biopics of some of American's most famed Black women (e.g. Whitney Houston, Simone Biles and Meghan Markle," but The Clark Sisters was one of its most successful (Hollywood Reporter, 2021). But what do more BWBs mean for Black women? It means an increased opportunity to continue the conversations around identity, memory, and history. It means giving credit where the credit is due to many Black women who have led the way in many fields, disciplines, careers and more.

A scholarly recommendation for Hollywood: while some scholars would suggest simply letting Black women tell Black women's stories and letting Black women film, produce, direct, cast, style, and edit BWBs, these stories matter to Black women's public memory. These films matter to Black women audiences so much that they impact their self- and collective identity. So, I do not simply suggest "letting it happen" as if it is a passive decision to quiet the storm of Black audiences. No. I see and predict more Black women creatives taking charge in the powerful spaces where these stories are constructed and birthed. Black women are taking up space in writing rooms, editing processes and in the smallest details where characterizations become authentic intersectional storytelling. Black women are the producers of their own stories, ways of knowing and critical representation. I consider Director Ava Duverney and her work with *Selma*,

> Very few films attempted to explore a Black woman's tensions or aspirations or to examine the dynamics of sexual politics within the Black community. The industry leaders might have us believe no one was interested in stories about Black women. But when a film did emerge that touched on the life of a Black woman, audiences, male as well as female, responded. (Bogle, 2016, p. 228)

Most recently, our stories connect to others' stories using hashtags seen in television and film or on the advertisements for shows or movies. Within the last few years, advertisers have included a hashtag to capture the responses and stories of the audience. But that is not the only

place where conversations about our oppositional readings (Hall, 2001) occur. I have argued that conversations surrounding resonance, authenticity, and identity occur within family and friend groups as culture bounces from one story to the next. There is a need to study how Black audiences are talking about themselves regarding Black women's biopics and the general genre of Black biopics. My dissertation fulfilled this need as it contributes to a language that discusses how Black women, specifically, engage and consume Hollywood's production of Black public memory.

With the talk of 65 Black women's biopics in development (Obenson, 2017), it is clear that Black women's stories are needed and now is the time for them. In addition to the recent trend of Black women's stories is the opportunity for greater research into the areas of representation, media reception, identity, and storytelling. Black women's biopics have a deep impact on Black audiences, as seen in their online engagement and personal digital storytelling as a response to the film. Black women's biopics so impacts Black audiences' stories that stories about themselves are then affected. Story invasion is how I understand what happens when a film's truth is integrated into our own. Story integration is when the stories become so intermingled in our realities that there is no clear difference between where ours begins and where another ends.

At the end of this research, my contributions to the communication field are detailed by using Black history and Black women's stories in scholarly conversations for pedagogy. Black history via Black women's stories, direction, writing, producing, and acting is changing the current media landscape. It is breaking through genres and responding to centuries of oppressive representations by the complication of certain stories alongside the recuperations and possibilities for Black audiences and scholars. The more Hollywood's storytellers are changing,

the more diverse the stories we see. By the end of this year, the filming and release of major Black historical women figures will be completed and added to the collection of content, including another Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin film.

Black Women Telling Their Stories, Changing Their Memories Through Autobiography

During the data collection, Black documentaries and autobiographies were discussed in each of the meetings. When biopics were not present for these Black women, they turned to other sources of Black American women's history. Several other participants asked, "do documentaries count as biopics?" Recent autobiographies like Beyonce's Netflix documentary, *Homecoming, What Happened to Nina Simone, Pieces of Me* (Toni Morrison), Maya Angelou's *And Still I Rise, HBO's Tina*, and so many others across streaming platforms have been made available to mass audiences. Black women's biopics have only just begun to take up Black women's stories in the ways audiences had hoped for decades ago. This year, Black women are shaping their own public memory in many ways and tools, including biopics, written and audio autobiographies, and documentaries.

Additionally, we are now seeing an increase in Black biopics accompanied by supplementary storytelling like a documentary with actor, family and friend interviews giving more light to the films. In 2020, *Netflix's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was followed by a short documentary on the history of Ma Rainey during the early 20th century. Furthermore, Lifetime network has also begun following their Black biopics with exclusive interviews as seen in the recent releases of *Robin Roberts Presents Mahalia Jackson*, *Clark Sisters: The First Ladies of Gospel and Salt N' Pepa*. Unlike many Black biopics, the real individuals were seen in the documentaries as they played crucial roles in creating and producing their own stories. With more of these stories and their supplemental material being made available, Black women's

public memory is constantly being shaped and reshaped by their own words and experiences consumed by Black women audiences who are using their text for a multitude of reasons their study discussed.

Final Thoughts

This dissertation set out to answer three questions: (1) How do Black American women regard themselves in relation to Black women's biopics? (2) What meanings, themes and interpretations do Black American women (audiences) bring to and take away from Black women's biopics? (3) How does the production of representation for Black women's biopics impact the consumption, engagement, and reception of these films for Black American women? Ultimately, this dissertation sought to explore how theories like white racial framing or the intentional whitewashing of Black women's memory through film impacts Black women as audience members. The study's qualitative exploration into Hollywood's construction of Black women's public memory through Black women's biopics found several themes and concepts present when investigating the Black women's audience reception to the stories.

bell hooks notes, in "Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies," [movies] give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real. It may look like something familiar, but in actuality, it is a different universe from the world of the real. That's what makes movies so compelling" (p. 1). She goes further to say that most of us go to the movies to learn "stuff," which is reflected in participants' responses. Put in the context of 2020's dual pandemics, which exacerbated the ongoing and existing racial and gender issues in American society, audiences not only learned "stuff" from the news media but also the films released during the pandemics. Audiences found themselves at home more under the national regulations, exposing them to "Black stories" on streaming platforms and the histories that became memories for Black women audiences.

Telling Black women's stories via film or anything other medium is to release the truths of society's disposal, mistreatment, erasure, and hyperinvisibility of Black women. To tell Black women's stories is also to tell portions of the stories of those who played vital roles in creating their narratives. To tell Black women's stories is also to portray their fight to simply be seen, exist and thrive. To be honest and vulnerable by way of Black women's biopics means to share the experiences in a cinematic way that may still be subjected to edited hands and the protective nature of respectability. To engage with the Black women's biopics in the same ways that the Black women's in the study engaged in was an intimate and validating experience; however, we found that Black women's biopics still tell secrets and hide some secrets as well - who are we to ask for it or to say we deserve the truths of other's lives and their history? Who are we to beg for a better plate of identity to consume; do we make the products of Black women consumable?

The participants agreed that identification with the characters in the Black women's biopics was about learning our history and the inspiration in seeing our stories on large platforms. They did not see themselves as those celebrities or the civil rights leaders who had films about their lives, but they felt validation in the stories being shared. With future research and different methodologies present for inquiry, our understanding of Black women's histories through Black women's biopics adds to the literature of audience reception and Black representation studies with present-day films.

I look forward to utilizing more qualitative methods like autoethnography and digital critical autoethnography to dig deeper into the reception to BWBs.

Afterthoughts: Seeing Black Women Through a Darkened Glass

> For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
> (1 Corinthians 13:12 NIV)

To bring this dissertation to a close and full circle, I am reminded of the significance of this work. This particular work is full-bodied as it embodies my entire existence and experience in the most poetic and spiritual ways. To bring our collective voices and stories to the forefront to better understand our identities and the representation of those identities, I gathered my sistas and my sista-scholars to converse in a digital, virtual world. Perhaps, a spiritual space. Where the "amens," "say that sister," "you talking good" were the call-and-responses of the hour. We brought our identities inside of those squares and hallowed the meeting in a sacred way. I open the ending of the dissertation with a scripture because it reminds us that we are all seeing only a mere reflection of our existence.

As I worked through this study, I was reminded of the endarkened mirrors, the silhouetted representations, and shadowy spaces where Black women have been made to exist even in our own biographical materials. But beyond that, and beyond the controlling images and stereotypical tales, I found a jewel. A jewel formed by the dark, cruel, and tight places that attempted to crush Black women out and yet made diamonds from the pressure. The jewels I found helped me -- not solely to answer the questions of the study but to investigate the storytelling, teaching, identity-making, and meaning-making that exists when we gather together.

When Black women gather together, it is a spiritual experience, and so whether the gathering was face-to-face, online, or in a virtual focus group called sista squares, learning and unlearning were bound to happen. As I commend this study to a lifetime of reflection, I note that this is another collection in the large and meaningful work around Black women's identity and the construction of our memories. I also note that commencing this study is truly the beginning — where future research goals and recommendations become the blueprint for Black print on

Black women. In the end, I welcome the celebrations that happen when we gather at the mirror and in the living room, where we dress up and undress the constructions that lead us here. I hope that the readers of this work build upon the sacred spaces of identity-making and storytelling as we all look through these darkened mirrors for yourselves.

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APPENDIX A

VERBAL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT - UPDATED

Good morning/afternoon,

Happy New Year! I wanted to give you all some updates on the Black Women's Biopics Dissertation Project. My project has received funding from the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University, so everyone who completed a survey and/or focus group interview is eligible to receive a $25 digital visa gift card because of your participation in the study. It will be sent to the email address you provided in the pre-interview survey.

There is an optional post-focus group survey that everyone can answer even if you weren't able to schedule a focus group meeting. These are short questions about Black women's biopics specifically. Please complete it by Jan 22 by 11:59 PM.

Once again, thank you so much for participating in this study. I had so much fun with each of the five focus groups and all of you who participated. You filled me with your stories about Black media and the Black collective.

Best,
Asha Winfield

Original Verbal Recruitment

My name is Asha Winfield, and I am a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University in the Department of Communication. I am currently working on my dissertation that focuses on Black women's biopics and Black women's responses to these films. In this project, I will focus on communication (individual, cultural, generational, and family stories) along with historical memory, nostalgic narratives, and critical representation. I'm hoping to connect with 60 self-identified Black/African American adult women in the Fall and Winter of 2020. Each participant will complete one online survey and focus group discussion. We will have five different dates available for focus group meetings. Please join me for this meaningful discussion about Black women with Black women.

You can email me if you have any questions or would like to sign up as a participant in the study.

Thank you,

Asha S. Winfield
aswinfield@tamu.edu

APPENDIX B

TABLE B1: PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS OF SELF

Name	How would you describe yourself? How would you describe yourself to another Black woman?
Krs	Independent, authentic, Positive
Aniyah Johnson	Intelligent, Hard-Working, Open-minded // Intelligent, Hard-Working, Open-minded
Addie	BLACK/Halfrican
April	I am a young Black woman that is passionate about advocating change for minorities, diversity, equity and inclusion, and helping students reach their full potential.
Alex	Funny, outgoing, loyal and compassionate. As a Black woman a Queen, but I do struggle with imposter syndrome aggressively in this academic space. As well as resilience as a superpower.
Alicia	I would describe myself as a fun, loving and supportive friend. I would probably say the same to a Black woman. I don't automatically assume that the description would be different to someone of the same complexion, but that does not mean that it would not be different in real-time. At best, the tone of my description may be a bit different or a tad more laid back.
Alyssa Ross	Single, black, mother, educated, independent, faithful, genuine, spiritual, kind, passionate

Nova	I am confident, fierce, determined, goal-oriented, driven, thoughtful, dependable, adaptable, friendly, organized, family-oriented, a traveler, responsible, and empathetic. I love who I am and who I am becoming.
Ana	A smart tenacious, capable Black woman looking to be the change I want to see in the world.
Sadie Belle	Tired

Table B1 (continued)

Name	How would you describe yourself? How would you describe yourself to another Black woman?
Madame CJ Walker	Fun, Vivacious, Inquisitive, Poise and Nerdy
Angel	I am ambitious, kind, caring, generous, passionate, consistent, disciplined, hardworking.
Aria Antoine	Dark-skinned, multifaceted, ambitious, driven, open-minded, educated, caring, passionate. I would describe myself the same way, as well as resilient, strong, and a support system to other Black women as well.
Channing Miller	I am an organized introvert who still enjoys building relationships with other people. I'm natural, creative, and passionate about supporting Black girls and young adults. I'm a newlywed (after getting married during the pandemic), a daughter, sister, aunt, niece, cousin, and granddaughter. I am active in my sorority and grateful for another opportunity to serve people.
Briana	Vivacious

Savannah	I am half African American and half Nicaraguan. While I do identify as an Afro-Latina, I primarily identify as a Black woman.
Dr. Maxine	Author, Entrepreneur, Educator, Creative, Black woman with a PhD
Cleo	I would describe myself (and have often been described by others) as calm, kind, loving, passionate, and strong
Dash	African American
Rose	Realtor. Empath. Mother. World traveler. Ambitious. Spiritual. Creative. Sister. Friend. Learner. Doer.
Grace	Optimistic; advocate for others; empath; goal-oriented
Cherolyn	I'm full of energy, compassionate, adventurous, and curious. I would use those same adjectives to describe myself to another Black woman
J.A.	I am a Black Woman. I carry a heavy load.

Table B1 (continued)

Name	How would you describe yourself? How would you describe yourself to another Black woman?
Nicole Johnson	I'm African American, Black
Jay	Hard-working, focused, helpful, compassionate, but don't mess with me. To a Blackwoman: compassionate, future planner
Kemp	I am passionate and dedicated to my family, my church, and my community. I am a youth ministry leader, a caretaker of my grandmother, and a business professional.

A.J. Gomillion	Determined, loving, friendly woman. I'm also a wife and business owner who is trying to make sure I have a life that enables me to have a ready worthy bio and more joy.
Addie	BLACK/Halfrican
Lovel	I would describe myself as a Dominican woman since my cultural heritage is a huge part of me. I am flexible and easygoing to an extent. I have a strong dominant personality.
Kristin Long	Ambitious
Jasmine	I'm a Black female Christian screenwriter from a beautiful, tough city. I'm smart, intelligent and like to have fun. I believe the true meaning of sisterhood is allowing others to express their individuality and appreciating them for who they are.
Valerie	I'm a free-spirited introvert that loves helping others. I love learning about others, but I'm passionate about uplifting Black women. I have a social justice heart, and I'm not afraid to speak up for others.
Amanda	I am a Black woman. I tend to be shy at times, but I am overall a friendly and chill person.
Nikka-Rosa	I am woke, wife, muva, an educator, liberatory pedagogue, womanist, FREE!
Michelle	Intelligent, kind, caring, high standards

Professor X	Mom, educator, community activist

Table B1 (continued)

Name	How would you describe yourself? How would you describe yourself to another Black woman?
Sarah	Black woman trying to make it
Gloria	Caring, giving and too loyal. Accept less than I'm worth. Love to help others.
A. L. Riley	Kind and caring. I think I am a nice person who loves uplifting others.
Blessed and Highly Favored	I would describe myself as optimistic and caring.
Seen	I see you, and I care. We want the same things, we have the same issues, and we can work together.
Foxy Brown	I believe in trying to uplift young Black women. I am fun-loving, and I am passionate about teaching young women regardless of race. I believe that if my smile can make you say HELLO, then I've opened up the doors for other and further communication
Shawn	Funny, understanding, ambitious, passionate
Shelby Jones/Monte Carlo	I am an introverted follower of Christ who loves adventure, growth and keeping it 100.

Sunshine	I am a beautiful soul who possesses a striving, fun-loving, caring spirit for humanity.
Servant Leader	African American woman committed to my community

APPENDIX C

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BWB FROM 2010 TO 2021

Name of Film	Year Released	Distribution Production Company/Studio	Director	Race/ Sex	Executive Producers
Hidden Figures	2016	Twentieth Century Fox and Chernin Entertainment; Box Office	Theodore Melfi	W/M	Donna Gigliotti Peter Chernin Jenno Topping Pharrell Williams Theodore Melfi Jamal Daniel Renee Witt Ivana Lombardi Mimi Valdes Kevin Halloran Margot Lee Shetterly
Genius: Aretha	2021	National Geographic: Made for TV	Anthony Hemingway	B/M	20 Producers included
RESPECT	2021	MGM; Box office	Liesl Tommy	AA/W	Sue Baden-Powell Scott Berstein Jason Cloth Aaron L. Gilbert Jonathan Glickman Jennifer Hudson

					Harvey Mason Jr. Stacy Sher
Nina	2016	Fragile Films; Made for TV	Cynthia Mort	W/W	Stuart Parr Cynthia Mort Barnaby Thompson Ben Latham-Jones Paul Rosenberg Gene Kirkwood Lauren Lloyd Zoe Saldana David Oyelowo Pierre Lagrange Aigerium Jakisheva Allison Sarofim James Spring Mark Burton
The Clark Sisters: The Ladies of Gospel	2021	Lifetime	Christin Swanson	AA/W	Queen Latifah Mary J. Blige Missy Elliot Aunjanue Ellis Holly Davis Carter Loretha Jones Bishop Sheard

Content Analysis (continued)					
Name of Film	Year Released	Distribution Production Company/Studio	Director	Race/ Sex	Executive Producers
Whitney	2018	Lifetime	Angela Bassett	AA/W	Larry Sanitsky Kyle A. Clark Lina Wong
Toni Braxton		Lifetime	Vondie Curtis Hall	AA/M	Babyface Toni Braxton Craig Baumgarten Erik Kritzer Marcus Grant
Robin Roberts Presents: Mahalia	2021	Lifetime	Kenn Leon	AA/M	Moshe Bardach Charles Cooper Robin Roberts Linda Berman
Salt N Pepa	2021	Lifetime	Mario Van Peebles	AA/M	Shakim Compere Queen Latifah Steve Solomos Cherly Salt James Sandra Pepa Dent
CrazySexyCool: The TLC Story	2012	VH1/Viacom	Charles Stone III	AA/M	Bill Diggins Keri Flink Lynn Hylden Rick Krim Kate Lanier Maggie Malina Alexander Motlagh Jeff Olde Rozanda “Chilli” Thomas Tionne “TBoz” Watkins

Aaliyah: The Princess of R&B	2014	Lifetime	Bradley Walsh	W/M	Debra Martin Chase Steve Solomos Howard Braustein Thomas Mark Walden Wendy Williams
Bessie	2015	HBO, Made for TV	Dee Rees	AA/W	Queen Latifah Shakim Compere Hallie Foote Randi Michel Ron Schmidt Shelby Stone Lili Fini Zanuck Richard D. Zanuck
Self-Made	2020	Netflix	Kasi Lemmons DeMane Davis	AA/W AA/M	Lena Cordina | DeMane Davis

Content Analysis (continued)					
Name of Film	Year Released	Distribution Production Company/Studio	Director	Race/ Sex	Executive Producers
Harriet	2019	Focus	Kasi Lemmons	AA/W	15 Producers Nnamdi Asomugha Debra Martin Chase Bill Benson
Roxanne Roxanne	2018	Netflix	Michael Larnell	AA/M	Nina Yang Bongiovi Mimi Valdes Forest Whitaker Pharrell Williams

Wendy Williams: The Movie	2021	Lifetime	Darren Grant	AA/M	Wendy Williams Charles Cooper Sheila Ducksworth Will Packer Bianca Versteeg

APPENDIX D

NEW DEFINITIONS & CONCEPTS FROM DISSERTATION

Biographical picture, biopic	A biopic is a program that tells the story of the life of a real person via film and television.
Black biopics	Black biopic or biographical picture is a film, series, or program that tells a visual story about the life of an actual Black person or group of Black people during a specific time or event with a certain perspective, framing, and intention, often highlighting several periods in the person's life like from birth to death.
Black Living Room Pedagogy	BLRP describes what happens when Black families, groups and individuals gather to engage and consume Black media. The meaning-making that occurs is based on everyone's individual and collective identities, lived experiences and personal knowledge being fully engaged in understanding the Black content.
Black public memory	Black public memory refers to the responses and reception constructed identity in contestation with knowledge of its consumers.
Black women's biopics	Black women's biopics (BWBs) are biographical pictures, films, programs, or series that focus on the complex identities of Black women through our history.
Black women's public memory	Black women's public memory is the reception to and stories based on the historical events and people that have occurred in society that centralizes the lived experiences and personal knowledge and interest of those with parallel identity with those whose stories are represented.
Call & Response of Black Women's Biopics, Theorizing	Call & Response of Black Women's Biopics Includes 3 Parts A. Production as Construction of Identity B. Critical Collective Consumption C. Intersectional Responsive
Historical dramas	Historical dramas weave fictional and historical elements in an illustrative, visual form
Intersectional storytelling	Intersectional storytelling may be defined as when films describe a character's intersecting identities or matrices of oppression. This type of storytelling describes the phenomenon of what happens when real stories, or actual occurrences, impact and resonate with their Black subjectivities.

New Definitions & Concepts From Dissertation (continued)

Shadowy representation	Shadowy representation refers to the ways in which Black women's film depictions mirror the ways that they are left in the dark, periphery, and out of focus in historical discourse. This type of representation focuses on how Black men's stories are centralized while Black women are often left in the shadows of history and intentionally erased for discourses unless intentionally recovered by other Black women. This type of representation has also been found often in historical dramas of the civil rights and Black freedom movements that focus primarily on great race men of the time.
Sista Square Methodology	A visual, virtual methodology that gathers Black women together through teleconference technology. This methodology enables Black women to share themselves as much as their desire mirroring the sista circle methodology without the restrictions of location.
Slave movie (Black trauma)	A slave movie is described as a historical drama that features the era of slavery. The graphic nature of viewing enslaved Africans on American soil for entertainment has had complex reactions with mass audiences.
Silhouetted Representation	Silhouetted representation refers to the representation where Hollywood overexposes its audiences to whiteness in Black stories eliminating all characteristics of the Black woman existence in history and contemporary texts.
Trauma porn	Trauma porn is the term that refers to the graphic, explicit nature of slavery, violence, and brutal realities faced by characters and actors on screen. This reality for Black viewers is often traumatic and not entertaining.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions For Focus Group - Group Setting

Warm-up Questions

1. Do you watch Black films? What are you watching now?
2. What types of Black entertainment or media are you watching now? What types of Black media have you been watching since the pandemic?
3. Where do you watch movies and sitcoms? e.g., homework with friends with the family movie theater
4. Who is usually with you when you watch Black media?
5. Do you ever buy Black films? Which ones?
6. What kind of Black films do you watch?
7. Which recent movies have you heard about but decided not to watch? Why?
8. What don't you like about them? What would change your mind?
9. Name three of your favorite Black films: past, present, or of all time? What made them appealing?
11. Name three of your favorite Black biopics? Past, present or of all time?
12. What did you like best about them?
13. What Black movies did you watch growing up?

Media Questions - Semi-structured

1. Overall, how do you think Black Americans are presented in Black biopics? How do you feel about these presentations? What kinds of characters are presented again and again? Are there any differences or similarities in the Black biopics you have been watching?

What events appear again and again? What are the impacts of these appearances? What are the effects of the events that never appear?

Are the people on these programs like real people? Do they resemble people in real life?

Do these biopics reflect what you know about these historical events or figures? How are they similar or different?

Can you see yourself in these Black women's biopics? Describe how? Tell me why you can identify and why not?

2. What do these stories remind you of as it relates to your own life?
3. What was the last biopic you watched? Why did you watch it? Who? When?
4. Can you make a list of your favorite Black biopics of all time? Now count how many of those are about Black women.
5. Where do you go to find out more information in regards to Black history? Black women's history?
6. What do you typically do after watching a Black film? Black biopics?

7. Who do you talk to if you are feeling various emotions after watching Black films? Why?
Do you ever discuss Black situation comedies with others? Who?
8. How often do you turn to social media while watching Black biopics? After watching Black biopics?
9. What are you looking for when engaging social media after movie watching?
10. What do the conversations with your family and friends look like while or after watching these Black biopics? Black women's biopics?

Addition Questions: (Questions When Participants Bring Up Particular Movies/Scenes)
Group Setting

(These questions were approved in the last research/pilot study)

1. After watching this clip, how do we feel about the scene? What do you feel in general?
a. What familiar themes are present?
b. What words or feelings come to mind?

2. How is this scene/movie relatable to you?
a. If it isn't, who do you think it relates to?
b. Why do you think it doesn't relate to you? Why?

3. How are the movies alike or different?
a. How does the genre of the program affect the images presented? Have you seen similar images in other genres?

4. How would you describe the depiction of the main characters? How are they relatable or not to you?
a. Who do the characters and/or the story remind you of?
b. Which character can you most identify with and why?

5. What new, if any, characterizations come from these films we viewed?

6. Think about the potential audience, who do you think these images are made for and for What reason?

7. If you have seen this movie(s) before, why did you decide to watch it?

8. If you have not seen this movie (s) before, why did you decide not to watch it?

9. What other movies, shows, characters come to mind when you think about this movie?

10. How has this discussion affected how you view movies like these in the future?

11. If you were a screenwriter, whose stories do you think have yet to be written and filmed?

14. When you first saw this clip, tell me what you felt and the memories it evoked?
a. If you felt, fear, disgust, sadness, anger -- tell us what triggered those emotions for You?

15. What recent movies have you been watching with Black leads?
a. Black stories?

16. Was the plot or ending surprising to you? Why or why not?
a. If the story could have ended any other way, how would you have written it?

Demographic Questions for the Pre-Focus Group Discussion Questionnaire/Survey

QR Will link to Survey & Sign Up on Google Form; The following questions will be posted there.

One-On-One Setting/between participants and an online survey.

1. How old are you?
2. Are you employed? Where? Salary?
3. What is your marital status? Marital history?
4. Partner's occupation? Income level?
5. Do you have children? How many? Ages? Sex?
6. Do you own our home? Rent? Live with family?
7. Parent's marital status? History?
8. Siblings?
9. Religious Affiliation? Religious Background?
10. What year were you born?
11. Highest level of education?
12. What is/was your major? What year are you? (ex. Freshman, Graduate studies?
13. Geographic experience? Where have you lived? Where is home?
14. Career/personal goals? Plans? Ambitions?

Post-Interview Survey (Online) Via GoogleForms

1. Email address
2. What was your pseudonym (alternative name) for this study?
3. How old are you?
4. Which focus group did you participate in?
5. Tell us your thoughts after the focus group meeting. What moments stood out the most? What more would you like to add to that/those topic(s) that you remember?
6. What Black women's biopics are most memorable for you and why? These can be Black women's biopics that you've seen at any point in your life.
7. Which Black women's biopic(s) could you identify with the most and why? If none, why do you think that was the case?
8. During the focus group session, we discussed our individual desires/needs to watch, share, and discuss Black women's biopics and history. How important is it for you to watch Black women's biopics and share them with others? Discuss below.
9. Discuss themes you continue to see in Black women's historical films? List below. Compare across Black biopics.
10. Any last thoughts or comments after the focus group session.

APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Research Study: "Say Her Name, Tell Her Story": Exploring Intersectional Black Histories with Black American Audiences Through Black Women's Biopics

Investigator: Dr. Sriviyda Ramasubramanian

Protocol Director/Researcher: Asha Winfield, M.A.

Funded/Supported By: This research is funded by the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University.

Why are you being invited to take part in a research study?

You are being asked to participate because of your interest in discussing the depictions, portrayals and representations of Black women's stories also known as Black biopics or Black women's biopics. Additionally, you are being asked to participate in this study because you self-identify as a Black/African American adult woman.

What should you know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team by email: Dr. Srivi Ramasubramanian -srivi@tamu.edu or Asha Winfield - aswinfield@tamu.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Texas A&M Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may talk to them at at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at irb@tamu.edu., if

- You cannot reach the research team.
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to discuss Black women's biopics with Black American audiences. It involves viewing scenes that reflect Black storytelling with the focus group where we will ask you questions about the scenes and stories in the films. The research is being conducted to add to the knowledge surrounding Black popular culture through Black biopics and Black reception studies that tell scholars who these true stories impact Black audiences.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for about 180 mins.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about 10 - 12 people in this research study for each Zoom meeting. Approximately 60 - 75 people in the entire study will be enrolled nationwide.

What happens if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research"?

- Participants who are interested in the focus group will sign-up using the link or QR code provided on the fliers and recruitment emails. The link will direct them to a Google Form.
- Participants will sign-up for one of the available 5 focus groups.

- After choosing a group to join, participants will be sent a mandatory pre-interview survey/questionnaire to complete before their scheduled focus group meeting. They will choose a pseudonym at this time.
- On the day of the focus group meeting, the researcher will ask the participants to use their pseudonym before entering the zoom room. This is required.
- When in the Zoom meeting room, we will first go over each part of the informed consent form (written and aloud).
- Once the willing participants agree to participate in the focus group and all its elements, then we will begin with an overview of what will happen in the setting.
- Participants will be asked open-ended semi-structured questions used to further the conversations around the Black biopics as a collective and individual.
- We will discuss the portrayals of Black women on screen and in their lives.
- Once all of the questions are answered, then we will exit the zoom room.
- Focus groups will be audio and video recorded. This is mandatory for the research.
- Mandatory screenshots/photos will be taken including full-face images for future research talks and presentations on this topic by the researcher.
- An optional follow-up survey will be sent at least 6 weeks after the focus group meeting to further discuss any lingering topics presented in the focus group.
- Your $25 compensation will be sent to you through your email address provided.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

What happens if I say "Yes", but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

If you decide to leave the research, there are no consequences. If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can remove your responses from the study.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

The potential risks we foresee are social or emotional risks. Discussing topics of the characters' identity and oppression with other strangers may lead to feeling uneasy or uncomfortable. But you can remove yourself, or share as little or as much as you like.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and other records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete privacy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information

include the TAMU HRPP/IRB and other representatives of this institution. Information received will be stored for 3 years where only the investigators can readily assess it.

Everyone will be asked to respect the privacy of the other group members. All participants will be asked not to disclose anything said within the context of the discussion, but it is important to understand that other people in the group with you may not keep all information private and confidential. Ultimately, information about you related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

Other Elements:

The following research activities are required:

The researcher may audio or video record me to aid with data analysis.

The researcher may audio or video record me for use in scholarly presentations or publications.

My identity may be shared as part of this activity, although the researcher will attempt to limit such identification. I understand the risks associated with such identification.

APPENDIX G

OUTCOME LETTER - IRB APPROVAL

DIVISION OF RESEARCH

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION
(Common Rule –Effective January, 2018)

January 13, 2021

Type of Review:	IRB Amendment
Title:	"Say Her Name, Tell Her Story": Exploring Intersectional Black Histories with Black American Audiences Through Black Women's Biopics
Investigator:	Srividya Ramasubramanian
IRB ID:	IRB2020-1250M
Reference Number:	119247
Funding:	Internal
Documents Reviewed:	• 112FinalDissertationFlierASW1(Version 5.0) • 1521BlackMovieConsentForm2(Version 4.0) • Verbal Recruitment ScriptBWBP11321 - (Version 2.0) • IRB Application (Human Research) - (Version 1.5)
Review Category	Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: i. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; ii. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or iii. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by .111(a)(7).

750 Agronomy Road, Suite 2701
1186 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-1186

Dear Srividya Ramasubramanian:

The HRPP determined on January 13, 2021 that this research meets the criteria for Exemption in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104.

This determination applies only to the activities described in this IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. Please use the reviewed, stamped study documents (available in iRIS) for applicable study procedures (e.g. recruitment, consent, data collection, etc...). If changes are needed to stamped study documents or study procedures, you must immediately contact the IRB. You may be required to submit a new request to the IRB.

Your exemption is good for three (3) years from the Approval Start Date (11/03/2020). Thirty days prior to that time, you will be sent an Administrative Check-In Notice to provide an update on the status of your study.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Administrative Office at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636.

Sincerely,
IRB Administration

APPENDIX H

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLIER

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Say Her Name, Tell Her Story

Exploring Black Collective Memory, Nostalgic Narratives & Critical Representation In Black Women's Biopics

Description:
Your participation in the focus group will discuss the legacy of Black biopics with special attention to Black women's stories inside of Black history and collective memory.
$25 Compensation to each participant.

bit.ly/BlackBiopics

To Sign up, use the link above or email aswinfield@tamu.edu

Who Can Participate?
Self-Identified
Black/African American Woman
18 years or older

Focus Group Interviews:
30 Min Pre-Survey
30 Min Post-Survey (Optional)

One 120 Min
Video Interview Via ZOOM
November 2020

Asha Winfield, M.A. is a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University in the Department of Communication where she studies the stories of Black individuals and groups occurring in the media, culture, and society. As a researcher and filmmaker, her goal is to use intersectionality, critical race theory, and Black feminist thought to frame and center the stories and experiences of Black people as it relates to audience reception, identity making, and storytelling.

IRB2020-1250M | APPROVAL DATE: 11/03/2020 | EXPIRES: 11/02/2023

APPENDIX I

NOTICE OF CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUNDING

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

Department of Communication

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

November 16, 2020

Asha Winfield Graduate Student
Department of Communication

RE: FY21 Communication Department, Research Enhancement Grant

Dear Asha,

I am pleased to inform you that the Department of Communication has awarded you a research enhancement grant of **$4500** to cover dissertation research expenses (participant incentives, NviVo software, transcription services, editing services, books & equipment).

Please coordinate with Silvia Martinez and business staff (Sandra Maldonado and Rubi Ruiz) concerning the process by which you will use to make these purchases. Let me know if you have any questions.

Congratulations!

Best,

Kristan Poirot
Director of Graduate Studies

CC: Sandra Maldonado; Silvia Martinez; Srivi Ramasubramanian