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From Princess to Queen

A Black Feminist Approach to Positive Sexual Identity Development

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ABSTRACT—Historically, research literature has focused on prevention components of sexuality with the African American community. There has been an emphasis on topics such as teenage pregnancy, unplanned births, contraceptive use, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Using a Black Feminist Theoretical framework, this study explores how Black women construct ideas about Black womanhood and sexuality through the narratives and experiences of their network, which can include family members and community members. The purpose of this approach is to help transition the deficit based, prevention only, hypersexual messages that have permeated the Black female community into an empowering approach to sexuality and sexuality research.

KEY WORDS—Black feminist approach, female sexuality, intimacy, development, identity, Black women

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Introduction

Health Benefits to Sexuality

HEALTHY SEXUALITY IS A FORM OF EXPRESSION IN WHICH ONE communicates without guilt, fear, or shame (Maltz, 2011) and is viewed as being positive and enriching to our lives (Maltz, 1997). According to Robinson, Bockting, Rosser, Miner, and Coleman (2002), positive sexual health is defined as a celebratory, self-affirming approach to sexuality that includes appropriate experimentation, sensuality, the ability to set sexual boundaries for self, and to be safe and responsible. Literature that explores and analyzes this positive sexual aspect is often missing when discussing the sexual experiences women overall, but even more so the sexual experiences of Black women. The current study is a beginning, exploratory inquiry into the positive sexual health of women, specifically Black women.

Despite these positive constructs of healthy sexuality, the majority of academic discourse revolves around the dangers of sexuality—such as unprotected sex and teenage pregnancy (Collins, 2005; Kaplan, 1997)—and the preventative habits in which one should practice, such as contraceptive use and healthcare relationships (Cooper, Diamond, & High, 1993; McKee, Karasz, & Weber, 2004). For communities of color, this negative approach to sexuality is what dominates the annals of academic literature (Collins, 2005; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Stephens & Philips, 2005). There is even less academic literature that explores the health benefits of sexuality in reference to Black women (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2005).

There is a clear history of violating, abusing, and distorting the sexuality of Black women (Collins, 2005). The historical lack of respect and disregard for people of color within the health community has created an understandable tension and apprehension with the current recommendations made for healthy life practices. As a result, Black women rely on one another for health advice, support, and guidance to better life practices (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1981; Neighbors & Jackson, 1984).

Healthy Sexuality

In exploring the positive sexuality of Black women, it is important to take a broad view of how healthy sexuality is defined and contextualized. Mace, Bannerman, and Burton (1974) identified the following three factors as critical to being sexually healthy. The three components include (1) the

ability to experience pleasure but also be in control of the sexual reproductive and sexual behaviors in which one chooses to engage according to their personal and social ethics and morals; (2) liberation from issues that have the potential to damage the sexual relationship or impair sexual response; these challenges could be the result of fear, shame, guilt, or other psychological factors; and (3) freedom from ailments or infections that hinder sexual and reproductive functioning. Similarly, the World Health Organization (1975) defined sexual health as being an “integration of somatic, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of sexual being, in ways that are positively enriching and that enhance personality, communication and love” (p. 6). In 2000, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) collaborated with the World Association of Sexology in revising the 1975 definition of sexual health as constructed by the WHO. In creating a context for explaining sexual health, they deemed it essential to have working definitions for sex and sexuality. Sexuality was explained as having “conditions for eroticism, emotional attachment/love, sex, gender, and reproduction. It is anchored in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs and values and is expressed through identity, attitudes and values, roles, behaviors and relationships” (p. 8). PAHO continues to explain that sexual health is the freedom to sensibly express those components of sexuality that support the well-being and life enrichment of individuals through an ethical framework. Our pioneering sexual health professional organizations provide similar definitions for contextualizing sexual health. For example, SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States) states that all people across the lifespan are sexual beings and describe sexuality as encompassing the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals. Its various dimensions involve the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the sexual response system; identity, orientation, roles, and personality; and thoughts, feelings, and relationships. Sexuality is influenced by ethical, spiritual, cultural, and moral concerns. While AASECT (American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists) simply affirms that sexuality is an inherent, essential and beneficial dimension of being human.

This study investigated the methods through which positive sexuality is learned and communicated among Black women. The topic was explored using a Black feminist theoretical lens.

Black Feminist Theory and Sexuality

Black Feminist Theory was created out of a need to be appropriately represented since there was a lack of representation within the Feminist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement for Black women in the 1960s (Collins, 2009). This theory posits that Black women construct their core ideas about Black womanhood through the narratives and experiences of influential members of their network, which include family members and community members. To combat the assortment of negative controlling images asserted by the White community, a revised collection of definitions explaining Black womanhood was designed. These self-definitions are constructions made specifically on family and community about the meaning of Black womanhood. The evolving meaning to Black womanhood is explained through the commonalities experienced, for which there is no single construct to assign to it. The purpose for this revision was to manage “the discriminatory social practices that the controlling images supported” (Collins, 2009, p. 13).

One of the primary objectives of Black Feminist Thought is to highlight the experience of Black women historically and within the present day (Collins, 2009; Few et al., 2003). It believed through this narration of experience that empowerment can occur, which can lead to positive change for future generations. When using this theoretical framework to explore sexuality, the purpose is to help redefine the deficit based, prevention only, hypersexual messages that have pervaded the Black female community into a more empowering approach to sexuality.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Historically, the sexuality based literature in relation to Black women has come from the deficit based, preventative health perspective. Though various literatures examine the importance of healthy sexuality and its health benefits, there is minimal exploration of this in reference to the Black female population. In working from a Black feminist perspective, it can be argued that the consistent examination of sexuality from a negative framework is a reflection of the oppression that occurs for Black women from a racial and gendered frame. Collins (2009) wrote that “efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (p. 89).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black women develop positive connections with their own sex and sexuality. The primary research ques-

tion guiding this study is: How do Black women learn about the positive aspects of sex and sexuality? Exploration of secondary questions may occur to help deepen an understanding of this knowledge and help health professionals build more effective programs to decrease the negative sexual health outcomes (e.g., unplanned pregnancy, STI/HIV transmission, sexual risk taking behavior, etc.) plaguing black communities:

- What do Black women identify as the positive aspects of sexuality and relationships?
- With whom do Black women talk about sex and sexuality?

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist Thought is a response to the lack of representation that occurred within the Feminist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement for Black women. Collins (2009) states that the need for Black Feminist Thought arises because African American women as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. According to this theory, Black women created their ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood through the narratives and experiences of their family members and community members. These definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites, as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1981)

One of the main objectives of Black Feminist Thought or practice was to give voice to the lived experiences of Black women and to better the life experiences that will occur. Omi and Winant (1994) explained that through the process of rearticulation, Black Feminist Thought can offer African American women a different view of themselves and their worlds. Collins (2009) affirmed this idea by stating the importance of taking the core themes of Black women's standpoint to stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes their everyday, taken for granted knowledge and breathing new life into it by affirming, rearticulating and empowering change for African American women (p. 36).

A contributing factor that helps with the rearticulation process is one's ability to truly define oneself. This process of self-definition and clarification is considered to be an important key to empowerment. Lorde (1984) once said, "It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others-for their use and our detriment" (p. 45).

Sexuality

Defining one's sexuality can be a confusing experience. Social norms based on family, media, and community ideologies are explored, as well as evaluations of personal values, perceptions, and expectations of sexual fluidity that can occur (Allan & Forcler, 2011).

The challenge Black women experience in defining and discussing their sexuality is not due to their lack of knowledge (Drayton-Brooks & White, 2004). The absence of formal/informal discourse can be attributed to the sexual silence that is taught to them to avoid being perceived as hypersexed (Hammonds, 1997). Collins (2000) and hooks (1981) have indicated that the characters, stories, and representations created about Black women in the media communicate that this is a population to be perceived as being hypersexual, manipulative, and deviant.

Few, Stephens and Arnett (2003) discussed the importance of employing theoretical perspectives that speak holistically to the life experiences of Black women. In this situation, the researchers may have explored the apprehensions Black women feel in discussing their sexuality for fear of being perceived as hypersexual (hooks, 1981).

This is an important idea as it relates to the overwhelmingly oppressive information about sexuality as it is typically relayed to Black women. It is possible that the sex-negative perspective that has been taken with and for Black women has had a negative influence on the construction of their sexual identity and the way they perceive their sexual health (Collins, 2009; Few & Stephens, 2009; Rouse-Arnett & Dilworth, 2006; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The information presented within research focuses on deviance and the negative developmental outcomes of Black family life (Bell-Scott, 1982; McLoyd, 1998). While the aforementioned definitions indicate that a positive version of sexual health exists, the space does not appear to exist for Black women to express themselves sexually without it being construed as risky, oppressive, dysfunctional, disease ridden, and unhealthy (Collins, 2000; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). Research implies that Black women are not capable of communicating about the pleasures of sex and sexuality without it being interpreted and labeled as hypersexual behavior (Few & Stephens, 2009; Guillory, 2010; hooks, 1981; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Stephens & Phillips 2005).

Talking About Sex

Understanding the basic practices of communication within the Black community, particularly among Black women, is essential in comprehend-

ing how sexuality communication occurs. Research conducted by Hecht, Ribeau, and Alberts (1989) identified the importance in understanding cultural speaking perspectives. Every cultural group has a perceived set of communication norms that they use as a way of thinking about and talking about talk. Cultural speaking perspectives expose the intricacies a cultural group perceives as normal by specific speakers and specific situations.

Historically, this cultural speaking perspective or method of communication among Black women occurred primarily through the use of storytelling (Chinweizu, 1988). Storytelling is an oral tradition, a method in which traditions and beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next generation. It is used as a means of communicating a culture's moral laws and identified code for appropriate or acceptable behavior.

Research conducted by Chinweizu (1988) indicated that storytelling is a primary vehicle of communication used by Black families to teach values, strengthen community and family bonds, and share the practical information necessary for daily living. According to Pluhar and Kuriloff (2004), storytelling plays an important role in how Black women learn about sex, particularly adolescent girls.

Nwoga (2000) found that African American mothers in her qualitative study used storytelling to accomplish sexual socialization and to persuade their daughters to avoid making the same mistakes they reportedly made as teenagers (e.g., teen pregnancy). Through storytelling, questions are answered, history is conveyed, and lifelong lessons are taught and learned. In contemporary society, the use of storytelling is still readily employed within this community (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Chinweizu, 1988; Nwoga, 2000).

There are a number of positive life lessons communicated through storytelling that focus on love, sensuality, and the beauty of being a Black woman (Cox & Albert, 2003; Stevens, 2002). This has not been explored within literature. Conversations surrounding sexual abuse, prevention of pregnancy, and disease are a familiar tale within academic literature. However, the Black feminist lens would argue that there is a rich legacy of empowerment and sharing that occurs with storytelling, specifically in relation to sexuality that has gone untold. This study explored the communication that occurs about positive sex and sexuality through storytelling.

The Black feminist approach guided this research and provided an opportunity to explore the shared realities of Black women so these research findings can be used as a tool for empowerment for engaging in positive sexuality practices. As Few, Stephens, and Arnett (2003) identified, Black

female researchers are responsible for challenging the deficit perspective traditionally used in sexuality research, which typically addresses behavioral outcomes and ignores the larger sociohistorical, political, and racial constructs that inform sexual behaviors while normalizing and validating only dominant culture experiences (p. 210).

Collins (2009) wrote that “efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (p. 89). The Black feminist approach within this study took a step towards lifting the oppression off of the Black woman’s construction of her sexual self and sexuality. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how Black women develop positive connections with their own sex and sexuality.

Method

As stated previously, there is a paucity of research exploring positive sexual health messaging and communication for Black women (Collins, 2005; Few, Stephens & Arnett, 2003). The intention of this study was to contribute to the body of academic research by filling this void within literature and providing a voice for the perspectives and experiences of Black women. Few, Stephens, and Arnett (2003) believe that the use of qualitative methods—particularly interviews or narrative documents—have been instrumental in informing researchers of the various dynamics that shape sexuality, race, and gender interactions (p. 207).

Qualitative Black feminist research studies the experience of power relationships, social positions, and the effect this has on the individual (Few, Stephens, & Arnett, 2003). There is an acknowledgement that while there may be a shared historical reality, there is also an individual story that needs to be told. Black feminists will also assert that the benefit of conducting qualitative research with Black women is to provide them with the empowerment to speak from and about their own experiential location (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995).

Focus Groups

Focus groups were comprised of four to twelve participants and were held multiple times so the researcher could fully analyze the trends or patterns that existed or emerged within the dialogues (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). For this study, the target population was 30 study participants ($n = 30$). The data were analyzed across groups to discover trends

and themes. Saturation of content is critical within qualitative research; to ensure this occurred; the researcher conducted six different focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The conversations took place in a focus group format. Some Black feminists believe that group forum discussions provide Black women with an opportunity to discuss and experience a shared historical reality, which ultimately becomes a forum for individual and cultural empowerment as well as a space for deeper self-knowledge (Collins, 2000). "Sharing stories in the Black community is important. Here we can recollect and renew ourselves and our creative genius" (Hambrick, 1997, p. 66). The focus groups lasted two hours and took place in a hair salon, an environment in which so many important and intimate conversations occur for Black women. Hair salons play an important and intimate role in the lives of Black women (Ross, 2003), which is the reason it was chosen as an appropriate location to hold a focus group. While there is not a significant amount of research to suggest that hair salons would be an advantageous location to hold a focus group to discuss sexuality specifically with African American women, one study by Lieberman and Harris (2007) supports the idea that hair salons may be an appropriate location for the dissemination of health education information for African American girls. They concluded that hair salons provide a place of comfort and familiarity for people to have important conversations. While the researcher affirms the position taken by these former studies and believes that hair salons are a natural environment providing a familiar and comforting location for Black women to have intimate conversations these focus groups occurred after the salon was closed for business. The sampling strategies used were convenience, criterion and snowball sampling. Solicitation to participate in the study had occurred through a variety of different mediums such as listservs, predominantly Black female organizations or Black owned businesses prior to attending the focus group. Potential participants would reach out to me about participating in the study and then they were invited to attend one of the focus groups. It was not until that point, they were given information about the time and location. The hair salon chosen was one that had a positive reputation by Black women in Philadelphia and the neighboring suburbs and one that the researcher had frequented many times in the past as a younger woman. Topics such as intimacy, masturbation, fantasy, health, monogamy and more were explored within these focus groups. The accounts shared by the participants were extraordinary narratives that exposed the ways they've

had to combat and triumph against the pathological lens in which Black female sexuality is viewed. These women laid the groundwork to a theory that explains the interactive process in which positive sexuality is learned for Black women; the Transformational Theory to Becoming a Black Queen. However, before the stages of the theory are discussed, it's relevant to first review the results of the study.

Participants

Thirty Three women shared their ideas, experiences and beliefs about positive Black female sexuality. The demographic breakdown of the study included participants that needed to be at least 25 years old. Academically, the majority of the participants possessed a Master's degree. The second largest group possessed an Associate's Degree. Three participants possessed doctoral degrees and five participants had a Bachelor's degree. The women were asked to choose a pseudonym as their identifier to protect their privacy. As the sole facilitator of the focus groups, it was going to be a challenge to make observations, ask questions, take notes and ensure that all of the important information shared was accurately captured so to minimize research errors, all of the focus groups were audiotaped and then transcribed. This helped to accurately analyze the cross section of data gained from the focus groups. The purpose of the transcriptions was to provide a detailed written account of the narratives provided by participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Transcriptions should be detailed so they clearly capture the multiple facets of dialogue and communication, which can include tone of voice, speed of words, emphasis, timing, and pauses—all of these factors can significantly impact on how information becomes coded for analysis (Bailey, 2008).

Findings

Emerging Themes

A number of emerging themes evolved from each of the aforementioned research questions. Below is a chart that summarizes the themes that corroborate with the aforementioned research questions.

Question 1: How do Black women learn about the positive aspects of sex and sexuality?

Major Theme 1: Direct Sources of Learning

Subtheme 1: Family

Subtheme 2: Books

Subtheme 3: Friends

Major Theme 2: Modeling

Subtheme 1: Black Queens

Subtheme 2: Relational Interactions

Major Theme 3: Experience

Question 2: What do Black women identify as the positive aspects of sexuality and relationships?

Major Theme: Personal Value

Subtheme 1: Connection

Subtheme 2: Sense of Agency

Major Theme: Freedom to be Sexual

Subtheme 1: Being Sexually Discriminating

Subtheme 2: Sexual Health

Question 3: With whom do Black women talk about sex and sexuality?

Major Theme: Friends

Major Theme: Partners

Major Theme: Sexual Privacy

In response to the question “How do Black women learn about the positive aspects of sex and sexuality?” three major themes emerged: Direct Sources of Learning, Modeling and Experience. The first and most pronounced major theme was “Direct sources of learning”. While traditional research often examines the influence mothers have on the sexual development of their daughters, and assumes this is a tremendous line of influence (DiIorio et al., 2003; Hersh, 2010; Hutchinson et al., 2003; Lieberman & Bartle, 2012) the results from this study indicated that mothers were not

always the first point of contact for discussing sex and sexuality with their daughters. In fact, many of the women shared that they did not acquire direct knowledge about the positive aspects of sexuality from either parent (mother or father). In exploring if they learned anything about sex and sexuality from a parent it was discovered that sexuality based conversations from mothers was either fear-based or educational. Primary dialogues involved basic overviews regarding hygiene and, in some cases, menstruation but only a minimum of information was communicated from a positive perspective. Fear-based conversations initiated primarily by the mother were tactics to attempt to ensure virginity was maintained and pregnancy did not occur. Study participants reported that the tactics used were not meant to be prohibitive; many reported believing that the purpose of the tactics were to emphasize personal value and to highlight the importance of monogamous relationships. Influenced by generational ideas about sex communication and a heightened awareness and desire to not fortify Black female sexual stereotypes headlined the reasons attributed for the lack of conversations about positive sexuality. The older participants shared narratives told to them by their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers in which they were witnesses to the construction of the stereotypes and their negative consequences. Therefore, in discussing sexuality Black mothers were to warn their daughters of the dangers of sex, not highlight the pleasures. The intention was to protect young Black girls from the consequences they had been taught and to prepare them for womanhood.

Direct sources of learning regarding the positive ideas about sex and sexuality came from other family members such as sisters, aunts, and cousins according to the participants. These women were identified as the primary female figures with whom they communicated about sex and sexuality. Words of appreciation and a warm tone were reflected when discussing the lessons, conversations, experiences, and support provided by these family members. Lynn, a participant in the third focus group, highlighted this idea by saying:

... my family, as in my cousins, to this day are the people I will talk to, like even like my mom never really discussed sex with me. And to this day, I'm just not comfortable going to her with a lot of things. But there's a group of us, male and female cousins who are very close in age. We're just a matter of months a part, there's about six of us. I can remember from the time we were teenagers, we would just talk with each other. And that's really how we learned! By talking with each other we would

say “oh, don’t say this or if a guy does this, don’t listen to that” and do even now that we’re older and our bodies are changing and things are different, we still call each other up, like “oh my goodness, is this happening to you? Are you feeling this? I’ve got hot flashes, are you having this?” So we are able to rely on each other.

Books were identified as another major source of learning for the participants. During puberty, many reported they were either provided with educational books by their parents or they sought out books on their own from the library. Books were a continued source for learning instead of talking to friends or family even as the women aged.

Friends were the third major source of learning for participants. In these situations, friends almost played the role of siblings and provided lessons or warnings as a result of their own experiences. Interestingly, there was a connection between the participants who learned from friends and still continue to communicate with friends about sexuality, which will be discussed later. Participants who reported learning about sex and sexuality via the guidance of friends appear to continue to feel at ease maintaining this open line of communication. Participants spoke as tenderly about their friends as a direct source as members who identified family as a direct source.

A second major theme that emerged which influenced how participants learned about sex and sexuality was modeling. A portion of Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971; Bandura, 1977; Berk, 2010) suggests that people can learn by observing and modeling the behaviors of others. The participants described their experience of learning about sex and sexuality as one in which observing and modeling behaviors of the people within their network had a tremendous impact on how they interacted with others as they aged. Black women are Queens and relational interactions are the two subthemes that emerged.

SUBTHEME 1: BLACK WOMEN ARE “QUEENS”

While many of the participants reported that their mothers did not always have candid conversations, they observed and admired other women such as aunts, cousins, and sisters as their behaviors established a norm for what sexuality should look like. When participants reflected on modeling behaviors of the women in their life, they frequently discussed beauty, sensuality, and respectfulness. They also shared the influence modeling had on them when they observed the relationships of the women, primarily the intimate

relationships of the mother. The modeling behaviors within these intimate relationships provided guidance about intimacy, affection and communication. As women shared stories about their “Queens”, it was with a tone of warmth, adoration, and caring. Horizon, a participant from the initial focus group, explicitly said:

You were raised by queens! It’s not just your mother—it’s how you see any—and we had—believe me, in my family there were more females than could be counted—there was just a lot of women and strong, I mean wow! I learned from looking at my aunts and cousins and whatever. They were beautiful! Not only were they beautiful, but they just had dignity.

Stories such as the one recounted above resonated for the other women and demonstrated how many upheld and saw their mothers as Queens of their kingdoms. The members validated these experiences through positive affirming exclamations of “I know that’s right!” or “Yes!”.

SUBTHEME 2: RELATIONAL INTERACTIONS

This section explored the influence modeling had on participants, particularly when they observed the relationships of the women around them, primarily their mothers. These experiences of modeling and observing also taught them about sexuality; it shed light on concepts of intimacy, affection, and communication. When participants were asked whether parents have contributed in any way to the positive construction of sexuality, Zumba said in her testimony:

. . . no, not about sex and sexuality. Maybe about I would say about the relationship, I mean because my parents were married for a very long time, and I’ve seen them have low times and high times. They stuck together, so I understand the part of about the relationship and hanging in there, sticking it out, struggling with each other. That part I understand, but the sexual part, they kind of just kept that hidden. My parents were born in the 30s and I think that generation, everything was hush, hush, shame, shame.

Twiggy, a member of the fifth focus group, affirmed this idea when she reported about the relationship she witnessed between her parents. When asked how she learned about the positive aspects to sex and sexuality and the influences that existed, she identified the observations she made of family members: “Watching my parents growing up and how they inter-

acted with each other—they were pretty affectionate, even with us and that definitely influenced what I wanted to do in my own marriage.”

Tits McGee, a participant from the fourth focus group, recounted a different experience of modeling. She reported that she learned about some positive aspects to sex and sexuality unintentionally from her mother:

For when I think of the first, or when I think about it as far as pleasure and all of that, I think the connection, although disturbing at times, and even now, came from me hearing, walking in on my mother having sex. I walked in once, but I saw, I heard her numerous times.

Experience was the third major emerging theme regarding how women learned about sex and sexuality. This theme supported the idea that direct experience with others had a tremendous influence on how people learned about themselves. These experiences were good and bad in nature and helped to shape the future sexual expectations of the participants. Toni explained it best when she said, “trial and error—I kissed a lot of frogs before I found a prince.” This was a truth for many of the participants in multiple focus groups. Direct experience was primarily associated with learning about orgasms, masturbation, and other experiences of sexual pleasure. This segment of sharing within the focus groups also prompted words of affirmation or validation and then more shared their own stories.

What Do Black Women Identify as the Positive Aspects of Sexuality and Relationships?

This question explored what was learned from the various influences and experiences addressed in the previous question. The purpose of the question was to explore what participants deem to be the positive aspects of sex and sexuality as well as explore lessons learned from their influences. Two overarching themes emerged from this research question: the importance in having personal value was deemed as a tremendously important aspect to positive sex and relationships. The other equally important theme was the freedom to be sexual, which was a very empowering concept articulated by the participants.

Personal Value

Personal value was reported by the participants as something learned and identified as an important aspect to positive sex and sexuality. Many of the women reported that personal value was something learned early on be-

cause it was emphasized and modeled by the women in their network or specifically communicated to them by authority figures. Participants reported learning not only what it means to have personal value but also how it is maintained, which includes modeling for others as well as taking responsibility with sexual decision making in all aspects. These ideas set the stage for the subthemes of personal value: connection and sense of agency.

While connection is identified as one of the subthemes, it was often intertwined with intimacy and perceived to be a vital component to attaining connection. Connection and intimacy was experienced as something that not only happened with other people but with oneself as well. The fundamental connection to this idea is based in personal value. Participants discussed their personal value as human beings as being more than the framed stereotypes for which they were all familiar. To distinguish and disconnect themselves from these stereotypes, many women used a common language to describe themselves or the Black women around them so terms such as “treasure” or “queens” were used frequently which is why it has become a part of the theory title. This empowering language uplifted and inspired the participants as they retold their experiences and what they wanted instilled in future generations. Even the euphemisms used by the women or the ones that had been taught to them emphasized their value as Black women. The participants asserted that if a woman was well connected with herself and understood her value, then it would positively influence her sexual experience, her sexual decisions and her overall sexuality. Many participants reported believing that being sexual with others was not an experience to be taken lightly, this didn’t mean that you had to be sexually restrictive but instead it meant that a person had to be sexually discriminating. Ultimately, the expectation was personal sexual value would lead potential sexual partners to also respect and value the woman.

The concept of intimacy as it relates to connection was frequently articulated by participants as one of the most positive aspects to sexuality and relationships. Lyla, a participant from the second focus group, reported:

What makes sex positive is that it feels good, in that moment I am sharing myself with you, I am making somebody feel good and they are making me feel good. It can relieve my stress, my frustrations . . . I am expressing myself in one of the most intimate ways that I choose, with my body. It doesn’t mean that I love you, but in that moment I am close to you.

Ebony, a participant from the second focus group, affirmed Lyla's ideas but added that "the intimacy part is not only that it feels good but that you really feel a connection with this person and that you're so comfortable with them that you can be free." Feeling free as a concept coincides with the other sub-theme within personal value entitled "sense of agency".

"Sense of agency is a central aspect of human self-consciousness and refers to the experience of oneself as the agent of one's own actions" (David, Newen, & Vogeley, 2008, p. 523). Within this study, these women explained having a sexual sense of agency to mean that they get to initiate or choose when, how, and with whom to be sexual; they owned their bodies, not their partners or the stereotypes about them. Many participants stressed the importance of feeling in charge of the sexual decisions and discussed this as a very positive aspect to sex and sexuality as they knew this was not the experience of many Black women historically. Conversation revolving around taking responsibility or ownership for one's sexual choices individually and within a relationship always elicited an excited response for other participants to share their individual narratives for how they arrived to a sense of agency. Some quotes that highlight the identified sentiments include Johnnie Hill, a participant from the sixth focus group:

When it comes to women, I think that sometimes when we're in relationships, whatever is going on in our relationship sexually is often led by the man. But you have to take charge for yourself and say what your interests are, if there's an experiment with some toy you want to try, say it to him, you may have to work with him because he may be close-minded, but that doesn't mean you should ignore your thoughts, feelings, and sexual needs.

However, it is important to note that sense of agency was not solely in relation to sexual choices but it also related to how the women felt about themselves and their bodies. In confronting mainstream ideologies about beauty and sensuality, the participants also felt that through time they had a more empowered and acceptance of their own beauty despite the fact that it may conflict with mainstream beliefs. Ebony, a participant from the second focus group, shared her ideas about the positive aspects as being:

... when you are able to accept who you are, or for me, accepting who I am, and not allowing society to make me feel like, because you're hippy, because you have a big butt or because of all these other things that—how society says you should look. I've come to really appreciate my sexu-

ality and say, this is who I am. And I can appreciate me, really now, understanding who I am and the choices that I make. I don't have to look like Beyonce and I can still feel good. It's also the ability to be vulnerable and the ability to just be so, I don't know, raw, so open with another person and that that person kind of sees you for who you are, for what you look like or whatever. You just own yourself and your actions, your thoughts and the vulnerability that comes along with that.

These moments changed the attitude of the group participants and the tone of the narratives conveyed strength and positive esteem, most women simply sounded more empowered. Many participants believed that an improved sense of agency was a matter of age and maturation while others stated that their agency was in direct response to refuting the stigmas associated with Black women.

Freedom to be Sexual

Participants explained the freedom to be sexual as a desire to break the chains from history and to stop living under the sexual stereotypes haunting them. The imprint of stereotypes for many participants has had a lingering effect mentally. There are clear aversions to stereotypes that have been passed on from generation to generation, specifically the message to not conform to sexual stigmas or labels such as sexual wantonness. A lack of intimacy, which is subjective by nature, has had a strong influence on some of the women's sexual decision making process. This shapes the idea of celebrating sexual freedom because women who appeared to portray the stigmas were not received very well and were seen as fulfilling stereotypes, not celebrating their sexual freedom. Participants reported that Black female stereotypes are regularly represented in various aspects of their lives as an inescapable frustration that could at least be managed and controlled. The identified cultural rules of etiquette influenced participants to not disclose the specifics of their sexual lives. Seemingly, they were very careful to not elaborate or offer insight about personal details. When the researcher attempted to press for specific details or experiences in most cases participants would either evade the question or directly say this was not something they felt comfortable disclosing. However, they were able to clearly articulate beliefs of what sexual freedom encompassed, which included being sexually discriminating and being sexually healthy—the subthemes to freedom to be sexual. These perspectives were overlapping concepts that

reportedly helped in managing and controlling the array of stereotypes they attempt to address in their sexual lives.

Many participants reported having multiple sexual partners in their lifetime and accepted their sexual desires as a natural part of life. However, many participants stressed various characteristics that should be taken into consideration before engaging in sexual behaviors. The most important characteristic is the act of being sexually discriminating. This meant being selective about the sexual prospect, being discreet, and taking responsibility for their behavior. Mack, a participant from the first focus group, said that women should be thoughtful about the sexual behaviors in which they engage:

Don't give in to abandonment or any type of wild abandon without thinking about. You have to be thoughtful about what you are doing. You don't have to love them all but you have to be selective about your choices. Use your freedom to enjoy yourself and learn about you but not feed into stereotypes.

The importance of being discriminating directly correlates with the role of sexual health as conveyed by the participants. The act of being sexually healthy not only included making responsible decisions sexually—such as contraceptive methods and STI testing and awareness—but also having the appropriate gynecological exams in the face of challenges that may have been experienced. Members from each of the focus groups also discussed that being sexually healthy included knowing with whom to have conversations to discuss their sexual health concerns. Lynn, a participant from the third focus group, discussed the role of her cousins. She learned about sexuality from them and she also mentioned that they talk about sexual health concerns with them as adults. As previously discussed, modeling is very important within the community, so many women reported initiating sexual health conversations with others in order to help ensure the positive sexual health practices for other Black women. It was a request made by many of the participants that their churches increase the sexual education provided to the congregation since in some cases these conversations happened with church members as illustrated with the following quote from Coco, a participant from the third focus group “I appreciate that I belong to a progressive church and they do address it but seriously we have to take charge of our sexual choices, protect ourselves and have these perceived taboo conversations.” Val, a participant from the sixth focus group shares similar sentiments as Coco and says:

As a nurse, I have to discuss that Black women can absolutely be sexual and enjoy their experiences but must be aware of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in our community. It's in our community and it's growing. We have to talk of it in our communities and in our churches and in our families. We have to talk about and remove the stigma because sexual freedom is not brushing major issues like this under the table. If we can talk about it and remove the stigma, people will get the help they need, they will go to the clinics and they will get tested. And if found positive, will get their medicine and stay on their medicine and we won't turn our backs on each other about that. And what pisses me off is that the stigma is so big, they won't talk about it openly, even in my church and I think my church is kind of progressive. We're coming along but it's not open.

The desire for better communication within the church and within the community overall lead us to exploring the research question below.

With Whom Do Black Women Talk About Sex and Sexuality?

This question explored with whom the participants preferred to discuss issues related to sex and sexuality. This included discussing different topics such as fantasies, toys, or sexual pain. Partners and friends were the two primary populations identified. However, a surprising third overarching theme emerged from the focus groups, dealing with the importance of maintaining sexual privacy in communicating about sex and sexuality.

Partners, whether married or in committed relationships, were the primary people with whom participants chose to communicate. Many saw this communication as the foundation to a healthy and successful relationship and could include discussions about fantasies, concerns, desires, and beliefs and more. The participants interpreted these intimate and sensitive dialogues as facilitating vulnerable moments for individuals in a relationship and vulnerability was perceived as increasing the levels of intimacy within the relationship, an identified goal and a positive aspect to sexuality.

Friends were the other identified population in which to participants communicated about sexuality. Participants who communicated with friends also believed in communicating with their partners and did not deny the importance of maintaining communication. Female friend networks also provided an opportunity to communicate about their sexual concerns and thoughts. Some participants reported that their friends provided them with an initial opportunity to process sexuality in a comfortable

and nurturing environment so they can go back and properly communicate with their partners. Lynn, a participant from the third focus group, said that she communicates with her friends, but her friends are her family, specifically her cousins. She also explained that this is her preferred population for communicating about all things sexual, whether physical issues of maturation, dating advice, or sexual curiosities.

The other major theme that emerged, sexual privacy, addressed the conservatism participants identified about discussing their sexual experiences despite identifying them as positive. As stated previously, very few participants disclosed the specifics of their sexual lives such as techniques or preferences, despite perceiving this being a positive aspect to sexuality. Some women simply chose to disclose stories or reflections that were broad in nature. Maintaining high levels of privacy around sexual communication was reported to be a learned behavior taught to them by other women as a means of ensuring the safety and preservation of their intimate relationships. Participants explained the importance of not discussing their sexual lives with their friends because to do so could lead to infidelity between their friends and their partners. The belief regarding the importance of maintaining sexual privacy was an idea repeated in all the focus groups by at least one participant each time.

Ms. Horizon, Horizon, Fatima, and Mack were all participants from the first focus group. They engaged in a very passionate dialogue about the role of sexual privacy in a relationship. Ms. Horizon reported: "I was brought up that you don't tell any woman about your man, because if you talk about how good it (sex) is then they're going to be out there . . ." At this point Fatima completed the sentence by saying "right, they're gonna want to sample him . . . they are gonna try and get some of your man!" This was followed by significant laughter and a chorus of "I know that's right" validations.

Finally, the participants were asked to share an idea or thought that they would want the world to know about Black women. It was an opportunity for participants to share one final idea about everything that had been discussed. These ideas were coded using NVivo software and as a result the following themes were identified:

- 1) *We are worthwhile* appeared to be the strongest message by participants as demonstrated by statements such as "That we are discriminating. That not only do we know how to carry ourselves, but we have certain values, and we, for the most part, just don't sleep with any and everybody" and "the thing that keeps sticking in my mind

is that we are not the flavor of the month. There's so much to us, we are so diverse in our belief systems and what we have to offer."

- 2) *We are beautiful and amazing* which is a theme that positively affirmed the affections held for Black women from Black women. The identified intention with this set of comments was to empower and unify Black women with a heightened appreciation of who they are as people. Statements such as "Black women are amazing. They are resilient and smart. And while we are sensual, we are not sexual. We did not invent sex, we are not the sluts people think we are. Being close to someone is just so much more important to us because of all the shit we deal with on a daily and I hope that as time goes by our contributions become more appreciated" and "there's such a huge variety when it comes to Black women. So it's okay if you have natural hair, it's okay if yours is relaxed, it's okay if it's short, if it's long, if you're light, if you're dark, if you're shapely, if you're not. It's okay. And this is who you are. You're not who society says you are. You don't have to look a certain way" highlight this theme.
- 3) *You have sexual rights and freedoms* thematically asserts that Black women should have the right to experience sex and sexuality in a way that is appealing to them, not for others. Some of the reflections within this theme are in direct response to idea that Black women are not the stereotypes pushed upon them and do not have succumb to oppressive historical frameworks. Statements such as "I think I want Black women to know that it's okay to embrace being a sexual being. Because we all are. And that the messages that we get about this-I guess this-the virgin whore or whatever it is. I think it is more emphasized in women of color because of the images that we are so sexual. But instead we need to embrace who we really are, embrace our sexual wants and desires and whatever comes to you is okay. And that I think it's actually more healthy then trying to repress it".
- 4) *We are not those stereotypes* which emphasized understanding that Black women are not the identified stereotypes by mainstream society. While it is consistently acknowledged that embracing one's own sexuality is extremely important, they deemed it more important to not fall prey to the categories of hypersexuality that haunt them. This is highlighted by statements such as "Okay, well what I would like to let people know about Black women of all ages is that

we are not caricatures, these wanting, overly sexual beasts or whatever. We are spiritual beings, that we are connected to romance and we're self-confident and like someone said, the nurturers—we are many faceted. OK. You know, because, they always have the Black woman as being so—they're overly assertive and snapping the neck and whatever, that's a caricature. We have to be respected, we're spiritual beings more than anything" and "We're not wild, we're not that white stereotypical opinion of us. We were never that wild, unabandoned woman, that we just do anything and everything with anybody. That's not who we are".

- 5) *We are all family so let's talk* which really emphasized the importance of increasing positive communication opportunities in the Black community as evidenced by statements such as "I think a lot of times, we, Black people, in general, we don't like to seek out help, it's like a weakness in the community when really being able to do so would move you into positive sexuality" and "I think that having a safe—I want to say family because to me that's the best word for it—a group of women that you are comfortable talking to, like we have here, this network. Before this group, I've never had friends that I would even begin to talk about the things that I've talked about and shared freely in a room like this."

Emerging Theory

The results from the study suggest that development of a positive sexual self is a lifelong learning process in which characteristics such as respect, loyalty, commitment, intimacy and self care as well as others are integral to a successful outcome. The insights of the participants became the foundation to the construction of my theory regarding the steps involved to become a sexually positive Black woman. The development of a positive sexual self for Black women is a process of transformation and blossoming; it is the metamorphosis from being a Black Princess to a Black Queen, an identity that emerged as important within the analysis. This metamorphosis occurs through a progression of interactive steps. I have entitled this theory to be the *Transformational Theory to Becoming a Black Queen*. There are five contributing elements of development necessary to transform from being a Black Princess to a Black Queen: (1) Modeling, (2) Experience, (3) Personal Value, (4) Relationships, and (5) Freedom.

Modeling

As Princesses, girls at a very young age are exposed to a multitude of positive Black female connections within the community. The network they are usually exposed to consists of mothers, aunts, grandmothers, sisters, cousins, and the friends of these various family members. The modeling provided by the women within this cohort, they provide a foundational knowledge of Black womanhood and how to be a Queen. This falls in line with the ideologies of Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1981) which posits that Black women construct their core ideas about Black womanhood through the narratives and experiences of influential members of their network, which include family members and community members. The study participants emphasized the importance of modeling in their overall development. This stage is described as one in which primary ideas about Black beauty, sensuality, and respectfulness are shared. During this stage, young women learn about the significance of personal grooming—including hair styling or styles of dress—and how this correlates to feeling good within one's body and ultimately increasing the confidence possessed and exhibited to others. Horizon, a member from the first focus group, gives emphasis to this concept by explicitly stating:

You were raised by queens! It's not just your mother, in my family there were more females than could be counted—there was just a lot of women and strong, I mean wow! I learned from looking at my aunts and cousins and whatever. They were beautiful! Not only were they beautiful, but they just had dignity.

These interactions and observations begin the journey for Princesses. It becomes the foundational script that she will use to establish her own set of norms, beliefs, expectations and behaviors for her sexual self. It is important to note that there are no age stipulations for this category. Adult women can remain stunted within this stage, never gaining a sense of their own needs or ideas but consistently living or engaging based on the constructs of other people.

Experience

As Princesses mature they begin to initiate ways to have their own experiences which will ultimately shape their ideas about sex and sexuality. Since many young women may have challenges translating the messages being received, the Princesses at this stage may seek out additional information

to gain a greater understanding about sex and sexuality for themselves. Though the modeling stage provides a solid foundation for understanding sexuality, they may now begin to engage in conversations with other family members such as sisters, aunts, and cousins as well as others with close familial ties. Research done by Neighbors and Jackson (1984), reported that the dialogues occurring within the Black community and their social networks play an important role in their lives. Stevens (2002) stated that “Black females find their voice in the chorus of other Black female voices” (p. 12). As a result of the knowledge gained from conversations and the modeling of their network, Princesses start to assert their understanding of sex and sexuality to others. Based on their projected understanding of sex and sexuality, they begin to receive feedback (positive and negative) regarding the persona being presented. The Queens in their network work actively with girls at this stage to distinguish between looking sexy and being sexual. Discussions could again revisit the importance of being well dressed, secure and confident in one’s body, the significance of self-respect, and being able to project that confidence outwardly however, it would not assume that to look sexy or sensual equated to having to be sexually active. Queens have discussions with women at this stage about the value they hold aesthetically, intellectually, and emotionally. There is an emphasis of the concept of being a “treasure”. When girls become sexually active, they are encouraged to increase their mindfulness to the persona being projected and the choice of sexual partners being made. In identifying prospective partners, the emphasis becomes finding ones who are respectful, attentive, and appreciative of them as women. Intertwining the experiences had to this point and the feedback received sets the stage to the value one creates and maintains for themselves.

Personal Value

The experiences and knowledge attained to this point from the previous stages power the construction of personal value. The factors that contribute to a strengthening of personal value include 1) a gained understanding and appreciation of self, 2) experiences of trial and error and 3) the ability to learn from one’s mistakes. Conversations had with other Queens and exposure to stigmas provide women in this stage with a clear understanding and disapproval of historical stereotypes. During the Personal Value stage women realize their worth as human beings and expect to be treated accordingly. The characteristics indicative of a “Queen” begin to emerge. An

increased sense of personal power due to the process of maturation and self-awareness occurs for many women during this stage. This becomes an important influence for helping women to make more informed sexual decisions. Sexual decision-making not only means being sexually healthy but also being sexually discriminating about possible partners. The empowered value demonstrated by women at this stage is exhibited in many aspects of her life such as the language that she uses about herself and others, physical presentation (style and dress), her openness to continue to gain knowledge and her sexual decision making including discretion and privacy. Taking on an empowered stance that incorporates all these factors proves to be important because this woman is now beginning to model behaviors for others. Ebony, a participant from the second focus group, highlights the concept of personal value by saying:

Self-worth and importance is when you are able to accept who you are, or for me, accepting who I am, and not allowing society to make me feel like, because you're hippy, because you have a big butt or because of all these other things that—how society says you should look. I've come to really appreciate my sexuality and say, this is who I am. And I can appreciate me, really now, understanding who I am and the choices that I make. I don't have to look like Beyonce and I can still feel good. It's also the ability to be vulnerable and the ability to just be so, I don't know, raw, so open with another person and that that person kind of sees you for who you are, for what you look like or whatever. You just own yourself and your actions, your thoughts and the vulnerability that comes along with that.

This quote infers that there is a connection between self-value and relationships. Women with a greater sense of self-value will possibly have a more established set of rules and expectations in relation to the intimate connections made with others along with how they should be treated within any established relationship.

Relationships

The Golden Rule—"treat others as you want others to treat you" (Wattles, 1996)—applies to the experience women have during this stage. The romantic or platonic relationship interactions in which women engage are tremendously important (Worell & Goodheart, 2006). The role held within the relationship will determine the role played by the sexually positive woman. A woman at this stage is transitioning into "Queen" status and

now has the responsibility of educating Princesses by either modeling behaviors or by becoming a resource in which educational conversations can occur. Interactions with people from her social network such as a cousin, friend, daughter, or niece provide this emerging Queen with the opportunity to model and discuss their increased understanding of self, sexuality and womanhood. In romantic relationships, women at this stage are able to demonstrate an appreciation and respect for their partner. To preserve the intimacy within the relationship, privacy must be seen and respected as a critical factor. Privacy within this domain includes being thoughtful in discussing the intimate details of the relationship with someone outside the partnership. In addition to privacy, the ability to be vulnerable despite being an intimidating experience also acts as an indicator that emotional connections are being achieved. This facilitates a feeling of freedom within intimate relationships that allows women to assert their sexual needs, beliefs, desires, and expectations for themselves and their partners.

Freedom

Ownership is the primary experience during this stage. The elevated sense of agency provides women with full control over their sexual choices. They are no longer governed by the stereotypes of the past; however, they remain mindful to them. While maintaining knowledge of the historical stereotypes and the influence they have had on society, a conscious decision is made to not allow it to conquer and defeat them. Instead, an increased feeling of empowerment occurs to make one's own sexual decisions; this means taking charge of one's sexual health and not feeling obligated to follow society's standards for beauty or relationships. Freedom within this theory does not equal sexually promiscuity; instead, the emphasis is on personal enjoyment, responsibility, and discretion. While it may appear paradoxical in nature, the relevance of practicing sexual discretion is not intended to prohibit the engagement of sexual activity but instead is intended to encourage and support sensible and responsible decision-making. It becomes a symbol of respect for self and the prospective sexual partners. In achieving the status of "Queen," these women have the full ability to reflect on their past decisions to use as teachable moments for others and guiding frameworks for themselves. They possess a positive level of self-confidence, value, and self-respect, which ultimately gives them the ability to see themselves as Queens. They now fully "own" their experiences and embrace the influence it has had on making them the women they are

today. Mack, a participant from the first focus group, shared her thoughts about the connection between sexual freedom and sexual discretion. She said that women should be thoughtful about the sexual behaviors in which they engage:

Don't give in to abandonment or any type of wild abandon without thinking about. You have to be thoughtful about what you are doing. You don't have to love them all but you have to be selective about your choices. Use your freedom to enjoy yourself and learn about you but not feed into stereotypes.

This quote highlights the nature of this stage by implicitly suggesting that one should have fun but be thoughtful of one's self first and foremost at all times.

Black Queens

The Black Queen is a woman who embodies a positive sexual self. She enthusiastically shares the knowledge she has gained in her life to assist others in their transition from Princesses into Queens. All of the above elements (Modeling, Experience, Value, Relationships, and Freedom) influence the transition into becoming a Queen. The element(s) shared by a Queen to a Princess is dependent on the relationship that exists between the Queen and the Princess. For example, if there is a mother-daughter dyad, the Queen (mother) may be most responsible for the impact she has on her daughter in the Modeling element, however that doesn't exclude her from having an influence in the Experience and Relationships elements of her daughter's sexual development. If referring to an aunt-niece dyad, the Queen (aunt) may be most responsible for the influence and wisdom bestowed within the Experience element, however she may still impact her niece's development during the Modeling and Relationships elements as well. Each Queen has the power to extract the needed element within her to help a Princess in their transitional journey. A Queen possesses the insight to use her experiences as a guide to know which element(s) are needed. Figure 1 shows the encompassing of all the elements existing within the Black Queen from an aesthetic perspective.

Conclusion

The Transformational Theory to Becoming a Black Queen is an emerging theory that speaks into the void of theoretical paradigms related to the

Figure 1. The Transformational Theory to Becoming a Black Queen

positive sexual development of Black women. Countering the traditional, negative stereotypes perpetuated by Western colonial perspectives, the theory gives voice to Black women in constructing their personal realities of healthy sexual development. In an attempt to give a definitive voice to the term “Queen”, it was chosen for this theory not only because it was used by most of the participants as a positive, empowering descriptor for Black women but because it’s a term that reclaims the role and the identity of black women and their contributions throughout history. Sweeney (2000) interprets the process of “reclaiming back identities within historical contexts such as queen as an important step to gaining historical sources as a background and then moving forward towards liberation and growth” (p.117), which is the premise of this theory.

As the theory continues to develop, more work needs to be done to ex-

plore the ways in which the colonizing images of Black women's sexuality may have influenced participant responses within the focus groups. An exploration of the heteronormativity, self and other policing, and underlying "self in response to oppression" will bring additional depth to understanding the positive development of Black women's sexual selves.

For now, the Transformational Theory to Becoming a Black Queen offers an initial positive framework that can build a body of literature that understands and celebrates the sexual selves of some Black women. There is much more work that must be done.

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