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The Eye is Still Blue: Epistles on Loving Blackness

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The Eye is Still Blue: Epistles on Loving Blackness

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors
in Women's Studies

By

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Prologue

Dear God,

First, sorry for cussing, but at this point, I'm tired of having to say the same thing over and over and over again. I'm tired of theorizing with friends as to why men of color will claim they love black women by citing their black moms, grandmas, and aunties. However, those same black men don't realize that they just named women who provided unconditional care and that type of love is very different from loving black women. Love has nothing to do with loving mother, but rather being genuinely invested in the woman behind that title. Be invested in her passions, her goals, her likes and dislikes. Who was she before she had you? Your one way loving with once a year mother's day gifts and weekly calls don't count. . I'm tired of having to point out how by citing their mothers in that situation they still continue to dehumanize them by only appreciating their existences as caretakers, hence my reason for saying I am not mother. I'm tired of having to ask all the questions, lend all the ears, and examine all the sources of pain for everybody else, but I don't ever hear about men of color theorizing with their friends about how they potentially hurt black women I'm tired of black men telling me they love all black women, but only see and hear lighter skinned women, and then, claim its innocent taste and preferences. On top of that, they explicitly tell you they cannot learn from black women and have to learn how to be a man from another black man who doesn't know either. They constantly looking for that one brotha and when that brotha doesn't show up, he turns to white men. I can't teach how to be a black man no. Not sure I want to, but I could help and grow with folks in learning how to be an empathetic and loving human being, but that would require one to forsake the pursuit of power. I'm tired of men of color claiming they love black women but don't understand why cultural appropriation is PAINFUL for black women. And for the last time, I'm tired of shitting on men of color who don't hear or see me no way. I have no agency in these issues because they don't have anything to do with me and I'm just fucking tired. I'm tired of other black women telling me I need to hop off that political shit and just have fun and be happy...like da fuq? You think I ask for this shit? They say I should have more apolitical relationships with men of color and I'm just like 'you think I haven't tried?' Also I'm not here for that fake as fuck, superficial as shit relationship.

Funny how in the many times I've said the same thing over and over, men of color will interpret this as shitting on them when really I was crying in pain and trying to tell them to stop hurting me, but they make it about them. A black boy I tried to talk to once asked me if I ever asked black men for help. I laughed because when you think I'm shitting on you that's exactly what I'm doing and it ain't about help. I'm asking you to see me as human but you want to read me as an illogical, petty, and bitter monster like that bitterness didn't come from a history of never being seen as human, let alone woman. I laughed because like the black lives matter movement and the many other movements led by black women, black men never had to ask for support or for their humanity to be seen by black women. In fact, I love black folk so much, sometimes I forget how to love myself and I've been wishing we could love together, but you're not interested and I'm tired bruh. I'm fucking tired.

Introduction

Why is it so hard for me to love myself on this campus, and what is blocking my joy?

These deeply vulnerable questions seem so familiar, yet are still deeply terrifying. But because they terrified me, I knew I needed to explore them further; so, I made them my preliminary

research questions. Surprisingly when people inquired about my thesis topic, they were confused by my preliminary research questions. People often said “that’s cool,” but showed no genuine interest in the topic. I also heard responses like “Wait, you don’t love yourself?” And then, I felt this compulsion to cover up and reframe what I said by throwing out buzzwords like “self-care,” even though I am not engaging in that discourse. So in truth, I want to know why people reacted that way, why is that normal, and most importantly, why couldn't I just admit *No, I don't love myself like I should and I am curious as to why*. Rooted in Black feminist theory, I want to know why and how my commitment to black love and loving blackness is impeded by gendered colorism but also how the combined stress of experiencing the two exacerbates loneliness a state of loss. No doubt, that in a world where my story of being a black girl is often told by others, I want to assert agency over my own story and narrative. This is dangerous work. In a capitalistic patriarchy hooks (1994) contends that power is the ability to control the narratives of *the other* (p.170). When Black women, like me who have been historically dominated, explicitly dispute public narratives, I am often met with aggression or defensiveness. Therefore in this work, I resist the urge to both comfort myself or those interested in maintaining their inflated sense of personal superiority.

This project began as a means for me to forge my own path as a scholar. Through the process, I worried about the legitimacy of my inquiry. Previously, I looked at other paradigms and asked questions I wasn't emotionally committed to because I wanted to maintain white patriarchal standards of objectivity in that I am the outside looking in. Indeed, I have over-extended myself this year by taking on three strenuous writing projects all so that I can be taken seriously as a scholar. However, Dillard (2013) encourages researchers of color to turn away from our desire to belong to a particular paradigm, or an acceptable way of analyzing, formatting, and articulating meaning. Instead, we must nurture and aid in the growth of paradigms that demonstrate one's cultural and spiritual understandings of memories and histories that shape our ways of knowing and ways of being and perhaps inform our interactions (p.58). In other words, what I want and need to make visible as part of not only black feminist scholarship, but also black feminist healing cannot be adequately expressed with writing in a linear format. Linear formats require a structured beginning and an end. The ways in which I understand and understood loving blackness is not linear but informed by many experiences processed at different junctures in my life.

In this thesis project, I am attempting to analyze and articulate meaning in the intersection of black love and colorism that has informed my challenges with self-love at Colgate University. Although a plethora of research exists for gendered colorism and how it affects women's conception of beauty and perhaps self-worth, little has emerged from academia on the intersection of black love and colorism as an obstacle to joy as well wholeness for black women. This was surprising. hooks too urged black feminist theorists to speak and write more on love, particularly self-love. There simply isn't enough research, and yet self-love is a critical part of our survival and happiness. For this reason, I want my research to discuss the specific obstacle of colorism using my own personal narratives as evidence. In addition I intend to interpret and understand these narrative using a black feminist theories on the significance of narrative inquiry and as a legitimate social critical theory.

Dillard (2013) suggests that an endarkened feminist epistemology articulates how reality is known when based in the historical roots of global feminist thought (p.59). As I intend to illustrate in later sections, Colorism exists as a valid historical gendered reality for black girls that has not been articulated enough in academia. According to Collins (1998), black women's collectivity, emancipation, liberation, or empowerment as a group rests on self-definition or the power to name one's own reality. Indeed, my negotiations with self-determination, to determine my own destiny, and not being allowed to name my reality is a way in which I want to problematize the conversation, or lack thereof. Specifically, I want to complicate how self-determination is interacts with gendered colorism and love. So many times, I have been silenced on naming the intersections I intend to discuss in my research. When I am not explicitly told to silence myself I am shamed for having brought up mental health or colorism overlaid by sexism overlaid by racism.

In embarking on the journey of Black love while learning to love my own blackness, I thought I would be on the same page as my black peers. Of course, the toxic interconnections between the love of myself and my growing desire for black love had not revealed themselves in my younger years. As a result, I wasn't prepared for the obstacle of colorism even though I had dealt with it my whole life. As Collins (1990) describes, by using feminist standpoint theory, I seek to make visible what is invisible to mainstream sociology and reveal "Everyday, unarticulated consciousness's" regarding darker-skinned black women and interactions with colorism (p. 26). Earlier in my life, I remember being confronted with the twisted hurt of

rejection for my blackness and my hue but still committed to love. At the time, I didn't know words like anti-blackness or colorism. But now, I possess the language to define my own reality.

Indeed, it took me a long time to find the language to articulate my feelings and before I could articulate it, I had to first accept and understand that it was even a problem. We are made to feel like these systems of privilege are normal. Even more we feel a need to maintain control by flirting with the possibility of acceptance in a society ruled by white supremacy. Likewise, Collins (2003) offers the perspective that by speaking out, formerly victimized individuals not only reclaim their humanity, they simultaneously empower themselves by giving new meaning to their own particular experiences (p 48). Additionally, by making what is felt public is one of the fundamental parts of black feminist healing as well as breaking the silence in black feminist research. So although I have often felt ashamed of my late entry into feminism and that I didn't quite understand my blackness positively, it is my story and a story I must learn to accept. In saying that I don't want this research to essentialize black women's experiences. This is my experience and the way in which I analyze my own interactions with black romantic love, black self-love, and colorism, as it is informed by my personal experiences.

Within this process of bringing my private journal entries into public discourse while being vulnerable with myself and the page, I was better able to see the threads of how my reactions to incidents were informed by my embodied knowledge on power. Oftentimes, these threads are obscured by distractions and fear. Squire, Corinne, and Tambouku (2008) suggest that we frame our research in terms of narrative because we believe that by doing so we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning. Additionally, narrative inquiry allows me to bring the layers into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change (p.1). Despite the ways in which my emotions and dialogue with political realities while be disjointed as life usually is, narrative inquiry more clearly untangles the layers to reveal social patterns not just demonstrated in the individual. By the same token, Squire, Corinne, and Tambouku (2008) contend that researchers in this field are interested in the social patterns and functioning of stories, whether the 'stories' are short, disjointed or extensive representations that exemplify broad cultural narratives (p.5) Subsequently, I am concerned with how narratives, my personal stories, are built through internal conversations exposed through journals as a means to extract the negotiations and performances of my social identity that are in a common space of meaning(Squire, Corinne, and Tambouku, 2008, p.6). Specifically, I use

journals as a natural healing method in response to feelings of silence. Although the complete inquiry will be interpreted differently, depending on who reads them and what informs their interpretation, my concern with journals is a commitment to honesty. Using journaling, I sought to let go of the fear of being judged, marked bitter, petty, overly-sensitive, weak-minded, naive, and childish. Like Collins (2003) I am seeking to disrupt the public truth that says black women are collectively strong always in all ways. Also, I want to interrupt the need to valorize strength without any critical examination of how “strong” has been located in a white patriarchal space that asks us to be devoid of emotion. We are still operating from a place of white patriarchy when we refuse to confront what hurts us and deem those do confront it “too political” and bitter. I am challenging narratives that suggest my stories aren’t enough (p.48). I am enough.

Unraveling Colorist Hierarchies

Dear God,

It hurts.

This hurts.

Lord have mercy.

Tonight, Junot Diaz said “If all the light skin women disappeared, black men would line up across the Brooklyn Bridge to kill themselves.” With such a violent image, I wasn’t breathing again. I wanted to cry. I wanted to leave, but I chose respecting the man of color speaker over me. Always in all ways I choose them over myself. I’m going crazy.

Lord help me your child is not alright.

I’m thinking what’s the point. I’m thinking I’m tired. I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired and angry. I’m thinking if all the dark skin women disappeared, these so called brothas would not even notice. I’m thinking back to that night in Discourses of Whiteness when Adrian said between him and Simone he would have to kill Simone assuming we live in competitive society with limited resources. He chose himself. Why can’t I choose me? Why was I so disturbed that he would take my life?

Lord, I do not wish to center my wounds anymore but I’m tired of niggas lying to me. I’m tired of the diabolical brilliance. I know they wouldn’t notice if dark skin women disappeared because a black woman was raped midday in a frat house and they didn’t do shit! But when a black man’s photo went out as a warning, something unprecedented, it was black women who raised hell. I never thought a simple genuine how are you was too high an expectation for broken folks. We are regressing. I don’t need black men to be activists. Perhaps the time of men leading has passed, but when they are just out here choosing themselves ALWAYS in ALL WAYS I just feel like...lord help me your child is not alright.

Lord the other night, Keith called me ten o’clock at night to ask me for food. He won’t say hi to me no time else but ‘muva always has milk.’ I’m tired of people taking and taking and taking and taking. If this is what black feminism is, to not leave anyone behind, I don’t know if I have the strength. I want to say no, but I keep thinking it’s my responsibility to change them. I

feel guilty but why? I owe them nothing. I want to hurt them like they hurt me but how? When I want to shit on their life, I always have four black women telling me that I'm wrong trying to make me feel sorry. Is that not the same as the power of white women's tears? The way they turn shit around and make black folk feel guilty for calling them out on their bullshit. I think people are too invested in evading responsibility. If they don't know about the boot they crashed into my neck or the ways in which they help white men do the same, lynching me in the daylight, I will let them know. Funny how everyone deserves compassion except black women, except me. This is personal. Yes, I am hurt that someone doesn't like me the way I like them. I am hurt that I was rejected. I am sexually and politically frustrated. I am hurt that I have been invisible for 21 years. I am hurt that not once has a black man initiated a platonic or romantic relationship with me. I hurt myself by always trying to prove to people in worldly ways that I am worthy. I am hurt that deep down, I know I will be forgotten. But when a girl says on yik yak she wishes she were white because of dating, devaluing black women's sexuality, and misogynoir...I know I'm not alone. Everyone is trying to make me feel crazy. Fine. I will show you crazy...

This hurts.

This hurts.

This hurts. Because in the end I know. I know that although I feel responsible and put so much energy into trying to save myself through saving those who don't want to be saved, I know there is nothing I can do. Colorism, misogynoir, and the sharing in our brokenness is not within my control. I can't make people see me or hear me. That's what's killing my joy. I'm invisible...my pain is invisible and there is nothing I can do.

Sitting deep into the soft green couch, unable to breathe and feeling the heat radiate through my chest, I watched as I among several other black women in the room grew frustrated. Angered and pained, we were by our black male peers' inability to recognize their violence in saying black women, especially, darker skinned black women were not attractive. They assumed that everyone has different taste and preferences. In fact, they posited that their tastes and preferences were innocent and that surely there is a balanced proportion of heterosexual black men who prefer darker skinned women to black men who prefer light skinned women. However, history suggests that dating and skin color preference is not only historical, but deeply political.

No one ever had to tell me light skin stood above me in the hierarchy of black women. I could see it. I could see the difference in how I was heard or rather not heard, and how lighter skinned women, some light skin friends, would express similar sentiments and would be met with understanding, compassion, and acknowledgment. I could see the way eyes lingered over their brightness and people felt comfortable to open up. People felt comfortable and desired to hold these lighter skinned women. Many times, I thought I was crazy. There were moments I entertained the idea that perhaps I was, in fact, unreasonably bitter. However, countless

narratives exist and conversations I've had with fellow darker skinned women demonstrate that we see similar indications of the reality of this intra-racist hierarchy of colorism.

Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall (2013) introduce "Gendered colorism" as the term adopted by social scientists to describe how skin color uniquely influences impressions of women versus of men (p.155). Colorism is most salient when confronting perceived scales of attractiveness (p.155). Indeed, before I consciously aspired to have black love, I was met with the pains of never living up to society's beauty standards. It didn't matter how much I relaxed my hair, a semi-permanent method of straightening or wore gray color contacts. I was seemingly never enough for my peers. Without question, I became anxious about my kinky roots, darker skin, and brown eyes so I could attempt to fit beauty standards, but also so I could exchange that beauty for being perceived as elegant, civil, and intelligent. Likewise, Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall (2013) offer that given the enormous role that beauty plays in the world of dating and mating, it is reasonable to assert there is no other life experience in which skin color plays a greater role-- and no one knows this better than dark-skinned African-American women (p.155).

According to Hunter (2005), mainstream society's conception of beauty is a racist construct that women of color have never fit (p.27). Because the construction of beauty has phenotypically centralized white European traits, beauty maintains white patriarchy. Such centralization also manifests itself in dating and marriage. The skin tone hierarchy engendered by the racist construction of beauty gives birth to what Hunter (2005) calls "the beauty queue," where the whitest and lightest women are placed at the front and the darkest women are placed at the end and receive fewer resources and social capital (p.28). Coupled with sexism where women's bodies determine their worth more so than that their intelligence or personality, women of color, especially black women have never been able to equitably exchange beauty for social capital.

To begin discussing colorism, the systematic preference for lightness that stems from the larger and more potent system of racism that exists in African-American communities, I had to first understand how it was spawned from racism. Hunter (2005) unravels the history of skin color stratification for African-Americans by illustrating the roots in the colonization and enslavement of Africans by Europeans(p.31). Europeans and white Americans created racial hierarchies to justify the subhuman treatment of the people of color they colonized and enslaved. Using their power to culturally, politically, and economically disadvantage Africans at every

conceivable point of possible self-determination, Europeans cultivated the beginning of white supremacist ideology. The alleged superiority of whiteness, and all things approximating it including white or light skin, was the rule. As a result, the maintenance of white supremacy in this country became grounded in the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness and inferiority. In contrast, skin color and features associated with white, such as light skin, straight noses, and straight hair represented civility, rationality, and beauty (Hunter, 2005, p. 2).

According to Hunter through racist ideology, “african-ness” came to be known as evil and “whiteness” came to be known as virtuous. African physicality has inspired “aesthetic derogation” by white racism. Actual physical traits associated with each racial group began to take on these ideological meanings. Dark brown skin, kinky hair, and broad noses started to represent barbarism and ugliness. Similarly, straight blonde hair and white skin began to represent civility and beauty. This shift in meaning from the abstract concept of whiteness and blackness to the actual physical traits of the races is at the crux of the contemporary phenomenon of skin color stratification (Hunter, 2005, p.3).

Colorism and Sexual Violence

In the public sphere, the pursuit of beauty occupies this complicated space of being a superficial pursuit. Feminism often dictates that women ought resist such sexist pursuits because beauty is structured by patriarchy when viewed through a male gaze. Although beauty and femininity regarding femme folks and bodies is sometimes articulated as interchangeable, I assert that beauty and femininity or linked are linked, but not the same. With that in mind, beauty and its conception have very real and quantifiable economic, political, and social consequences. The construct of beauty especially produces a convoluted and painful reality for black women.

To understand the construct of beauty as it interacts with colorism, Hunter (2005) begins with the sexual violence towards Black women during enslavement. White men established social order grounded in two key ideas: the dehumanization of Africans on the basis of race and the control of women’s sexuality and reproduction. Sexual violence, rape, perpetrated by white men is the beginning skin color stratification where the obvious result was racially mixed children. The long-term effect was the creation of a color hierarchy through the systematic privileging of light-skinned African-Americans over darker-skinned African-Americans. Via the

connection of lighter skinned black people to white slave owners, their skin was systematically privileged. The special status of lighter skinned offspring of slave owners offered lighter skinned offspring opportunities for manumission, less violent treatment by overseers, less stressful work tasks, access to education, and opportunities for skilled labor.

Likewise according to Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall (2013), preference for lighter skinned slaves was also demonstrated by placing them in the house to keep an eye on offspring as opposed to hard labor in the fields with darker skinned slaves (p. 56). Hunter (2005) adds that with the occasional opportunities for manumission, a class of free light-skinned black people emerged giving rise to a class of freedmen and marking the beginnings of African-American light-skinned elite in the contemporary United States. However, mixed race children and families were never accepted as social equals like that of white families (p. 63). Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall (2013) add that in 1662 legislators in Virginia voted that the status of the child would take on that of the mother. Colonial mixed children had lived free until the passage of this law. However this law was only the precursor to the laws based on the one drop rule(p.16).

Subsequently, Hunter offers that the rule of hypodescent, or the One Drop Rule where “one drop of black blood” defined members of the black race, linked gender and racial politics. While white men used this rule as a means to maintain “race purity,” they also sought to control white women’s sexuality and reproduction to maintain patriarchal power and decrease competition for resources with black men. Likewise, black women were the center of blackness. This enabled white men to rape black women to produce more slaves.

Additionally, black women were positioned and conceptualized as less than woman and less than human and became “unrapeable” objects. In fact, Hunter (2005) explains that when enslaved, darker skinned black women were forced to work alongside men in physically strenuous tasks, for long hours. They were not the pristine, neat, clean, passive, and fragile traits that defined white womanhood. Instead, African women were used as mules forced to always be sexually available to white men. Consequently, they were “de-feminized” because they occupied a gendered space for which there was no clear defined gender identity. They were wives and mothers, but unlike white women at the time, they were also positioned as workers that were independent, and strong. Subsequently, such a combination of traits left black women unable to share the same female protections of patriarchy because they weren’t even seen as women but still sexual objects deemed “unrapeable.” For this reason, society situates black women,

particularly dark-skinned women, as dehumanized and defeminized objects. In other words, we, dark-skinned women, have never fit mainstream beauty constructs or constructions of feminine women because these constructions were never made for us. We are barely considered women let alone beautiful.

Dear God,

Truth is, I am hurt colorism and have to hear from black men on this campus and outside how they hate me everyday. EVERYDAY. And I have had so much trouble getting to a peaceful place of accepting this reality and not being so upset with black men that aren't interested in black women. But I have more easily internalized hateful propaganda than the knowledge produced by black feminist theorists that suggest that I am not my wounds, this is not my fault, it is not my responsibility to change it. I am confused by my need to care for myself and my desire for an anti-racist black community, which is not a given amongst black folk. In discussing this, I realize that I have been restricted to a very isolated campus that plays tricks on me. It makes me believe that black men everywhere are like this in that they say they love black women but ultimately love caretakers and reproductive organs, which may be true for most men, regardless of race.

Maybe my question is why haven't I gotten over it? What's wrong with me that this hurts so much? My research shows that I am not the only person who has ever felt like this. Many narratives validate my feelings of transferring my anger to individuals, internalizing anti blackness by purchasing lightening creams, and being committed to community because it provides a spiritual solace. However, I feel like everyone else has moved past these pains like a phase of caring about the fact that people hate you. Am I child? No, perhaps it simply that I am not ready for relationship and indeed, I must return to myself. I have to love myself before I can love anyone and share that love with someone else, otherwise I will fall into the trap of loving people who don't love or themselves, or are simply malicious.

We are not talking about mental health. I understand that centering our damage is not all that I am good for and I am not just my wounds. I am so frustrated and have pent up raps and vents because I, we black women, are not talking about our scars. I think of it this way. It takes me more energy to hold in my tears after violent events until I get home alone, so I don't have to cry in front other people. I have internalized my father's message to me in 4th grade that said don't ever let them see you cry. Then, I have people who tell me my pain and my issues with colorism are played out. Concerning it is indeed that a black woman to mixed woman would imply that the systematic privileging that is setup to frame me as less than white and lighter skinned women is "played out." The additional layer of racism overlaying sexism in my life precludes me from being visible, seen, heard, registered as human is "played out," as in no longer relevant or an issue, as in get over it. Like Collins suggests, although we don't talk about colorism and we don't want to talk about colorism and how it affects the self- esteem and mental health of our community, it is a seemingly invisible narrative that many people feel.

Color "Preferences": Personal as Political

The argument that has raged for decades and continues to take up space in the public sphere is whether the privileging of lighter skin women is simply an innocent preference or

sexualized racism and colorism. In fact, data has surfaced that black women, especially darker skinned black women are the least likely to receive messages on online dating services. Despite overwhelming evidence, people become highly defensive when they are called sexual racists for having a racialized preference in dating. Often the perspective is that *you know it when you see it*, but there is little reflection on how people have decided consciously that they don't date black women because they don't find black women attractive yet have not met every black woman. Without doubt, many have internalized this racism so deeply that can no longer recognize racism and colorism for what they are and instead think of them as individual tastes.

Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall (2013) confirm my understanding by stating that Colorism has seeped into everyday culture so that it is hard to clearly identify with even though everybody sees it. In fact, they add "go to any Black nightclub and observe how fast Black men's heads turn when light skinned Black woman crosses the room," and not much has changed. Those women, *not* light skinned themselves may also show how attention is redirected to their lighter-skinned femme peers (p.107). One my friends, who is mixed and lighter-skinned, has remarked that she can come downstairs for two minutes during a house party and have an interested male partner talking to her, as in *he* initiates. Whereas my other friends and I, who are darker skinned, always have to be initiators and are often invisible in these spaces.

The phenomenon in which black men are not looking at or marrying darker skin black women is not all in our head. Herskovits (1928) studied successful Harlem couples and found that more than half (56.5 percent) of wives were lighter than their spouses while less than one-third (29 percent) of wives were darker than their husbands(as cited in Russell-Cole, Wilson, Hall, 2013, p.156). These ever relevant statistics as they play out in our daily lives often feeds into our feelings that heterosexual black women have to compete with lighter-skinned and white women for heterosexual black partners.

The short answer is that within the African-American community, skin color is not just personal, or innocent tastes and preferences, it's deeply political. Were African-Americans to date one another across the skin color spectrum with no discernable pattern, then indeed there would be on the grounds for analysis. But when a singular feature preference such as skin color become so persistently evident in the dating choices of men of African descent, a red flag has to be raised(160). In other words, dark skin women, I included, are not crazy. Color preference is not about innocent tastes.

Dear God,

I remember last year when my friends and I took a trip to Rochester for them to go see J. Cole. At the time, I wasn't a big J. Cole fan. I just wanted to get away from Colgate. Funny, because somehow I left to get away from the demon that lurks over Colgate but those demons followed me. I kept listening to J. Cole's song, No Role Modelz, and Kendrick Lamar's song, Complexion (A Zulu Love), back to back. Like a movie montage, I heard the smooth beatz, the lyrics, and saw Adrian's face. I imagined him with the women people told me he slept with and all of them were lighter than paper bags. I was growing sick. I kept looking at my skin wanting to scratch it off hearing Rapsody, a rapper, blame me for not loving myself and J. Cole tell me he wants a dark skin love but names five light skin women. He remarks on how he treats women he claims are shallow like garbage cum stains. I wanted to hurt him, them, who ever believed that as much as they hurt me. I grew sicker and sicker watching my two friends, Lena and Daniella walk in the mall. I cursed their light skin thinking what about a hue made them so much more desirable even to those who know the history. You can tell a man that their preferences are rooted in white supremacy where your value is based on how close or far away you are from whiteness. They can even believe you, claim they love all black women, a zulu love, but still only show compassion towards only light skin and white women.

Lord this may be irrelevant, but I remember in seventh grade, this black boy, D.J, told me he doesn't date black girls because their loud, ghetto, and ugly. I thought we were friends. I didn't know how to react. Part of me wanted to punch him in the throat. the other part of me focused on how to prove him wrong. The main question I had, is if we were friends, why did he feel so comfortable saying this to me? Why do black men feel so comfortable and at ease claiming they love me or love black women but don't see how they spit in my face. They take and take lord. They jack my milk and treat it like it's free. It's because they know... they think I'll always be here no matter how they treat me. Loyal to literal death.

I get the feeling they know exactly what they're doing. I wish people would stop saying love. They don't know what that means. I don't know what that means. All I know is the only love I have and need is yours lord. That's all I got.

Walking the Colgate campus, and this very white earth being constantly overlooked and disrespected, I grow frustrated. I let the love I have for myself teeter and totter. Distracted, I transfer my frustration of being ignored, rendered invisible, to tangible bodies like white or lighter-skinned women. I question over and over again *why* even when I know the political answer. In fact, one of Hunter's (2005) interviewees, Pamela, expressed similar frustrations and transference of hatred: "I will say that I started to resent lighter skinned women. I have a friend of mine now, she's light skinned. When I lived next door to her I hated her. She's beautiful. And I thought ' God, I hate you'" (p, number). Although I love all my sisters and friends, I grow tired and feel like if I blame the women themselves I can gain some type of control. Coupled with isolation, I forget that the favoritism has nothing to do with me or them. Politics, as it interacts with social psychology, is out of my hands and says nothing about my actual worth or beauty.

Still I feel competitive at times when I feel my eyes linger on a black man, but I know he would choose a white girl over me for aesthetics. Perhaps people think that is an assumption that I am entitled to black men and that I am worth of being loved. Although I am not entitled to anybody, I am and will remain worthy of love. A culture in which I must prove my worth at every conceivable turn is the issue. However, Hunter(2005) argues that the scarcity leads to increased tension and competition among African-American women for the limited number male partners, thus increasing animosity over issues of beauty and color(p.73).Competition between women of color over skin color serves as a distraction from larger oppressive systems such as racism and sexism.

You didn't have to tell us we're considered less than when black men and even other black women I thought would understand the salience of colorism showed us their lack of compassion by denying our realities. Where some white folk deny the issue of racism and white privilege, black folk and lighter-skinned black folk deny skin-color stratification. Colorism is the dirty laundry we don't want to discuss. Those who perpetrate, perpetuate, and reify the devaluing of black beauty deny the behaviour, its relation, and sometimes existence. However, in reading Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye* (1984) and Jane Kuenz's (1993)article, *The Bluest Eye: and Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity*, they revealed that the uniquely produced knowledge I gleaned from being a dark-skinned black girl about positionality in the black community was not held in isolation. Morrison illustrates the story of Pecola, a girl living in Ohio who prayed for her eyes to turn blue and her skin to be brighter in order to be beautiful just as I did. Additionally, Morrison depicts a moment in which Claudia paid attentive to detail to the contrasting ways in which people behaved around Maureen, a lighter skinned character:

Claudia and her sister can recognize the thing made [Maureen] beautiful and not [them]" only in terms of its effects on other people. Despite know that they are, "nicer, brighter" they cannot ignore how " honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of [their] peers, the slippery light in the eyes of [their] teachers' all pour out to the Maureen Peals of the world and not to them (p.422).

Although no one may have explicitly said she was not beautiful because of her shade, Claudia was able to discern what was not present in the care and keeping of her by viewing the treatment

of Maureen. Indeed, by paying attention to the “honey voices” or the compassionate attention Maureen received, she was able to unsettle that the way in which people treated her with less respect and little room for mistake is not normal. However, Claudia did not have the verbal language or analytical foundations to express this upset as society centralizing whiteness.

Brushing my relaxed hair as straight as possible, I would still grow furious that there were these weird holes at the bottom. Places where the hair was spread awkwardly when my hair wasn't freshly done anymore. I wished I could spend the fifty to eighty dollars it took to get my hair done every week, but I lived in a working class family. I remember becoming anxious about the little curls growing in and not being light enough. I remember secretly using my first debit card to buy papaya soap that I thought would just make me a little lighter but not too much. I didn't want to look oddly or unevenly light. I just wanted to be perceived as cute and feminine like other girls in my class from elementary schools even up to secondary school. Activist and writer, Michele Wallace, expresses similar sentiments of wanting to embrace whiteness: “There was a time when I would have called that wanting to be white, yet the real point of the game was being feminine. Being feminine meant being white for us.” Indeed, Hunter (2005) articulates that true femininity, as it has been constructed in society, is still defined in relation to whiteness(p. 77).

In fact, in another scene taken from Toni Morrison's(1984) *The Bluest Eye*, the narrative takes on the perspective of Claudia who becomes frustrated and filled with rage about the dominance of whiteness:

I destroy white baby dolls.... But dismembering of dolls was not true horror. The true horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded: the secret magic they weaved n others. What made people look at them and say “Awwwww,” but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 42, 1992).

Morrison illustrates that it is not unusual to become distracted by the symptoms of white supremacy. Additionally, as people with white or lighter skin become representations of existing

power dynamics and the systems that dehumanize darker skinned black women, we may transfer our anger to the individuals. Indeed, like Claudia and Morrison's illustrations, I too have asked, "What was the secret" and "What did we lack?" Without access or knowledge of black women's narratives other than my mother and myself, I began to internalize colorism. When I should have asked why are lighter-skinned women greeted with comfort and more acceptance than me, I thought it was something wrong with me. Layers of white supremacy and the hiding of black women's analytical knowledge prevent black women from first seeing that their stories are not isolated. As a result, I begin to internalize the ways in which I was met with hostility and marked as intimidating and blame myself as an attempt to control my circumstances. Subsequently, I often turned to skin lightening creams. Black women's unique knowledge and skills serve as entry points to realize that first, the system of white supremacy, where whiteness is positioned as superior, exists. Second, the way in which we, darker-skinned women, are treated is not normal.

In questioning the significance of how I, a self-identified womanist, negotiate black love, black self-love in conversation with radical self-care, and colorism, I see that there is little research directly discussing black feminist interpretations of love between black heterosexual black folk and its politics. For this reason, I have engaged with some of the foremost scholars of black feminist inquiry regarding love, community, and colorism. Indeed, the lack of literature was surprising, perhaps because such theorizing is done in conversation outside academia. Without question, I believe that black feminist and womanist scholarship should not be restricted to academic spaces where such theorizing is often invalidated and seen as an illegitimate location of critical scholarly inquiry. On one hand as a womanist, I am committed to loving blackness and black people. I am committed to a movement towards the eradication of all forms of oppression with the understanding that I am constantly learning and imperfect. On the other hand, because I understand love as a combination of trust and responsibility, care, affection, and the sharing of brokenness, I have often been betrayed or disappointed. Oftentimes, folks don't really want to go that deep and share in their brokenness, especially black men. This was and perhaps is the most frustrating. It's frustrating that I want this spiritual growth, but many black men choose to be more vulnerable with white and lighter skin women and don't even *see me*.

By *see me*, I mean some Black men choose not value my story or knowledge or wisdom in that they actually ignore me physically and metaphysically. In fact, one black male peer has explicitly said he has nothing to learn from black women. To be clear, all black men are not just

being vulnerable with white and lighter skinned women or saying that they don't value my story. However, I can no longer remain silent about the growing pattern I see on this campus that black men just choose to deny. If black men's dating patterns were spread out across race and shade, this preference wouldn't be an issue, but the dating patterns are far from proportional. This isn't just at Colgate either (Rephrase--too informal), but my context is here. I have felt crazy about recognizing and talking about the correlation between colorism and the lack of black love on this campus. Many times, I am greeted with sighs like "Aidan, what are you going through," because my relationship with black men has two extremes: ranging from let that them burn to burn and learning to be broken together. When my trust is betrayed, it is personal.

Perhaps others have negotiated this differently by not spending so much time on seeking the validation of black men. Indeed, I have made this mistake as well but I am engaging in this inquiry for the purposes understanding why I can't or don't unlink myself from black men, why I haven't come to understand that the back and forth between extremes is a result of essentializing black men. How do I negotiate the shame in continuously coming back to black love knowing I will be hurt again? Why do I feel ashamed? Basically, where is the place in which I get to the point of *I don't care*? In other words, when will I internalize that I am not the problem and do not don't have to constantly prove myself worthy to others?

Fractured Self

Dear God,

For the past ~~few days~~ semester I haven't been able to see myself past twenty-five maybe thirty. I could say it's the poorly fried tender and fries, ramen, and a lack of water drinking clouding my ability to hear, see, and love myself clearly, but I know that's not it. I know because if that's all it was I wouldn't have lied to Leah, a counselor, and said I was fine and that the thoughts were mild that night of Junot Diaz. True, I felt better. The sun was out and I had cried enough. I was okay, but I forgot to mention that I made an art of playing off the fact that I felt like I was dead or dying on the inside. There are some times when my mind is better but my body does not let me forget. It reminds me I am not okay in the multiple times I catch myself not breathing. It reminds I am not okay when I realized I haven't pooped in three days. It reminds I am not okay when I lose my chapstick and I just start bawling asking you why this always happens to me. The body (re)members and keeps trying to tell me to return to myself and you but I get caught up seeking instant gratification by eating more and spending more under the guise of self-care and "I deserve this" when really I just need my motherfucking self and King Jesus.

When you drive into the village of Hamilton, passing the Main Moon chinese restaurant, the local theater, and the luxurious village green, you will see a Colgate University sign. Behind that sign is our pristine and elegant campus. The campus looks so beautiful with a glorious lake

that used to be the home of two now departed swans. A city upon a hill, we possess our own beacon of light as the golden cupula from the top of the chapel can be seen from just about anywhere on campus. In the warm months, the grass is green and tailored. In the winter the silence of the snow covering every inch is astonishing. The pamphlets weren't lying; they just stretched the truth. The grass is fake and who has time to look at the flurries when it snows too early, stays too long, and the cold hurts your face. I'm sure the water has high amounts of calcium and zinc. The land was stolen from the Haudenosaunee people. Bodies of enslaved people are covered up by the strip of Route 12B that is directly next to the Colgate. And of course, I can't forget that Pleasant Road was formerly call Nigger Road.

In the many times I have driven back to Colgate after my first semester, I felt something looming over me despite the excitement and possibility held in a new semester. Sometimes, I think it's a demon wreaking havoc for stealing and settling on unceded Haudenosaunee land. Other times, I think it's the collective negative energy of the drained and restless folks emotionally bleeding throughout campus and the town. Without question, I try to be positive. I try to set goals and make plans to be the best version of myself and take care of myself, but these goals and plans always fail. The minute I pass the green traffic sign with the white arrow that tells me that Colgate and Hamilton are "this way," two things happen--my phone provider reminds me of my isolation by nixing my service and I am forced to put on my coat of emotional sacrifice.

Dear God,

It happened again. This time...this time I imagined my blood flowing from my wrists in the shower. Cried all night. I cried and cried then slept and woke up three in the morning to cry again. I went back to sleep only to cry some more before my politics of poverty class. My dad called and midst of it all and he heard my voice. He asked if I had a cold. Pulling the phone away while covering the mic, I scrunched my face trying to fight back the burn in my eyes then uncovered the mic just to lie and say "Yea, a cold." My dad told me to make sure I had some soup.

I knew you did this. I knew that was opportunity to tell my parents the truth and say I was not alright. In fact, my dad called because earlier I had texted my mom that I wanted to come home. Although I meant spring break, I did want to come home in that moment. In the times when I can't love myself, my parents do it for me and that scares the shit out of me Lord. They won't be around forever and right now...I feel like I have no one else in my corner. My brother rarely speaks to me. I can text him how are you and he won't answer till a week later. That night I considered calling friends for help, but I felt compelled to do this all on my own knowing that I can't. People have their own shit and I just felt like who am I to bring my shit into their lives.

Perhaps I just wanted to burn right then and there. It's so hard for me, Alexandria Davis, to love myself on this campus and I don't know why... I just don't know why.

I try to tell myself, *I'll cook my own food this year*, but the time it takes to *cook myself home* is a privilege. Bugged down with classes where white men talk at me and avoid real discussion and white women find me so intimidating they don't bother to look me in the eye, coming to Colgate I just suddenly feel...tired. Before I even do much, I am tired of a predominantly white campus dominated by white male Greek culture, rape culture, and white supremacy literally sucking my energy. And yes, I mean literally because at Colgate, I sleep less than five hours and can't go one week without God trying to test me. With folks dehumanizing me by invalidating my experience, and asking I be apolitical as if I don't try to have peace, I just feel tired. I have broken down four times at Colgate and have thought about suicide two of the four times. Raised in a community that didn't talk about mental health, I didn't name my experience of not wanting to leave my room, crying all day, and forcing myself to class depression.

I realize being well and whole on this campus, as in loving myself and knowing that I am loved by others, is impeded by the commitment to be devoid of emotion as way of being strong. Well, I'm sick and tired of being strong. My practice of feminism and womanism is situated such that I seek to eradicate all forms of oppression, which includes how emotions like passion, sadness, and melancholy are viewed as illegitimate or things that are not supposed to be in public.

Dear God,

I was sitting at my thesis carrel the other day stressing over the fact that haven't written a word and yet my friend Faye is on her literature review and my friend Laila is nearing her first full draft. I kept scrunching my hands in and out wanting to pinch myself out of inadequacy. In that moment, I realized I have more regrets than the years I have lived. I am overly critical of myself I know...but I wonder who taught me that I deserved love if and only if I was perfect? I wonder what got me so concerned with being forgotten that I pushed myself to do everything that sounded like me only to be doing it at 20%. I'm yearning for something. I'm searching for something.

I regret going to Santa Fe because something broke me over there. I can't connect. I regret not going to London. I regret not applying for the awards. I regret dropping Econ even though I hated it. Maybe I would be better off if I had just tried harder. I regret not getting good enough grades to transfer. I regret falling for Adrian and telling everyone except him. I was in a relationship all by myself and slowly killing myself because he didn't notice me. Sure, I knew I couldn't trust my heart with him anyway, but something pissed me off about his affinity for snow

and sunshine... white and light skin girls. I was trying to prove something to him. Damn, I was trying to prove something to myself.

You know this already God, but I feel so utterly invisible on this campus. In the classroom, in clubs, and at parties I feel like an unfinished paint job just waiting to get painted over. So when someone shows a little interest or just kindness, I catch myself falling too fast for no reason. I am thirsty in all senses of the word confused about what will quench it. Adrian asked me what I wanted in a guy one day and I lied and said fruity pebbles, cartoons, and booty rubbing trying to appear non-committal. He offered me his chicken nuggets and I couldn't help trying my best to keep my mouth closed chewing each nugget. The thing is, the last thing I wanted was sex. I wanted intimacy, something he would never give me because he doesn't know how and didn't want to, but I told myself it was because I wasn't worth it to him. Who taught me that? Who taught me that I didn't deserve more than boys who wanted to be loved but had no interest in loving?

Coming off Adrian I met this other guy, Keith, who I am or was crushing on, and had a healthy conversation. It seemed like the healthiest conversation I had had with a black guy in a long time. Back then I didn't want a relationship out of it other than friendship because I felt like rebounding with him would be unfair, but I caught myself considering not going abroad because of him. I thought I could have time to cultivate a relationship. In him, I thought I could find wholeness, happiness, or joy. I just wanted to be happy so badly that I continued to put energy into the relationship even after realizing it was beginning to mirror the same unhealthiness I had with Adrian. Sure, these boys had their own issues and Lord knows they were unhealthy and not loving themselves either, but still, why did I or do I cling so heavily to people who don't see me. What is wrong with me that I buried my happiness in men who treat me like a cow? What is wrong with me that I couldn't tell that this guy was seasonal?

In the four years I have been at Colgate, my most rewarded sites of intellectual and spiritual growth, were in conversations with other students and faculty talking about themselves. However, we are often cut off by the stress of irrelevant tasks that ask us to sacrifice our humanity. I go months without having time to think about what I want and how I wish to grow. Rushed from place to place, I eat take out that is slowly but surely killing me. The only beverages I drink are coffee and water. I see over-extension more often than not with black women on this campus who feel so beautifully but dangerously responsible for the growth of others that they are on the core of multiple groups, taking full course loads, and working multiple jobs. Despite the ways in which dread creeps up into our throats and manifests itself in our bodies with bad health and sudden pop offs, we are still here giving and giving and loving and loving just hoping someone will return that love and care. I stay steady committing and hoping people will love me in the same way and ask me a simple and genuine how are you; that has become too high an expectation.

Although I am a black girl kept fractured by the isolated context of Hamilton, New York, I was a person before coming to such a draining place. For this reason, I want to locate myself in my research and not essentialize that the way in which I am fractured applies to all black women studying at predominantly white institutions looking for healing in community. I grew up in Framingham, Massachusetts, which is a predominantly white-suburb where the most visible people of color are Latino. I was raised in a working/middle-class two-parent household with one older brother. The only time I was surrounded by mostly black folk was our Sunday trips to a black evangelical church in Boston. When I moved to Charlotte, North Carolina when I was twelve, I still lived in a predominantly white suburb and attended public school until high school. I was driven to live out my dream of going to private school because at the time I thought not only would it make me more prepared but also give me access to social capital as well as a new start. Like my other educational institutions, my secondary school education was also predominantly white. I separated myself from other black folks partly in fear of being called an *oreo*, a term that suggests you're black on the outside and white on the inside. The other part is that I was simply arrogant. My arrogance however doesn't excuse my black classmates who pulled my hair, punched me in the stomach, and shoved my head into the water fountain during school. With that in mind, I understand now that the greatest weapons white supremacy has is not simply the structures it uses to divide black folk, but also the ways in which those divisions makes us think white supremacy's violence is individual.

Reclaiming Blackness

With such a lack of black folk among undergraduates as well as faculty at Colgate University, the key component for community--the sharing of intergenerational political and historical knowledge--was scarce for me. As a result, when confronted with divisions emerging from systematic organizations of society that privilege some over others and ultimately center white, straight, able-bodied, rich, cis-gender men, I grew hopeless about ever being happy. I was tired of not being intellectually or spiritually engaged, and now that I knew that not having black authors shouldn't be normal, I was tired of being written out of history and not having real discussion about the culture of apathy on campus. The division and brokenness that has been the most frustrating is colorism which is a system rooted in the history of colonialism.

Now, in preparation for the potential resistance I may receive, I want to dissipate the myth that the only reason for naming and recognizing colorism as a black woman comes from a

petty, bitter place of a lack of self-love. In fact, I want to posit that because I have learned to love and do love blackness, I want everyone to share in the radical reclamation of blackness and black love as a means political resistance--and perhaps my personal desire. In order to) share in in the radical love of blackness, we must recognize that colorism is real. We must acknowledge that so called preferences and tastes and who people choose to be vulnerable with is not just personal but political, especially among black and brown communities upset by colorism. Therefore in this work of scholarship, I want to talk about black self-love and what that has meant for me through my journey here at Colgate. Then, I want to discuss loving the black community. And as a result of loving my own blackness and loving my black community, I want to demonstrate how my stirred yearning for black love as a cisgender heterosexual woman in a white supremacist society on a predominantly white campus led me to wanting to share that love with a partner. However this is hindered by historical and political renderings of physical attractiveness.

Similar to valuing my own story and self-definition, there is something radical and dangerous to valuing my story as a black girl and seeking to love my blackness in a white supremacist society. To love blackness in spite of being marked as ugly, irrational or savage is in complete opposition to a culture predicated on the superiority of whiteness. Indeed, bell hooks(1992) affirms my sentiments in saying that to love blackness is threatening and so intensely s the fabric of social order, that often punishment is the rendered(p.9). In my transition to Colgate University, I admit that I ran away from blackness. Blackness seemed like an obstacle to be overcome. In an era of colorblind racism post-Obama elections, I was taught to be ashamed of my blackness. Indeed, I remember urging people in my writing to focus on what makes us similar rather than different. However, my focus was on how blackness had prevented me from obtaining material desires and social capital rather than the peace and liberation that is currently woven into all my endeavors. According to bell hooks (1992), I may have been seduced by the promise of mainstream success only if I negate my blackness (p.17). No doubt, in my secondary school years when my blackness became evident in conversations about race, I tried playing neutral or not saying anything at all hoping that my “neutrality” would be viewed as rationality and gain me access to idiosyncrasy credits where my blackness would become irrelevant.

Dear God,

I can't sleep. This is the fourth night I haven't slept well and I'm getting scared.

I thought I was prepared for whiteness having grown up in a predominantly white suburb my whole life and attending a predominantly white, upper-class private school. Often, I disregarded the truths of black peers in my initial Black Student Union meetings when they talked about the failings of Colgate University to support black and brown students or that Sheryl Sandberg, author of *Lean In*, was not thinking critical about the systematic barriers for black and brown women. However in coming back to faith after winter break, I also made room to talk to my residential advisor, a Latina woman, about race and racism on campus. Things I thought were normal like a mostly white-authored curriculum, being described as an atypical student, or feeling afraid that I would be rejected from greek houses became slowly understood as symptoms of the white supremacy: a system of I had tried to deny for years. The realization was like saying wait, *it's not normal that I want to be white? And there are black authors that are equally brilliant?* Similarly, in bell hooks (1992) understanding of Paule Marshall's character Avey in *Praisesong for The Widow*, once our denial falls away we can work to heal ourselves through awareness (p.20).

Subsequently, to learn to love my blackness at Colgate and undo and unlearn eighteen years of black self-hatred in a predominantly white community, I had to surround myself with blackness. Specifically, I had to immerse myself in images, art, literature and politics that both engaged with and resisted black victimization. bell hooks(1992) contends that in her reading of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, that the main character, Clare, chose to claim a white identity because she had only seen blackness framed in this space of victimization(p.18). Indeed, I had very few positive black role models. In constantly being surrounded by whiteness outside my family, I was taught how whiteness was beautiful, but blackness was singularly discussed in reference to slave narratives, and civil rights. Perhaps problematically, I unfollowed all blogs on Tumblr that promoted white beauty but not black beauty. I made a rule to not buy any books with white women explicitly on the cover. Additionally, I stopped looking at magazines like *Teen Vogue* and *Seventeen*. Furthermore, I began to attend Sisters of the Round Table, a feminist organization that discussed the issues relating to women of color, and the Black Student Union. bell hooks(1992) tells me that in reclaiming love for blackness there may be a need for rebirth, reawakening, and relearning:

Awareness. It would have called for an awareness of the worth of what they possessed. Vigilance. The vigilance needed to safeguard [reclaim blackness]. To hold it like a jewel high out of the envious reach of those who would either destroy it or claim it as their own(p.19).

Constantly surrounding myself with images of black people loving blackness whether through art, music, or political resistance was my way of reshaping and safeguarding my understanding of blackness. In connection with my spirituality, I realized that blackness is not a disease, it is indeed a jewel, a gift, and god has not made any mistakes on me. Additionally, I also began to understand that those who spoke on the reclamation of blackness and urged others to confront their anti-blackness in every single instance of devaluation of the black experience, intersectionality, is not bitterness, but rather radical black love.

However in writing this, I felt conflicted. By centering my wounds and damage as a black girl who once hated her blackness, I feed into a white-supremacist structure that indulges in seeing me in pain and expressing the moments in which I wanted to be white. bell hooks(1992) expresses that black self-hatred can often silence constructive discussion on loving blackness (p.10). Indeed, in my Discourses of Whiteness course, it took eight weeks before the people of color in class stopped centering whiteness even within the people of color caucus. We spent more time discussing why the white people weren't talk and why they may feel threatened by the more vocal black folks than we did talking ourselves and the love we could have for each other. And when we did finally talk about loving color and wanting to learn to love each other better, roses that were once dead inside me blossomed once again. For the first time in a while, I had accessed tears of joy. Indeed, in talking about loving ourselves and loving blackness, there is such a focus on survival. But although, I see how constantly focusing on my damage as a black woman may feed into white supremacy, what is killing me and what is murdering my spirit is being more encouraged to lock my suffering away rather than be vulnerable and confront my demons. In valuing my own story, a revolutionary act, I am not doing this for anyone else. That said, I'm tired of surviving. I want to live.

Dillard (2013) contends the quest for loving blackness, especially for the researcher, begins with questioning how do experiences live within us (p.29). And as if talking to each other across time hooks (1992) asks: " From what political perspective we dream, look, create, and

take action?” (hooks, 1992, p.4). Additionally, hooks (1992) seeks to explore the personal way in which (re)member to productively put back together again one’s own “ certain ways of being the world in an effort to heal such that it rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self”(hooks,1992, p.4). Although the experience of seeing the devaluation of black beauty may begin with media representations, the devaluing, and the internalization is experienced in the body and enacted upon others in how people behave, talk to, hear, and see each other. For this reason, I have never quite understood how people can call low-self esteem and naming the causes petty and bitter. Especially when the messages that express blackness as ugly, savage, and irrational are lifted from magazines and T.V screens and seated in people’s voices, attractions, and ultimately their interpretations of life.

Dear God,

I remember the first notable time you tried to call me home. I had just left my home in Charlotte, a place that in just a week started to feel bitter, angry, cold, and wrought with turmoil.

You know this but my mom found out my dad had cheated on her. I’ve never seen my mom cry so much in pain and scream so angrily. Her tears made me uncomfortable. So early in the morning, I wished that I could will myself back to sleep but my mom shouting “Fuck you” tore into me. I prayed for you to make them stop, but it just got worse. At one point she said “I’m gonna tell your children who you are.” Of course my dad replied “Don’t do that now.” It didn’t matter we already knew.

I had known since May when my dad forced me to send out his weekly mass text for his catering business. I saw the message from Alice pop up reading:

I don’t think we should do this anymore, you and I both have kids and it isn’t right

I didn’t know how to look at my dad. I certainly didn’t know how to tell my mom. I remember sitting on my mom’s bed wanting the truth to burst out of me but I was selfish and didn’t want things to change. I didn’t want to have divorced parents, something I was sure back then would happen. My brother wasn’t home then and I wanted to text him and ask him what I should do? When he did come home I asked him “if you knew something that would change our family forever would you say any thing?”

“Doesn’t matter because things wouldn’t change” he replied. Even while they were yelling back and forth during break, I wondered if my brother could hear them too, or was he sleeping through it. Sure enough, he came into my room telling me to get dressed so we could leave. We went to Jimmy Johns and just sat in the parking lot. It turned out that he knew before I did and found out the same way.

I remember the next day wondering why we stopped going to church and praying. I kept praying but felt like it wasn’t enough. So I called someone that although I didn’t know very well, I felt like she was a great person to pray with me after she saw me break down in Resurrection church. Remembering all this I knew what I missed was church. I missed praise and worship. I

missed music that carried with it the memories of a collective struggle. Every Sunday, I used to see so many black folk in need of faith and a message that said we would be alright in a world trying kill our joy, kill our creativity, and kill us.

This search for joy, faith, safety, and the need to share our wars is not individual. I hear it in Gospel music and secular music.. But it's hard for me to connect when I hear and see white people singing wade in the water but have never talked about what that imagery means. I am dying of thirst

Lord, my spirit is dying here. I don't have access here to connect back to my ancestors and (re)member that I am not alone. This campus...its isolation makes me feel like I am so alone and I have to do this, survive and live, all on my own. A bad habit because you have never forsaken me, yet I lose faith here. How? The farther I am away from my family and ancestors who always remind me I am nothing without God, the farther I am away from people who could provide me intergenerational knowledge on how to survive because they have done this before, I start to think that no one understands me and that I am the first to go through this shit. I get tricked into thinking, I gotta figure this shit out all by myself. What does that look like? That looks like me running away and doing shit the way white folks do. Forsake the collective. Forsake joy and God. You start...I start getting bold... thinking things that are not in my control are in my control. I start getting destructively arrogant. I need people that have been through this to pop me in the mouth and bring me back to earth. I need people who can tell me that the struggle is real but we are in this together.

But with such a scarce black community with very little visible black faculty and staff, with little visible black students, and even townspeople... we grow divided thinking we know best how to do this all by our individual selves. At least that's what I think. I think I spent a lot of time running away from the people that gave me the strength to carry on and reminded me that my anger was valid. Something beautiful happens when we, black and brown folk, are united. I used to get some of that on Sundays, now I don't get it at all. I know Lord that you say when one or two gather in your name you will be there but there is something unique in that you and my ancestors are present when black and brown folk are together in celebration of our life and our survival.

I have a war to share and I can't do this on my own. This place makes me feel especially not enough to be loved and cared for. This place tells me lies that make me believe I don't deserve happiness. I need to come home.

Dear God,

How do I decenter men in this...

Poetic Interlude

If Beyonce Can't

You tried loving more

Giving more

Lay down your life for him you did

Still it wasn't enough

But it's not because you didn't love enough

Because if Beyonce can't

You welcome his brokenness

take him into you

When he doesn't love himself

You show him all there is to love

Carry his baggage like your own you did

Still it seemed not enough

But it's not because you didn't love hard enough

Because if Beyonce can't

You endure, you endure

Hold him down

His mama even like you

Still not enough

But it's not because your love wasn't deep enough

It's not about you

You are worthy

No need for proof

Because if Beyonce can't

Doesn't mean there is no hope

Doesn't mean you can't find heaven and love is lost

Just means it sure as fuck ain't your fault.

First, I cried feeling hopeless but then I asked myself who taught me to fear being alone? Who said I couldn't be enough for myself or worthy with me, myself, and I?

*Who taught me,
who told me,
who made me feel ashamed of
being me and
being with me and
the heaven all over
buried inside...*

Despite the brilliance and complex emotions flowing through Beyonce's Lemonade, what I see most in the eyes and hearts of my sisters after watching is hopelessness. I see sisters drowning in this feeling that if Beyonce can be cheated on, there is no hope for us. Aside from the fact that Beyonce is a human being, beautiful, creative, amazing, and brilliant, she is no deity. That said, I think people are dwelling in a space that is in opposition to the album's message. What I got from it was not there is no hope, but I certainly went there for a minute. Certainly, I went to a place that If Beyonce can be cheated on there is no amount of beautiful, brilliant, or boss I could be to secure the love of the people or person closest to me. I went there. But then, I realized how cruel that was to myself and to Beyonce because that is a form of victim blaming or the blaming of ourselves. Many victims of violence or low self-esteem blame themselves because it maintains a sense of control. We want to believe that there must be something we could do or say to earn love and prove we are worthy. But this is dangerous. This is placing more value in the truths and narratives other's create for you than the one you create for yourself. What is true is black and brown women are personally and politically disrespected and undervalued by society but that means nothing or says nothing about our actual value. This isn't about us. We are revolutionary gifts to this world. What should be drawn from this is not hopelessness but recognizing that the disrespect of black and brown women is historical, political, and a problem that exists outside of us. We are not the problem.

That said, this hopelessness stems from a great fear black women don't often like to talk about because we like to maintain the image that we are strong: the fear of loneliness. Why do we fear loneliness, this state of loss? To be alone does not necessarily mean that we will be lonely, so what do we fear? We fear that we will not be enough for ourselves. Indeed, we have lost faith in heaven buried deep inside of us. There is a heaven in you and you deserve it. The world makes us believe that we are not deserving of love, of heaven. That we are dirt and sin from birth. But we need not prove ourselves to NO ONE. NO BODY. There is a heaven in you. There is a heaven in Me . There is a heaven in us.

Now I may sound like a person not rooted in reality and trying to veer on the side of positivity. I don't care because the truth is no one deserves to have their love betrayed. When I said if Beyonce can't, I meant that Beyonce is beautiful, brilliant, and enough and if Beyonce can't then it really must not be about us. They make us think that if we are the perfect woman, follow the rules white hetero-patriarchy we will be loved. Beyonce is the great southern belle men always say they want. She gave and she catered. She kept it sexy and classy. Jay earned her and still didn't love her deep enough perhaps because he too thought he was undeserving. If we say that there is no hope because Beyonce got cheated on, you are also saying that Beyonce and all our

beautiful black girls will never be enough. Clearly we are not only enough, we are more than enough, so enough, and if it ever existed too much.

So how do we create that heaven? Just as we personally invested in other's stories, passions, and goals we must become personally invested in our own narratives, passions, and interests. Become personally invested in our intellectual and spiritual growth. I refuse to believe this public truth that says I am not deserving of happiness. This society had convinced me and my sisters that we are not enough or legitimate by ourselves which made us fear loneliness. To fear loneliness is to fear that you are either not enough or perhaps we fear that we can not do the impossible and that is create heaven all our own by ourselves. That same heaven and humanity they denied us since birth, since crossing the sea, since raping and pillaging our land. They told us we are not worthy and for the first time I am going to engage in that self-love and trust my own spirit, my own narrative, and radically deny and interrupt the public truth. There is my truth. My truth is that I am the fucking shit and society has simply fallen short of me and my expectations of valuing humanity and empathy. Not the other way around. We must (re)member our ancestors' words and that they willed us here. We are the center of blackness and brownness and people fear what they cannot understand. They cannot understand our beauty, our strength, and something else I cannot describe encompassed by our spiritual intuition. Terrified, they try to kill us. Not today, Satan, not today. God has a different plan for me.

Sharing My Wars: Discussion

In this section, I want to engage in two conversations. First, I want to examine the deep and emotional ways in which I negotiate being a black feminist/womanist committed to loving blackness, black folk, and myself. Second, I want to interrogate how my attempt at being superwoman as maintaining and valorizing strong black women.

With the blue lights turn down on my computer, so I can sleep later on, I ponder why discussing colorism is like jumping into double dutch. Although I credit great mentors for helping me begin to theorize racism overlaid with sexism early in my undergraduate career, gendered colorism is still met with unique exhaustion. I, too, meet it with hesitation. Particularly on this isolated, white, hetero-patriarchal campus, the discussion scratches old scars. However, I argue those scars aren't healing precisely because I am not talking and not being fully vulnerable about how gendered colorism operates in life.

Truth is I am hurt. As much as I centered men in my growing understanding of colorism and love, perhaps that is because I have most often confronted colorism with men. I have also been taught that my existence as black woman would only and could only be validated by black men. Confusing desire with love, I wanted one or the other to steer away a dark hopelessness settle somewhere in mind. Unfortunately, I have not fully comprehended that where men are in their development on this campus coupled with the lack of available and accessible role models

precludes them from knowing what love is or the kind of love I need. Love as in responsibility, care, affection, honesty, commitment, trust, with the sharing of intellectual growth and the sharing of spiritual growth would never require I earn it through superficial means or prove myself worthy. But I settle for desire every time. However, the larger question is why engaging in a conversation about colorism and black love inclusive of self-love is so difficult.

I struggled with gendered colorism in being able to name it since sophomore year when I vigilantly embarked on the journey of loving blackness. Unfortunately as I grew to love blackness, as a cisgender heterosexual woman, I wanted to intimately share that love of blackness with someone. In writing, this I didn't consider this scholarly work because I, too, thought I sounded pathetic. After researching colorism and black love, I still couldn't understand why I couldn't just let this go and love myself in my commitment to black self-love. I feared that I was just justifying whining about my experiences and self-hatred where I transferred my anger to other people as distractions. As I said before I asked myself why were my lighter skinned friends desired and met with more honey or compassion than myself. However, these questions were predicated upon the assumption that love has to be earned, particularly earned through adhering to Eurocentric standards of beauty and belonging. Often, I feel misunderstood or alone in my understanding of how much colorism, not being desirable, and not being greeted with as much compassion as others, or not being seen as feminine or 'woman' hurts. Additionally, I don't feel like anyone trusts me or is committed to me perhaps because I am indecisive and I am not perfect. However, those I know who are decisive and exude a strong image in life sacrificed the care and keeping of themselves, mostly sleep.

I don't know how to love and care for myself on my own but I also don't understand why I felt as if I should have to learn all on my own. In trying to engage this question with my peers, I am met with confusion and disbelief, thus adding to the idea that my emotions, loneliness, and feelings are singular. The only thing that saves me is reminding myself that I am not alone and my belief in God, in that I must believe that there is something bigger than me. I thought that desire could fill what I could name only as loneliness. That is a foundation of the black church because every sermon in some way shape or form encourages you to have and keep faith because we all know life will knock you down harder and harder and harder each time. But we don't want to say the words or name it, so I will. I am lonely. I feel alone. I have plenty of friends who love me. And despite having two supportive and loving parents and friends I believe care about

me, I could never bare to tell them that still their love wasn't enough to cast away the emptiness I felt inside at times. The hardest thing for me to say or *admit* still is that I feel lonely.

So as a researcher, I explored what does black feminism say about loneliness. Although not much research and discussion on the intersection of black mental health, colorism, and love has emerged from academia, particularly with a black feminist lens, so many narrative blogs exist in the public sphere that suggest that many folks are in fact, *going through it* regarding loneliness and we are very tired. Without question, this discovery comforted me because now I could see that I am not alone in feeling lonely. However, a common theme I observed was that so many black women structured this discourse on loneliness as a confession and as something they had to *admit*. This observation made me question why black women felt like they had to confess loneliness. In conversation with black love, black self-love, and gendered colorism, a system of privileging I believe exacerbates feelings of loneliness in that it attacks self-esteem and positive self-concept particularly for darker-skinned black women, I want to know why *I* feel guilty. Gendered colorism, a type of violence, isn't all in my head. Research shows that the closer you are to whiteness the more desirable you are perceived and can exchange that beauty for economic and social capital. So why am I confessing that such a system hurts? I argue that the main reason I would feel like I had to confess or admit loneliness is because I have been made to feel ashamed of loneliness. How has shame operated in my life in this regard and why do I think that talking about black love or the lack thereof and gendered colorism is pathetic when it is a reality and a recurring social phenomenon worth studying? Why couldn't I say *no I don't love myself and I want to know why and how?*

Although many people cross-racially feel lonely or depressed at times, black women are uniquely affected by the controlling images of the strong black woman trope and the larger context of the silence on mental health in black communities. In other words, there is a connection between Black women's health and sense of love and my hesitancy to have these difficult conversations. When discussing loneliness, Jouelzy (2014) speaks about letting insecurities go and her hesitancy to expose vulnerability, yet understands that this feeling of loneliness, a state of loss is something she can no longer deny.

No doubt, I think that by denying what hurts me and not exposing my vulnerability, I am attempting to maintain the image of a strong black woman. Perhaps I feel like the only way I can earn a seat at the table, earn respect, and earn love is to prove I am strong and remain devoid of

emotion. But many times I fail. Although I am validated and not completely denied, when I fail, I am often met with silence or told in convoluted ways that I need to love myself first before I can love others or have others love me. This is true, but dismissive. With that in mind, I am tired of hearing that you need to learn to love yourself before you love anyone else despite its truth. So although women of color may admit the validity of the pain, some don't want to delve too deep, which makes me think that I am the only one struggling with these political and historical issues. These discussions make me feel as if everyone else has moved on from this violence. Consequently, the cycle of internalized violence like racism, sexism, and colorism is perpetuated because there is no one willing to publicly wiling to affirm or validate the emotional violence systems of power perpetrate.

I know for some others being able to understand the history of gendered colorism and other forms of violence while also theorizing allows for them to heal. And yet, I have done all this research and still feel unsatisfied. I am unsatisfied and angry about my lack of agency and my inability to control my destiny regarding gendered colorism and being desired, loved, and respected. The lack of control leaves me hopeless and uncomfortably helpless. A state of being or feeling some black folks might label as victimization. This is a narrow view of a victim. Indeed, it is also a narrow view of a survivor that is forced into the box of 'hero' because no one likes sad stories. Society likes survivors. Society likes those who get back up again, who keep faith. However, I think a way in which I love myself is by being vulnerable and "getting all in my feelings" as a way in which to validate my story and narrative. But by being told the same thing over and over without actual discussion, I feel rejected all over again, which causes me to retreat once more. I interpret the lack of discussion and coupling "being in all in my feelings" with "annoying" as vulnerability not being a valued quality in circles that purport humanity and emotions.

While white women's tears are normalized, black women's tears make people uncomfortable. Although white heteropatriarchy violates all women, it protects white femininity inclusive of those who appear closer to whiteness. White women's tears are met with compassion and comfort, but because black women do not occupy the space of woman or human, our femininity is not protected and is considered deviant. White heteropatriarchy does not have construction for black femininity and considers black women sexual animal objects that are "unrapeable." However, white heteropatriarchy did construct the strong black woman trope

in having us work physically strenuous tasks dawn till dusk alongside men. I posit that vulnerability, is not included in the construction of black women's femininity, particularly for darker skinned women where our bodies are "defeminized" and we are coded as savage irrational creatures not capable of emotion or humanity. I have worked to maintain this trope to earn a seat at the table and be respected, but now realize it just simply isn't helpful. I was taught to value strength and independence as well as valorize the hero narratives. Indeed, I remember being very discomforted by my own mother's tears unsure of what to do. So then, I start thinking that perhaps I should push through my shame of being emotional in front of mentees and women of color. The fact is I won't always have that support and it would be unwise for me to trust just anyone with my truth only to have my truth marked weakness and be unheard and misunderstood. I am not asserting that I will not speak at all, however, I will reserve my truth for a select few that trust me and I trust them in love.

Subsequently, I posit that by trying to maintain the strong black woman image we make it harder for younger generations to name their scars and heal. They will receive the message that vulnerability is not supported and as result, bottle up those emotions or hide them. Again I cannot extrapolate, so I will say that I felt I was alone in my hurt because every time I brought it up people would automatically point me to self-love. Specifically, when I bring up Colorism with women of color, I am first validated in its existence and its pervasiveness on this campus. But when I really just want to cry and admit I'm lonely, I hold back in fear that I will be accused of too emotional or weak. There are times when I feel more alone trying to express myself with women of color because when I do "get all in my feelings" or become emotional, I am dismissively asked "Aidan, what are *you* going through" with sarcasm or exhausted sighs. Such a question again makes me feel like I am the only one contemplating what is hurting me and why. I am isolated in my cyclical thinking and not over being rendered invisible or being utterly disrespected.

The culture of the strong black woman trope and the ways in which it is reified and reinscribed is dangerous. There is a pattern in that by not discussing these issues in public, we allow others to believe their struggles are singular and that they must figure it out on their own. When left alone, we are made to feel insane. But I'm not insane or crazy. I have to admit that perhaps I, too am adding to the deaths of siblings as they struggle to "figure it out" and instead take themselves out. In conversation the black feminist notions of healing needed to reconcile

with myself, with my siblings, and society, I needed to forgive myself for not having it “all together” and realize that not only does no one have it all together, there is beauty in the broken and breaking. I love myself more now that I have put onto the page my negotiations and tensions with systems of power that are trying to kill me. Most of all, even though I knew transferring anger was a distraction from larger systemic issues, I still had to forgive my brothers and myself. I recognize now, that I am not healing because I am not talking. I have to learn to somehow find tangible ways to value and make my story visible. Everyone is not going to be ready and willing grapple with vulnerability, insecurity, and emotion. Some also don't have the luxury. Indeed, we all have lives to live. But I know I can no longer deny my humanity. I am a human being human and that is okay. Undoubtedly this is a journey of self-love.

Negotiating Black Feminism, Black Romantic Love, and Self-Love

Before I talk about how I negotiate my black feminism with loving black men, I have to first talk about loving myself. I imagine loving myself would mean trusting my voice, and not having so many regrets. I imagine I wouldn't be afraid to be bold about how I present myself. I wouldn't feel insecure about being perfectly imperfect. I have buried my self-worth in other people who do not love me. In other words, I have attached more meaning to the truths and the stories people create for me than the one I create for myself. I give more meaning to their power over me where power is the ability to structure the narratives of others. Yes, sometimes I feel those narratives were the ones that mattered because gendered colorism among other systems are realities. But my attachment to these narratives is predicated upon the assumption that I can earn my worth and I can earn love. I believed in the fallacy that I would receive what I give. If I give love, I will receive love. This is a fallacy also predicated on the assumption that the world is just. The problem is I don't trust myself to do the impossible, the impossible being to influence my own narrative and question if it will be enough to sustain me. But perhaps I am too much and live in fear of my potential. Self-love would begin with trusting that I can do the impossible and that I will be enough.

There was a time in my life when I found it easier to believe that in the superficial ways of achieving beauty and femininity that society laid out for me in magazines. I thought if I just did what the media said, society would make good on their promise and I would be equally perceived as beautiful. The reality is that there are power dynamics at play that have nothing to

do with my actual beauty that I cannot control. Since Beauty and femininity were never made for me, it could have never been promised to me. My femininity, my body, my innocence is not considered or protected by white-hetero patriarchy. Unfortunately, I think my difficulty letting this go is because I don't have control over the solution and I know that racism overlaid with sexism is not going away anytime soon. What feeds into my loneliness is the reality of hopelessness. Diane Ciccone said during her Real Talk that there were times where she doesn't have hope, but she keeps coming back for young women of color. I feel the same.

As a black feminist committed to the movement towards the eradication of all oppressions, I always think what we need as black folk decentering whiteness is a conversation and time to share in our brokenness. For this reason, I mistakenly vested my time in loving black men think that was the only solution. But in the many times I facilitated conversations between black men and black women, disconnection still remained when approaching the topic of gendered colorism. Because gendered colorism is a topic that asks for vulnerability, acknowledgment of the ways in which we reify racist and sexist images in our daily lives, and maturity, we often get nowhere. The complexities of gendered colorism are a discussion that needs to happen perhaps in gendered caucuses or just organically. Forcing the conversation when folks are not mature enough to hear or want to hear is a waste of energy and time. Also, I must consider that people choose not to see me or hear me, which is something I cannot control.

With that in my mind, although my black feminism is committed to love and loving my black folk, my womanism must also be grounded and committed to my mental health. Just as Adrian chose himself, I have to learn how to choose me. I must vigilantly and actively decenter white-heteropatriarchy along with black men as it has constructed my narrative of womanhood in my life. I am not asserting that I am forsaking black men, but rather decentering them as my root of validation. Some will say that theorizing in womanism is what is contributing to the brokenness in black communities. But I think for the first time, as much I as I want to believe I can love myself and black folk and black men equally, I have realized that loving both equally is something I cannot do that right now. I have to be fully invested in me, which is a privilege. I am tired of trying to prove my worth. What I realize now, is although white-heteropatriarchy can never dictate my actual worth, I will never be perceived as worthy to white hetero-patriarchy and black men no matter what I do and no matter how much love I give. Through the white hetero-patriarchal lens, I am body and object and there is no place for my narrative. Audre Lorde might

say that these sentiments exhibit separatist attitudes rooted in fear that things won't change and activism should be rooted in hope and love. Today, I will admit that I am not an activist or an organizer and have yet to learn how to be a human being at 22 years-old. I do want to share love and wisdom. However, my humanity and my worth is no longer is not up for debate. I have facilitated multiple organized conversations making space for black women, black men, and black folk, but not truly myself. Unfortunately, a real conversation cannot be had when one party or another's humanity is considered debatable. So as much as people will say womanism is the division, I think those who say black women radically loving themselves when non one else would and embracing our humanity is what divides black folk.

So how do I love myself, my black self, and the same black self that society slanders, misunderstands, dehumanizes, and disrespects? When my voice and story carries no value for anyone else, I must carry that value for me. How do I love that same black self? How do I love that same black self that people act as if they love by loving my creativity and intelligence just not on my black skin. I love my blackness. That is not the problem. I want to love my spirit and creativity and get out of the habit of seeking visibility in a world that will never see me. That is the reality. I started out by centering black romantic love. And this notion of love is constantly being shattered by colorism, infidelity, racism, and capitalism. So how do I decenter these societal pressures in my understanding of myself? Audre Lorde (1984) tells me that I must study how to be tender and gentle with myself and my past. This would mean seeing my mistakes as puzzle pieces to a complete picture. I draw from Lorde that I must let go of those that do not add to my existence and are not invested in safeguarding my humanity politically and emotionally.

This journey needs further research that will present many challenges. I forgot what I wanted, who I wanted to be, and never quite shaped an answer for the love I deserved, so finding the answers to these question remain my mission.

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