

Introduction

A Half-Told Tale of Black Womanhood

It is not that Black women have not been and are not strong; it is simply that this is only a part of our story, a dimension, just as the suffering is another dimension—one that has been most unnoticed and unattended to.

—bell hooks, *Talking Back*

The defining quality of Black womanhood is strength. As a reference to tireless, deeply caring, and seemingly invulnerable women, the claim of strength forwards a compelling story of perseverance. Critical figures in this narrative include prominent social activists of the last two centuries, such as Sojourner Truth¹ and Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks. Each is invoked and revered for embodying a courageous, unselfish commitment to the protection and enfranchisement of the dispossessed. As an account, however, the persuasiveness of strength is not limited to such historical exemplars. Also noted are family members and intimates. Although managing lives of hard, unremunerated, and often low-status work, such mothers and grandmothers have never—as the story goes—attenuated their feminine commitments to the men and children in their lives. Like women in more privileged and protected circumstances, they, too, have been responsible and respectable. This widely accepted tale of who Black women really are also

draws us to the attitudes of friends, coworkers, and celebrities who carry themselves with determination and a convincing sense of being “phenomenal” (Angelou 2000) women regardless of their portrayal and treatment by others. In short, strength advances a virtuous claim about any Black woman whose efforts and emotional responses defy common beliefs about what is humanly possible amidst adversity.

And herein lies the problem. Because the idea of strength *appears* to honestly reflect Black women’s extensive work and family demands, as well as their accomplishments under far from favorable social conditions, the concept *seems* to provide a simple and in fact honorable recognition of their lives. However, appearances are often deceiving, and much of the acclaim that the concept of strength provides for Black women is undermined by what I argue is its real function: to defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring Black women’s experiences of suffering, acts of desperation, and anger.

As bell hooks (1989, 153) suggests in the epigraph, strength is a half-told tale. Within this incomplete narrative, “most unnoticed and unattended to” have been Black women’s human vulnerabilities. Swept under this cover story are what Black women experience disproportionately—disparagements and violations of their minds and bodies, foreclosed opportunities to experience full citizenship, and social responsibilities that fall to them as people of color, who are women, and too often also poor (see, for example, Duffy 2007; Richie 1995; Roberts 1997; Williams 2002). In a society woven from resilient threads of sexism, racism, and class exploitation, strong Black women occupy a particular discursive and material space. They are required to be, as Zora Neale Hurston (1937, 14) famously described, “de mule[s] uh de world.” Their specific function in the script of American social relations—distinct from the roles of other race–gender groups—has been to take on the burdens and complete the tasks that enable society as we know it to continue.

Strength is a “mystique” (Friedan [1963]1983). It derives from the American fascination with self-made personalities and a structurally transcendent, victorious individualism. Thus, strong Black women are important characters in a redemptive narrative or “sincere fiction” (Vera, Feagin, and Gordon 1995) of race, gender, and class relations. As “invented greats” (Irvin Painter 1996), strong Black women embody precisely those qualities that inspire a grossly simplified and thereby sentimental statement about American social reality. To assert the idea of strong Black women during slavery, segregation, or contemporary institutional racism and intra-racial sexism is to maintain a reassuring conviction: that personal actions and agency trump all manner of social abuses. Therefore, the presence of “strong Black women” soothes many a conscience that could be troubled by the material conditions forced upon such persons and the toll of organized injustice on their humanity. In other words, strong Black women do not simply exist, they *play* critical roles in the societal imagination and in social life. It is therefore questionable whether we can afford to live without the reassurance, comfort, and hard work they are invoked to provide. If such persons did not exist, it seems there would be much motivation to create them and maintain their presence among us.

Listening Beyond Appearances

Moving away from appearances and expectations about “strong Black women” to what Black women say for and about themselves can bring a markedly different image of strength to the fore. Crystal² is a thirty-six-year-old, fashionably dressed, attractive mother of two school-age sons. Pursuing her undergraduate degree at an urban university, she in many ways is a strong Black woman—a single parent devoted to her children and working to provide a more secure existence for her family. In my interview with her, I am struck by her forthcoming manner as we talk about her

experiences of womanhood: She appears certain in her views and comfortable with herself.

However, when I ask her directly about the concept of “the strong Black woman,” what it means to her, and how she has encountered it in her life, I become aware of an underground that is rarely allowed to surface.

And a lot of people tell me that [I’m strong]. Like when my mom passed, I didn’t cry [voice quivering]. And, one of my brothers said that, “I’ve never seen her cry.” . . . I lost my husband . . . Well, it’s been ten years ago. I haven’t been married [since]. And my mom said that she was worried about me at first, but she see I’m doing fine. And I noticed my family would, when he first passed, they would be looking at me and . . . I’d turn around and say, “What are you lookin’ at me for?” [said quickly in a high-pitched, exasperated voice]. You know, everybody’s trying to figure me out. . . . And maybe they think that I’m keeping everything under control, so I’m a strong person, despite *whatever*.³ Even though deep down inside, you don’t be feeling that way. You be feeling like life is just *biting you up* or something

Through inflections in her voice and the tears she begins to shed, Crystal expresses a range of emotions that she does not characteristically reveal, even to family: deep sadness over the passing of her mother, continued grief over the loss of her husband, and frustration over the ongoing difficulties in her life.

Crystal also refers to a “deep down inside.” In this space carefully guarded from view, Crystal records recurring instances in which she has needed but failed to receive support and encouragement: “Sometimes, I want to be like, you know, patted on the shoulder or something. . . . Sometimes, I’ll be like, ‘Damn, my life is not so great. I’m having a hard time. . . .’” From this hidden van-

tage point, she narrates a counter to strength and provides a commentary on the costs of adhering to the mandate that as a Black woman, “I can handle anything.” Feeling and needing more than a “strong Black woman” should, Crystal must contain what she is not permitted to reveal.

Despite thwarting her desires to be assisted and nurtured, appearing strong is critically important to Crystal. Her self-presentation as a “strong Black woman” is a well-practiced strategy for personal esteem and protection.

I hide my emotions a lot. So I think when people *see* you doing good from outside, they think you’re a strong person. . . . I think I *like* the idea when people see me as a strong person, and not a weak person. I don’t know why. It just makes me feel good. It’s, it’s crazy. . . . Because it’s like, I *want* people to look at me as a person that I *know* I can go to Crystal and get what I want, but at the same time, I really want them to leave me the hell alone. So I don’t know. You know, it’s like, I don’t want them to say, “Well, I know she doesn’t have it.” I want them to know, “Yes, she *does*.” But at the same time, I don’t want them to ask [chuckle].

Embracing the idea of strength brings Crystal a level of distinction. She becomes a capable person, someone who can reliably provide for others’ emotional and financial needs. However, this virtue also leaves her with a set of irreconcilable oppositions out of which she must live her life: She cannot be both strong and have needs of her own; she cannot share what is going on “deep down inside” and retain the esteem of those around her; and she cannot take care of others and expect reciprocation. Such is the dilemma of strength—to choose appearances and remain unknown to other people, or to choose truth and risk being disregarded by them. Crystal selects what many other Black women see as the lesser peril: She invests in the appearance of her invulnerability,

other-directedness, and lack of needs, and hopes that despite being taken in by the performance, others will somehow “leave me the hell alone” and not make such demands of her.

Crystal’s experiences of being perceived as stronger—that is, more able and less vulnerable—than she is are far from singular. Black women commonly face such expectations and participate in similar mismatches between self-assessments and outward self-presentations. For Crystal, maintaining the illusion of her strength has relational costs, affecting her ability to experience recognition and mutuality among those closest to her. For many other women like Sondra, a married mother in her forties, the costs are embodied and compromise their physical and emotional wellness.

I just think that, we’re always, on the surface saying, “Okay, yup, I’ll do it. I’ll do it.” And then in our rooms by ourselves, we’re like, “How the *hell* am I going to do it,” you know? But you figure out a way, but then, you don’t let those feelings *out* to anybody, so, eventually, it’s just a time bomb waiting to go off. So, and the heart attack rate’s high in the Black community.

Sondra intimately knows what Black women experience and must manage in their lives precisely because they are perceived as strong. From this knowledge, she also contests prevailing medical views of distresses, such as heart disease, as the consequences of genetics or lifestyle. Rather she insists that a largely normalized and highly problematic social backdrop exists to such health conditions: the compromised and exploitative material and relational life circumstances Black women endure in the name of their strength. Continually agreeing to numerous labor-intensive tasks, having no one in whom to confide, and suppressing emotions of doubt, anger, and frustration are regular dimensions of Black women’s experience of strength. And, like Crystal, Sondra distinguishes between “surface” behavior to appear strong, and what happens out of sight, “in our

rooms by ourselves.” Such a split in consciousness reflects the extensive accommodations utilized by Black women to prevent discrepant emotions from becoming evident. However, in the process of keeping up the appearance of strength, Black women’s bodies become repositories for the thoughts, feelings, and realities that contradict the one-dimensional view of them as unflaggingly capable and ever resilient.

As Crystal and Sondra describe, the word *strength* is both a social expectation and a personal strategy. As a demand, strength requires that Black women act as if they were invulnerable to abuse; and in adopting strength as a self-protective strategy, Black women present themselves as capable of weathering all manner of adversity. In other words, many Black women fight strength with strength: They manage unfair claims as though such were legitimate. However, on the other side of such categorical expectations are enforced silences. Invocations and practices of strength overlook the fact that Black women are subordinated within race, class, and gender hierarchies; that abuses both material and relational occur given such entrenched structural imbalances in power; and that many Black women respond to such duress through their bodies.

A Voice-Centered Framework

Oppression within the United States is not only a material reality, but a psychologically invasive practice. Subordinated groups are encouraged to embrace social lies as their own reality—that is, to “become wedded to what within ourselves we know is a false story” (Gilligan 2006, 59). Such lies or discourses are frameworks of beliefs generated by those with the power to define reality for others. As hegemonic tools, they are used to infuse psyches and social practices with particular meanings directed toward the legitimation of an unjust social order. Such commonsense ideas attempt to secure individuals’ active consent by encouraging them to

deem noncompliant views—their “deep down inside[s]”—as deviant, unreliable, and therefore discreditable. However, as a growing body of research reveals, the psyche—or what post-structuralists refer to as our subjectivity—is capable of being a resistant space.

Despite the existence of discourses and social pressure to conform to the identities and beliefs that inhere in them, we are not fully determined by those expectations. As post-structuralist scholar Chris Weedon ([1989]1997, 109) explains, subjectivity is a contested and vital site for both social control and social transformation.

Subjectivity works most efficiently for the established hierarchy of power relations in a society when the subject position, which the individual assumes within a particular discourse, is fully identified by the individual with her interests. Where there is a space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest, a resistance to that subject position is produced. . . . The discursive constitution of subjects, both compliant and resistant, is part of a wider social play for power.

Our subjectivity contains multiple, shifting, and contradictory stances for several reasons. Conflicts between what we should do according to these varied discourses can engage our cognitive ability to wonder about possible options. Furthermore, our lived experiences offer us opportunities for building knowledge from the ground up and not only from the imposition of discourse-driven order. Thus, included in our psyches is the presence of widely accepted points of view that places us in good stead with others, as well as our individual attempts at meaning-making that fail to fall neatly within such conventions. Importantly, then, our subjectivity both conforms to as well as challenges the parameters set by our social settings.

Language is a critical venue for the empirical exploration of subjectivity. “Voices” or ways of meaning-making are identifiable

by the degree to which they carry forward conventional beliefs or discourses.⁴ Voice-centered (rather than discourse-focused) research highlights the complexity of subjectivity. Attending to the overlooked and distorted experiences of women, voice-centered inquiry has sought to access and understand a central dynamic: the distinctions between cultural understandings of women or how they are *supposed* to think, feel, and act, and the perspectives or voices of individual women that are relatively “free from second thoughts and instant revision” (Gilligan 2003, 25). As Dorothy Smith (1987, 107) argues, to focus on women’s voices rather than prevailing social discourses is a subversive act of “creat[ing] the space for an absent subject.” It is also an intentional attempt to access the “subjugated knowledge” (Hill Collins 2000, 251) that oppressed groups and individuals create in order to sustain themselves in situations of inequity.

Drawing on her work with teenage girls, Lyn Mikel Brown (1998, 36) describes how thought and behavior, while strongly patterned by discourses, are not fixed:

[The girls] struggle with, critique, and resist what passes as feminine expression and behavior, *even as* they come to speak through culturally sanctioned, patriarchal voices of femininity, and publicly perform, at times even judge other girls, along the same narrow standards.

Listening to such girls over time and carefully examining their talk reveals a general principle. In the face of multiple social discourses, we can feel and speak consent. We can also engage in surface conformity, consciously “ventriloquating” (Brown 1998) words and performing actions of acceptability. Lastly, we can outwardly resist expectations. In other words, speech and behavior have the potential to reflect as well as critique and undermine “the hegemony of various available and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values” (Brown 1998, 106). Consequently,

attention to both voices and discourses in the speech of interviewees places in relief ongoing and disputed processes of social control. Such critical activity, however, can escape scrutiny when the investigative focus is only on behavior or when speech is interpreted as though it were the carrier of flat, self-evident utterances. Furthermore, by attending to the meaning-making of individuals, voice-centeredness retains a sensitivity to the diversity of responses evident as people engage with the discourses and material conditions of disenfranchisement.

The Listening Guide

Out of voice-centered concerns regarding how subordination impacts the subjectivity of women has emerged a particular empirical tool, the Listening Guide.⁵ Described as a simultaneously feminist, literary, and clinical method (Brown and Gilligan 1992), the Listening Guide conceives of the interview situation as an opportunity to elicit multilayered texts of human social experience. As Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992, 23–24) summarize from their development and use of the Guide to study the adolescent experiences of girls:

Our Listener's Guide . . . is responsive to the harmonics of psychic life . . . the polyphonic nature of any utterance, and the symbolic nature not only of what is said but also what is *not* said. We know that women, in particular, often speak in indirect discourse, in voices deeply encoded, deliberately or unwittingly opaque. . . . Therefore, our Listener's Guide—as well as being a relational method, responsive to different voices—is also a feminist method, concerned particularly with the reality of men's power at this time in history and its effects on girls and women as speakers and listeners, as knowers and actors in the world.

The Guide regards speech as a unique portal into an individual's participation in social processes. As such, it carefully examines the thoughts people convey, the manner through which they express these views, and the often layered and contradictory meanings involved in their accounts of social reality. The Guide listens for, but more importantly, *past* social discourses to access a distinction that people often make to themselves—between what they “think” as opposed to what they “*really* think” (Gilligan 1990, 4). Thus, use of the Guide approaches interviewees' utterances as texts with both manifest and more latent content, the latter often existing beyond the sanction of cultural prescription (Anderson and Crowley Jack 1991). And it is the interviewer's responsibility to listen for such undertones in speech.

The Listening Guide focuses on the less evident and often more socially disapproved aspects of speech, “the coded or indirect language of girls and women, especially regarding topics . . . that [they] are not supposed to speak of” (Tolman 1994, 326). During the interview sessions, it directs researchers to adopt a stance of nonjudgmental responsiveness toward the words of the other person. Throughout analysis, it insists on multiple readings of interview text focused on different aspects of the psyche—social discourses, references to self, and distinct forms of meaning-making in the face of such discourses. Because it draws explicit attention to the psyche's layered constitution through discourses and voices, the Guide makes evident the assemblage of conforming and transgressive thoughts and behaviors that constitute a person's subjectivity (Gilligan et al. 2003).

A Voice-Centered Project: Rationale and Methods

At its core, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* is the product of listening. Because of the utility of strength claims to a range of race-gender

groups seeking to avoid a confrontation with oppressive realities, assertions and images about Black women need not be truthful ones. In order to move beyond such myth-making to an examination of lived realities, *Behind the Mask* focuses on the voices of fifty-eight Black women, and their discussions of what strength means to them. It traces how a discourse of strength has been constructed in society, and how as a strategy of womanhood it is introduced to Black girls through their mothers and women kin. *Behind the Mask* investigates how both the expectations and the strategy of strength envelope Black women in silence, stoicism, and ongoing struggle, and how maintaining these processes impacts them body and mind.

In the five-year period of 2001–2006, I engaged in an exploratory study of Black womanhood.⁶ I recruited participants through flyers, social and professional networks, and word-of-mouth. The women who spoke with me included nontraditional college students enrolled in an open-admissions university and an urban women's college, members of a loose friendship circle in a government agency, and individuals I encountered in my life as a Black woman and an academic. Whether introduced to the project by posters, key informants, or personal invitation, most of the women predicated their agreement to participate on having knowledge of me. That is, their willingness to reveal aspects of their lives hinged on knowing who I was—that I was an acquaintance of someone they trusted, a professor they had heard about, someone they had met personally, or that I, too, was a Black woman.

Within the interviews, many women stated that the opportunity to focus on their womanhood was generally a novel and fruitful experience, one which they described as cathartic. Given the documented unease of Black women with questioning their strength or having challenged this seemingly unassailable aspect of their personhood (Boyd 1998; Dorsey 2002; hooks 1993; Shorter-Gooden and Washington 1996), I sought to create a responsive interview space in which they could speak about aspects of what

they knew and experienced without feeling judged as less than strong or other than authentically Black. This approach reflected my desire to have conversations about strength—not as an identity or essential core that defined Black women, but as a framework they encountered, accommodated to, and sometimes resisted.

My interviews with these women were largely individual, but on occasion were undertaken in pairs or small groups. Lasting from thirty minutes to three hours, they varied in terms of length as well as intensity and detail. Adopting the voice-centered feminist practice of seeing the women as my teachers, as those who held the keys to understanding strength, I sought to be a sympathetic witness to their accounts and to listen for multiple standpoints in their narratives of self and society. I opened interviews with a general statement of my concerns about the paucity of research detailing womanhood from the perspectives of Black women. I also acknowledged that I was seeking the women's assistance in gaining insight into their lived experiences. Working from qualities and statements about womanhood that the women had recorded on a short demographic form, I asked them to discuss the salience of these ideas to their lives. The majority of interview time was spent asking follow-up questions to acquire a more nuanced sense of how and why they saw womanhood in particular ways. I also sought their viewpoints on two specific areas of concern—the concept of the “strong Black woman” and the presence of overeating and depression among Black women. In both instances, I was frank about my position as a Black woman and researcher who was trying to determine the relevance of these experiences given the absence of substantive attention to them in the social science literature.

The women interviewed ranged in age from 19 to 67, with a mean of 35.6 years. Included in the sample are five women born and raised in the Caribbean, as well as three who had lived on the African continent.⁷ With regard to socioeconomic status, most of the women could be usefully classified as “newly middle class”

(Hill 2005). That is, their social mobility was recent and often limited to their current households. Like many other middle-class Blacks, they typically worked in majority-white settings while maintaining deep interpersonal and material ties to working-class family and friends (Cole and Omari 2003). Straddling two cultural and social classes provided them with a particular “outsider-within” (Hill Collins 2000) standpoint that promoted their conceptualization of womanhood in relational rather than absolute terms. As a result, the women’s talk of their race, gender, and strength often incorporated their awareness of other constructions of womanhood and were rarely narrow or exclusive discussions of personal experiences. Rather, the women regularly articulated points of convergence and difference between their lives and those of the women with whom they interacted at home, in communities, and at work, and brought to the project a wider context of femininities than might be suggested by their age, race, or class status.

That two-thirds of the women spoke about, through, and most often in conflict with a strength discourse suggests its prominence in, as well as its impact on, their lives. And in the first half of this book, it is their voices that carry the arguments I make about strength. That for the remaining one-third of the women the idea of strength seemed to be an echo of a past or distant expectation, relevant to other women but not applicable to themselves in their current positions and contexts, points to the wrongfulness of using strength as a master template for perceiving and measuring all Black women. It is these women’s experiences, as well as the critiques that the others make about the accuracy of strength as an account of their womanhood, that motivate my efforts not only to document strength, but to identify some other formulations of Black womanhood. Taken together, the accounts of both groups reveal Black womanhood to be an experience more varied than common representations of “strength” allow.

Using the Listening Guide to focus attention on the contours of the discourse of strength and women’s reactions to its imperatives,

I encountered the existence of three voices: accommodation, muted critique, and recognized vulnerability. Associated with their attempts to be regarded as dutiful mothers, partners, and employees, as well as faithful bearers of family traditions, the voice of accommodation reflects Black women's mindfulness of the "shoulds" and "have-tos" in their social worlds. Behavior and thinking are consciously and even willingly altered to conform to the particular expectations impressed upon strong Black women, and to avoid vilification and cultural ostracism as "selfish," "weak," or "white." Evident in Crystal's earlier discussion of strong Black womanhood, her voice of accommodation follows the dictates of strength and draws on the discourse as a reference point for her self-understanding, esteem, and actions.

Although not affecting outward behavior, a second voice of muted critique reflects an unraveling between the discourse of strength and Black women's consciousness. Revealed in talk of spaces akin to Crystal's "deep down inside," this voice privately questions and stands apart from the prescriptions of strength. Women's commitments to the discourse, however, override their growing awareness of the enormous energy involved and costs incurred in appearing strong. As a result, the presence of this voice in their talk rarely interrupts Black women's outward adherence to strength. Nevertheless, by registering the struggles of Black women to keep up the appearance of their strength, the voice of muted critique importantly conveys the existence of often profound, but largely masked, physical and mental distress, including compulsive overeating and depressive episodes.

In contrast to the voices of accommodation and muted critique is the last stance of recognized vulnerability. Through this voice, Black women see and express themselves as multidimensional and developing persons with a variety of human needs and interests. For women speaking in this voice, strength does not exert moral sway over them as a policing regime organizing their perceptions and actions. What the women define as good, important, and

valuable are qualities that incorporate varied aspects of their subjectivity and the actual conditions of their lived experiences. Often generated in response to problems of the mind and body that have debilitated a woman, this voice seeks a way of being that does not lead to the erasure and disintegration of self that many come to associate with strength. In the place of being strong, such women commit to the flexibility and vulnerability of being human. Taken together, the presence of these voices reflects the varied and ongoing influences on Black women's thought and behavior, and the challenges they experience to secure self-respect, health, and social acceptance within a stratified society.

A Personal Note on Strength

Although a woman of African descent, I was not raised with the term "strong Black woman." I first encountered the concept in graduate school, when interacting with a fellow Haitian American classmate who was attempting to raise my spirits after a particularly frustrating day of coursework. Her comfort came in the form of reminding me that I was an "SBW," a strong Black woman, and that I could tap into this virtue and reframe my experience. Rather than focus on my hurt, I could envision myself as the descendant of freedom fighters who had made social progress under much more dire circumstances. I could also dismiss the stinging behaviors of some of the white women by characterizing these classmates as whiny, weak, and having been spoiled by their privilege. In doing so, I could trade in "racialized gender" (Nakano Glenn 1992), following strength's commitment to the opposition of race-gender groups to justify a social order riddled with inequities.⁸

Using the term to refer to myself and reinterpret my world did boost my esteem, for a time. But I found placing myself and others in a narrative whose lines were drawn years before in slavery troubling. Outrage over the lack of progress made in social relations seemed muted under an acceptance that racial tensions and cul-

turally specific and mutually exclusive feminine traits still carried the day. And even if this narrative were an accurate one, what was I to do with lingering senses of hurt and vulnerability? What if I didn't always feel strong? Over time, I found that many of my "strong" Black women friends also struggled to name what pained them—rejection from faculty advisors, the insensitivity of classmates to their particular perspectives on course material, deep wounding by intimate partners, and a general inability of others to see and treat them as human beings. Yet these injuries were routinely concealed by the claim and the expectation that they were "strong enough" to deal with any situation. And I witnessed a disproportionate number of such women stall during parts of the graduate program and in many cases not finish courses of study that they were intellectually very capable of completing. As one told me, unseen by the claim of her strength was that the institution and mistreatment by others had "brought me to my knees."

Since those years, I have come to see strength as a construction of virtuous exceptionality and have puzzled over its origins and effects on Black women. My questioning of strength ties into the indignation I have felt toward the requirement made of people of color and women generally to always rise above the socially orchestrated unfairness placed upon us. As Frank Wu (2003) discusses in his critique of the model minority myth, tales of exceptionality are duplicitous. Widely disseminated accounts of Asian American success are not a tribute to the abilities and achievements of this culturally and economically diverse group, as much as they are a defense of a racialized and class-stratified social order. To the extent that Asian Americans can be touted as able to rise above poverty, language barriers, and exclusion, their "success" can be used to affirm the justness of American society. In the process, the failures of other "unruly" minorities, namely Native Americans and American-born Blacks and Hispanics, can be expeditiously and seemingly fairly attributed to their own internal

or cultural limitations. Because of their ability to deflect attention from a problematic social order, myths about exceptions bolster rather than question entrenched inequitable social relations. These carefully drawn and strategically retold stories of triumph pacify a social conscience that on another level knows that expecting a particular group to always demonstrate its value in terms of superlative achievements is a standard both unnecessary and patently unfair in a democracy. It is at the convergence of expectations of immigrant and Black women's exceptionality that I have come to question under what kinds of social conditions and to what ends exceptionality emerges as a virtue. And as is the focus of this book, I am drawn to explore the real yet often hidden costs these expectations of exceptionality have on those required to be other than human, intrepid and inviolable, and prone to look inward rather than to society to manage social inequity. It is my belief that such exceptions are used to prove rules not of such persons' making and to defend circumstances of dubious benefit to them.

A Road Map

Behind the Mask opens with Chapter 1, "More Than 'the Historical, the Monolithic Me':⁹ Deconstructing Strong Black Womanhood." Drawing together Black feminist scholarship in intersectional theory, cultural studies, and women's history, this chapter introduces strength as a strategic discourse that rearticulates long-standing sexist and racist attempts to subordinate Black women. Beginning with Michele Wallace's seminal text, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* ([1978]1990), the chapter examines critiques of strength generated by Black feminists over the last thirty years. As discussed in the chapter, Wallace's argument that Black women's actual subjectivity exceeded their characterization as strong opened the doors to an interrogation of strength as a controlling image (Hill Collins 2000) rather than a natural identity. In the process, it allowed important questions to be raised about how expectations

of Black women's invulnerability become normalized into strategies of womanhood adopted by individual women, in ways that lend their unwitting support to an oppressive and multiply stratified social order.

Chapter 2, "Living the Lies: Embodying 'Good' Womanhood," draws on an emerging feminist approach to women's distress. Puzzling over the gendering of eating disorders and depressive episodes, this framework suggests that such are physical and emotional expressions of the self-silencing many women undertake to achieve standards of feminine goodness. Drawing connections between this framework and strength, I review a growing autobiographical and clinical literature by Black women experiencing compulsive overeating and depression. I demonstrate how these two distresses reflect an underlying dynamic of denial and the active suppression of strength-discrepant thoughts and realities in the service of maintaining the image of good, that is, "strong" Black womanhood.

Following the theoretical investigations into strength as a discourse of racialized gender and its silencing effects on women's bodies and minds, the next three chapters turn to the interview data. These empirical chapters elaborate a trajectory from normative Black femininity to distress, and from distress toward a wellness grounded in the women's experiential needs. Chapter 3, "Keeping up Appearances: The Performance of Strength," examines the socialization and interactional dynamics that render strength into a centerpiece of Black women's "doing" (West and Zimmerman 1987) of gender. Highlighted are the standards of stoicism, care, and selflessness that Black women encounter from girlhood through adulthood, at home and at work, among intimates and strangers. This chapter also scrutinizes how Black women learn to create and also discredit an internal repository for their vulnerabilities, fears, wants, and angers.

Chapter 4, "Lies Make Us Sick: Embodied Distress Among Strong Black Women," discusses how Black women call upon their

minds and bodies to manage prohibited experiences of “weakness” and “inauthenticity.” This chapter demonstrates how forms of physical and mental distress—particularly overeating and depressive symptoms and episodes—derive from the proscriptions against “strong” Black women revealing their complexity as human beings. Chapter 5, “Coming to Voice: Transcending Strength,” analyzes the social awareness and personal changes that become available to Black women, often in the wake of life-threatening disease or deep emotional harm. When they foreground their actual experiences rather than sociocultural lore about their lives, Black women adopt a strength-critical view of social reality and readily admit their humanity. As a result, they question and resist their characterization as exceptions to the suffering others experience in contexts of oppression. This chapter also explores how such individuals seek alternatives to the examples set by women kin and friends. *Behind the Mask* closes with an epilogue. Entitled “Mules No More, Just ‘Levelly Human’: A Societal Challenge,” this conclusion emphasizes the everyday ways in which people invoke strength and thereby entrench an overarching system of racialized gender. Highlighted is the importance of replacing the lies of strength with an appreciation of Black women as fully human social beings.