Growing 'homeplace' In Critical Service-Learning: An Urban Womanist Pedagogy

Vanessa Lynn Marr
Wayne State University,

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/oa_dissertations

Recommended Citation
GROWING ‘HOMEPLACE’ IN CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING:
AN URBAN WOMANIST PEDAGOGY

by

VANESSA L. MARR

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2014

MAJOR: COMMUNICATION

Approved by:

Co-Advisor Date

Co-Advisor Date
DEDICATION

To the unapologetically hopeful solutionaries of Detroit—

for teaching me a new way to love.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“We must ignite the spirit of Ubuntu: ‘I am what I am because of who we all are.’”

~ Leymah Gbowee, Liberian Peace Activist and Nobel Laureate

When I decided to embark on my journey towards a PhD years ago, I could not have imagined the outpouring of love, encouragement, and support from family and friends that sustained me throughout this process. Whether such support was in the form of a kind word, a hearty nudge, a valuable suggestion, or gas and rent money during the lean times, it is with deep gratitude that I honor you on these pages.

Much love goes out to the passionate community co-teachers in the Detroit service-learning course that planted the seeds for this project. I also wish to express the deepest gratitude to the many rebel citizens who made sure I walked my talk, including Grace Lee Boggs, Kofi Adoma, Mama Sandra and Baba Charles Simmons, Gloria Lowe, Shea Howell, Elena Herrada, and Siobhan Gregory. Thank you for opening your hearts and homes time and again, as well as for giving me a space to grow my soul.

To the four co-participants of this project—Kipanga, Bea, Amaka, and Kasi: I could not have done this work without you. I am blessed beyond words to hear your voices through these pages.

I thank my former students, who enrolled in my courses believing I was the “instructor” but instead taught me far more through their stories and experiences. They continually push me to do what I do inside and outside the classroom.

Heartfelt appreciation goes to my dissertation committee: Karen McDevitt and Donyale Padgett, thank you for believing I had something valuable to contribute through my writing and supporting this project through its completion with your feedback.
Monica White, thank you for those initial meetings at the Bean & Leaf; our conversations regarding Detroit, community-based research, and urban agriculture helped give my research its shape. Pradeep Sopory, many thanks for keeping me on track and making sure those I’s were dotted and T’s crossed to get us to the finish line! Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, I can’t even begin to thank you for opening my eyes to communication education and helping me articulate the “why” behind my teaching and research. Your seminars on critical pedagogy and autoethnography provided a great deal of substance to my publications, conference presentations, and the dissertation itself. Although you were making your own personal and professional transition from Detroit to Carbondale, you were always accessible and gave invaluable feedback on everything I tossed at you. Above all, you reminded me during moments of self-doubt that I deserved this degree and needed to finish with my head held high. For that, I will always be grateful.

Many thanks to Wayne State’s Communication Department faculty and staff who supported me through the years: Mary Garrett, for working closely with me during the dissertation’s earlier iterations and introducing me to rhetorical criticism—your Language of Oppression class was a game-changer for me; Loraleigh Keashly, for epitomizing grace and efficiency while serving as department chair; Angela Windfield, who always knew how to make me laugh; Mary Alleyne, who worked her administrative magic behind the scenes while creating extraordinary art; and Kelly Young, whose Rhetoric, Cultural Studies & Detroit course made me hungry for more.

The development of this project would not have been possible without the support of my sister-friends in the Women’s and Gender Studies Department at Eastern Michigan University: Dyann Logwood, Jessica Kilbourn, Salima Zaman, and Suzanne Gray. I
thank Lisa Klopfer, former interim director of the Nelson Faculty Development Center, for helping me spread my administrative wings at the FDC. I also am grateful to Sylvia Sims-Gray, Lynn Nybell, Rebecca Martusewicz, and Decky Alexander, all of whom provided opportunities for me to bridge theory and practice through student-centered and community-based learning. I wish also to thank everyone in the “Teaching in Context” faculty learning community who understood the importance of placing Detroit in the center of our pedagogy and was not afraid to dig deep.

In addition to my Eastern Michigan “Eagle Pride,” I am fortunate to have dear friends and colleagues at the University of Michigan whose commitment to social justice and education inspires me daily: Denise Galarza Sepúlveda, Evans Young, Ashley Lucas, Luis Sfeir-Younis, Jennifer Myers, Teresa Sanchez-Snell, Tatiana Calixto, Deb Gordon-Gurfinkel, Jill Halpern, Nesha Haniff, Ian Robinson, and Gloria “Doc Glo” Thomas. Thank you for making me feel at home.

I am deeply appreciative for the friends who kept me afloat with healthy doses of humor throughout graduate school. Although there are too many people to list here, I do wish to acknowledge three dear friends in particular—Katrina Newsom, Dale Anderson, and Anke Wolbert—for the countless hours we shared completing degrees and chasing dreams. Your useful research tips and job search advice equipped me with the tools necessary to persevere with clarity of mind and purpose. Thank you, Jeri Schneider, for sharing your garden space and the fruits of our labor. Loving appreciation also goes out to Sylvia Weinberg, for always asking me “How’s the diss coming along?” regardless of how I was feeling in the moment. Thank you, dear friend, for always keeping your door and arms wide open.
This journey began long before this doctoral program, and I wish to thank the following friends and faculty who continue to keep in touch and keep me grounded: Diedra Knox, Charissa Urbano, Tamara Arizola Barrientos, Lisa Barksdale-Shaw, and Katie Livingston. To Janice Wolff and Eric Gardner, my former English professors at Saginaw Valley State University: Thank you for insisting that I go to graduate school and recognize that there was an audience for my work. I believe you now.

If it takes a village to finish a dissertation, then the heart of this village was my immediate family. To my life partner, Dawn Richberg: You were a constant source of stubborn love that helped me keep my eyes on the prize even when those eyes were blinded by tears and fatigue. When I needed you to be the annoying drill sergeant, the radical Black feminist intellectual, or the gentle confidant, you stepped up time and again. I am forever grateful to Spirit for finding a homeplace for us to learn from each other. To my children, Brandon and Jordan: We started on this long road together, and I couldn’t have asked for a better cheering squad! In spite of the sacrifices, you encouraged me to keep going—thank you for loving me through it all. You were the inspiration behind this project as I imagined new ways of exploring a world for future generations. To my Saginaw family—Dad, Nikki, Elroy, Pam, Ronnie, Niecy, and Sqeak: Thank you for supporting and loving me across the miles as only you know how.

Finally, I wish to honor the memory of my beloved mother, Mildred Ezelia Beasley, who transitioned from this life during my doctoral journey but now joins the Ancestors in guiding my steps. She was and continues to be my greatest source of strength. Thank you, Mama, for always making a way out of no way…I still hope I make you proud.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication........................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements............................................................................................................... iii

Chapter 1 – Introduction ......................................................................................................... 1
  Urban Service-Learning in Context ................................................................. 10
  Havin’ Our Say: Placing Womanist Service-Learning Counternarratives........ 13
  Purpose of Study............................................................................................................. 18
  Chapter Overview............................................................................................................. 20

Chapter 2 – Planting Fertile Seeds:
  Placing Womanist Thought within Critical Service-Learning......................... 22
    Critical Theory.............................................................................................................. 22
    Critical Pedagogy......................................................................................................... 24
    Feminist Pedagogy........................................................................................................ 27
    Black Feminist/Womanist Theory.............................................................................. 31
    Womanist Pedagogy...................................................................................................... 36
    Traditional and Critical Service-Learning................................................................. 41
    Detroit as Homeplace: A Womanist Exploration of Urban (Safe) Space.......... 48

Chapter 3 – Creeping the Vines:
  Performing a Rhizomatic Womanist Methodology............................................. 55
    Method ........................................................................................................................... 56
      Ethnographic Case Study......................................................................................... 56
      Why Autoethnography Matters............................................................................. 58
      Crafting the HeART of Ethnographic Interviewing........................................... 61
    Research Process.......................................................................................................... 65
    Data Collection............................................................................................................. 67
Digging In: Rhizomatic Womanist Methodology .................................................. 74
Justification of Research Methods ................................................................. 84
Researcher’s Positionality ............................................................................. 85
Autobiographical Timeline ........................................................................... 87

Chapter 4 – Ditchin’ the Master’s Gardening Tools for Our Own:
An Auto/ethnographic Discussion in Multiple Voices .................................... 90
Lessons from Sankofa: An Introductory Retrospective .................................. 90
ODO NNYEW FIE KWAN: “Love Never Loses Its Way Home” ...................... 97
Positionality + Space = Resistance .............................................................. 97
Learning to Touch the Earth ......................................................................... 103
BI NKA BI: “No One Should Bite the Other” .................................................. 106
Power and Identity: Uprooting Privilege ...................................................... 110
Critical Engagement as Process .................................................................. 115
‘Leave Your Arrogance at Eight Mile Road’:
Challenging Assumptions ............................................................................ 115
BOA ME NA ME MMOA WO: "Help Me and Let Me Help You" ................. 119
Homeplace as Spiritual Refuge .................................................................... 119
Bringing Womanist Praxis to Social Justice Education ................................. 123
Bearing Fruit: Womanist Approaches to Course Design ............................... 134
Environmental Insight .................................................................................. 136
Cultural Representations of Space ............................................................... 138
Reflexive Relationships ............................................................................... 141
Collective Action ......................................................................................... 144
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. (Lorde, 1984, p. 112)

My life’s calling to urban service-learning came completely by accident thanks in part to a group of vociferous homophobic students who, almost through fate, forced me to question the transformative power of critical pedagogy. During my first semester as an adjunct English instructor at a predominantly White community college located between urban and rural mid-Michigan, I got a jarring reality check from my department chair one day as he stopped me in the hallway. It appeared that the aforementioned students were so troubled by the fact that their English instructor identified as openly gay that they took it upon themselves to report this fact to my boss, who in turn took it upon himself to inform me of this “uncomfortable” experience my students were having. While the chair seemed sympathetic towards me (“Some of my closest friends are gay…”), he did not dismiss the students’ collective concern that sitting in a classroom led by a big, Black bulldagger was disruptive and disturbing. The chair’s recommendation was not one that included diversity training for my detractors or a referral to a queer faculty support group for me; instead, the recommendation was for me to leave the region altogether. “You would be better suited in a city like Detroit,” he said, nervously. “Schools down there can handle diversity better than this place can.” I do not recall what I said in response to his suggestion, or if I had said anything at all, but I do remember trembling—not knowing if
I was about to be reprimanded or fired for welcoming personal examples (from my life as well as the lives of my students) to illustrate each lesson. Although the practice of shared narrative was something that many of my reputable colleagues used in their lectures as a means of raising awareness of current events and the social issues relevant to them, my accounts were considered “too risky” (and perhaps too risqué) for students who rarely encountered an African-American woman—homosexual or heterosexual—in front of the classroom. While my boss assured me that my tenuous adjunct position was somewhat secure, he urged me to take his “friendly” suggestion of relocation seriously. Reluctantly, I did.

Six years and 100 miles later, I often think about that afternoon in the hallway whenever I am experiencing a sense of disconnect between social position and place while teaching. In order to make the learning experiences more culturally relevant, I began incorporating service-learning into my courses as a way to help students make stronger connections with the material covered in class, the Detroit neighborhoods surrounding them, and their own lives. Often celebrated as an educational practice that promotes civic engagement, service-learning would provide the impetus I needed to encourage students to examine and reflect upon social inequalities based upon their experiences while working in distressed communities. Upon closer inspection (and introspection), however, I began to realize that the oft-touted potential of this pedagogical orientation also had its share of shortcomings. Many students regarded the projects as nothing more than forced volunteerism designed to help “those people” for a grade. More often than not, I found myself using the community’s struggles to push students to acknowledge their own privilege. Despite having the dream of finding a multicultural
oasis in a city as diverse as Detroit and integrating service-learning as an engaging approach to teaching, I also felt there was a missing element to the experience. Although my pedagogy primarily draws from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970/2000) and his concept of conscientization—the use of community-based education to understand, address, and combat oppression—I was doing a poor job connecting my teaching with the communities we were supposedly “serving.” I was, in essence, assuming the oppressor’s role by rendering community members—especially the under-resourced African-American women who worked alongside me—silent, invisible, and helpless in my quest to bring the classroom to them as a learning tool. The city itself was little more than a rusting backdrop for my myopic democratic vision.

Heralded as a means of building mutually beneficial partnerships between academic and at-large community members (Furco, 2001), service-learning programs and courses have been gaining popularity within U.S. higher education institutions since the 1980s. Interest piqued even more after 2005 when the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching introduced community engagement in its classification system to recognize colleges and universities that institutionalize “engagement with community in [their] identity, culture, and commitments” (Driscoll, 2009, p. 5); by 2010, 268 institutions earned community engagement classification—up from 77 postsecondary schools in 2006 (Campus Compact, 2012). Linking service-learning with the experiential education goals championed by John Dewey and his contemporaries in the early twentieth century, as well as social justice educational endeavors born of the Civil Rights Movement, Butin (2007) argues that this approach “positions education as a key tool for understanding and overturning oppressive conditions and practices in schools and
society” (p. 178). In a communication context, service-learning “presents each act of learning as a resolution of the dialectic between the individual and society,” by which “[e]ach successful resolution enhances both the perspective of the individual and the fabric of society by strengthening the link between the two” (Applegate & Morreale, 1999, p. x). In theory, service-learning is designed to bridge the long-existing gaps separating campus from community, forming lasting connections inside and outside the classroom.

Yet despite the good intentions and positive outcomes promoted by service-learning practitioners as well as the exponential growth of service-learning programs over the past thirty years (Butin, 2007), Butin (2007) notes how the diluted “micro-politics and micro-practices of grand narratives” such as “equality,” “freedom,” and “tolerance” are hampering efforts to advance the goals of service-learning and social justice education (p. 178). If left unchecked, such narratives “may harbor unacknowledged and oppressive racial, classist, and heterosexual norms” that further obscures the relationships between power and knowledge (p. 178). When applied to urban classrooms such as those located in Detroit, such grand narratives intersect with the self-serving objectives that students and faculty incorporate into their educational goals, such as the need to “gain valuable ‘real-world’ experience,” to “give back to others,” and to “help the less fortunate learn from my expertise and experiences.” Rather than collectively and reflectively exploring issues of race and class with the help of those who experience such inequalities inside and outside the urban classroom, service-learning researchers have largely enhanced the dominant feel-good discourse of civic engagement while not subjecting the practice to substantial critique (Butin, 2007; Gilbride-Brown, 2008). Students who are assigned to
work within cities affected by the ravages of racism, classism, and industrialization will not make the crucial connections necessary to facilitate any kind of social change through their efforts. For them, it will be akin to volunteer work designed to merely reward student participants for their deeds but not critically engage them within the racialized, gendered and classed spaces in which they are “servicing,” thus relegating such efforts to “missionary work” that “laps[es] into habits of paternalistic charity and noblesse oblige” (Deans, as quoted in Spigelman, 2004, p. 98). As part of the grand narrative proposed by dominant service-learning discourses, the voices of privileged students and academics are often presented as the only significant “transformative” experiences articulated in these types of courses (for examples, see Droge & Murphy, 1999). As Butin (2003), Butin (2007) and Spigelman (2004) addressed in their critiques of service-learning rhetoric, colorblind and class-neutral discourses have created a weakened educational paradigm built on a weakened, one-sided theoretical framework that fails to give an account of the intersecting complexities associated with urban service-learning and the practices that lead to significant change.

Even more alarming is the absence of community member voices from service-learning narratives, which are often reduced to superficial responses produced through surveys and Likert-scale questionnaires (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Contrary to Applegate and Morreale’s (1999) assertion that service-learning resolves the self/society dialectic, Stoecker and Tryon (2009) argue that contradictions may exist between institutions and community organizations due to an overemphasis on student learning or research and lack of community input altogether. In Community-Based Research and Higher Education (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003),
for example, the voiced frustrations of constituent members reflect the ongoing power imbalance and potentially exploitative nature of community-based academic projects such as service-learning:

> Researchers from the university come in here all the time with their clipboards and pencils, and I’m getting sick of being asked how poor I am. I’m fed up with being treated as a guinea pig. I’m answering more questions from folks like you, and I’m still not seeing any real change around here.

> You guys come in here for a day or two, and then we never hear from you again. Are you really interested in helping us solve some of our problems? Then why don’t you spend more time here and really get to know us?

> You don’t have all the answers. Ask us sometimes about our community and our problems. We’ve been living here and we know a lot. Respect our knowledge. We can teach you a few things. (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003, pp. xviii-xix, italics added)

A deeper area of concern is the lack of diversity prevalent not only in service-learning programs but also within nonprofit organizations that collaborate with service-learning faculty and staff (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Although both nonprofit and postsecondary institutions frequently include the promotion of diversity as part of their mission, these institutions often have staff who overwhelmingly reflect a White middle-class suburban demographic not representative of their target communities (Brooks, 2009; Butin, 2006; Green, 2003; Jackson, 2009; Lin, Schmidt, Tryon, & Stoecker, 2009; Vaccaro, 2009). Due to time constraints among faculty who juggle multiple teaching, research, and service obligations, nonprofit organizations often carry the heaviest burden of placing, training, and evaluating student service-learners—usually without the inclusion of cultural competency education to better prepare academic workers to engage with community members different from themselves (Jones, 2003; Lin et al., 2009). The tensions that could arise as a result of this mismatch contribute to the longstanding debate
regarding the potential harm inflicted upon marginalized communities by well-intentioned agencies that work with academic partners (Bushouse, 2005; Butin, 2003; Butin, 2006). As Cipolle (2010) explains, “Without adequate preparation and knowledge about the populations served, their social and political contexts, and an understanding of discrimination, racism, and classism, students’ service experiences often reinforce stereotypes” indicative of a deficit model that depicts community members and the spaces in which they reside as inferior and in need of rescue (p. 45).

Faculty and service-learning institutions can also reinforce these stereotypes under the guise of multicultural education and “teaching for the greater good.” While attending a regional Campus Compact session dedicated to science education and service-learning, I listened uncomfortably as two presenters—both White male chemistry instructors—spoke of how they had a difficult time convincing (Black) “folks from the hood” to participate in their community vermiculture projects because they were more interested in television than in organic chemistry. As soon as the presenters concluded and began to field questions, my hand shot up. I asked how they went about making the project culturally relevant to community members and what assumptions were they making while depicting members in a negative light. The presenters were honest with their answer: The thought never crossed their mind—the project was intended to bring scientific gardening to the local urban community, not to have “expert” faculty engage with its members directly or include them in the program’s development. While the instructors were willing to entertain my suggestions of adding a cultural/oral-history component to future projects and visiting local Black churches or senior centers to invite
community members to participate, they were reluctant to pursue these ideas due to existing time constraints.

Though I try to be mindful of such oversights in my own service-learning practice, I have to be equally honest about my role in reinforcing stereotypes in the classroom. Far too often have I scrambled to revise a syllabus, haphazardly contact community organizations, and encourage students to “do learning” by getting messy and making mistakes out in the field. But at whose expense was this type of learning being “done”? Because I failed to facilitate a deeper exploration into social oppressions relevant to the communities we entered or provided any context to urban space, many students were dropped into situations that amplified their fears and prejudices. Detroit’s Black residents—especially women—were already spoken for in the minds of students who see caricatures of them in establishment media in the form of unwed mothers, sex workers, and drug abusers. Rather than inviting students to dialogue with community members about their neighborhoods and lives or encouraging them to unpack their own invisible knapsacks of privilege (McIntosh, 1988/2007), I rushed through each unit in hopes that students would at least make the connections on their own and community members would appreciate our contributions. My silence did more harm than good, reinforcing the deep divide between higher education and grassroots community cultures in addition to forms of oppression based on race, gender, class and so forth (Langseth, 2000; Verjee, 2012).

Given these examples, it is little wonder why Stoecker and Tryon (2009) warn that when service-learning programs are poorly implemented, they may “undermine community interests, which may negatively impact the community and undermine
community support” of such programs (p. 8). Displacing urban communities through empty rhetoric is no less detrimental. Citing Bannerji (2000), hooks (2003), and Razack (1998), Verjee (2012) argues that “universities are premised on an ideology of whiteness, patriarchy, and classism as the dominant culture, which functions to colonize, marginalize, and silence racialized students, non-academic staff, and faculty” (p. 1). In a service-learning context, higher-education institutions may also function to colonize and marginalize urban communities of color by targeting neighborhoods for self-serving academic research, using data to enhance institutional resources while denying community members access to resources, and further intensifying power differentials. Service-learning, in its most egregious form, could perpetuate the same systemic injustices its practitioners claim to combat (Henry & Tator, 2010; James, 2010; Verjee, 2012).

Despite the volumes of literature dedicated to both sides of the service-learning dichotomy in relation to diversity, little research has emerged regarding how the intersection of race, gender, and place factors into this dynamic from the perspectives of community members (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Taylor, 2009; Verjee, 2010; Verjee, 2012). O’Grady (2000), Stoecker and Tryon (2009), and Verjee (2012) have identified the primary goal of service-learning as building mutually beneficial partnerships among academic and community members to address social issues and to co-create solutions. Rather than colleges and universities assuming the lead role in addressing and “fixing” such issues through service-learning, “communities must be a central and active partner in leading these efforts” (Verjee, 2012, p. 3). Though such actions will not completely repair the damage caused by decades of institutional injustice against vulnerable
communities, they are crucial to service-learning reforms that are more inclusive and reciprocal as opposed to changes indicative of White critical consciousness that perpetuates an us-versus-them mentality (Cipolle, 2010; d’Arlach, Sánchez, & Feuer, 2009).

Urban Service-Learning in Context

While higher education has had long-existing conflicts with both rural and urban communities with many of the instances described here, this study will focus exclusively on the latter for the following reasons:

- A larger concentration of racially and ethnically diverse populations is generally found on campus and/or in surrounding communities.

- Urban-based service-learning programs often employ dominant narratives to distinguish their institutions as “helping partners” to economically depressed communities in need.

As urban service-learning practitioners continue to develop and promote programs that foster diversity, community enrichment, and student leadership while “most of the curriculum is still grounded within a dominant framework that disappears or erases ‘othered’ world-views” (Verjee, 2012, p. 6), it becomes crucial to examine the ways in which dominant narratives are created from positions of power within higher education. As Enos and Morton (2003) and Verjee (2012) attest, campus-community partnerships are largely based “on views that perceive communities as the domain of problems and institutions as the domain of solutions” (Verjee, 2012, p. 3). Academic institutions are positioned to overpower community partners due to their production of “legitimate”
knowledge from expert faculty as opposed the lived experiences shared within communities (Lin et al., 2009; Verjee, 2012).

The aptly-named Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) provides examples of these distinctions in its 2007 report on USU institutions that “have a responsibility to actively engage and improve their urban environments” by “empowering poor neighborhoods to take ownership” (Center for the City, 2007, pp. 3-4). Of the nineteen colleges and universities profiled in the report, no community organization was credited with initiating any USU-sponsored program; the academic institutions were responsible for engaging the community dialogue, recruiting student volunteers, investing billions of dollars toward urban revitalization (with no mention of community members as stakeholders), and providing basic services to impoverished areas. The Coalition’s agenda is drawn from a motto of a featured USU institution: “Let knowledge serve the city” (p. 3). The hegemonic narratives produced in such documents and in urban service-learning promotional materials reflect the charity model that not only renders academic knowledge as superior but also the driving force designed to rescue inner cities from the ills which plague them.

Urban higher education institutions, as a site of struggle between academic and community cultures, can utilize charity-based service-learning models to “let knowledge serve the city” as a way to exacerbate existing power dynamics (Langseth, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Verjee, 2012). Campuses located in economically depressed neighborhoods are often in a position to direct resources that serve the needs of institutions and their stakeholders, particularly those who provide funding through tuition and grants (d’Arlach et al., 2009). Service-learning research that focuses on the
perspective of community members is still “rare and recent” because it “lacks financial and motivational backing” (d’Arlach et al., 2009, p. 6). When community input is requested, it is usually compiled in university-sponsored reports that more heavily concentrate on the institutions’ contributions than on the collaborative efforts with community partners. Urban-based nonprofit organizations that provide postsecondary institutions access to community members are less likely to report negative comments from their constituents for fear of losing needed funding and non-monetary resources (d’Arlach et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2009; Verjee, 2012). Though service-learning advocates argue that campus-community partnerships must be reciprocal to meet the needs of students, administrators, and community members alike, “The very legitimacy of the university depends on being perceived as having expert, objective, universal knowledge to impart” (d’Arlach et al., 2009, p. 5). As a result, community members’ voices are silenced and their collective visions for neighborhood transformation go unseen.

In an urban service-learning context, such a power imbalance can have wider implications. Because higher education institutions are predominantly White and middle-class with more men in leadership positions, the values espoused by these institutions reflect a dominant worldview that constructs community knowledge and the lived experiences of women of color as inferior (Green, 2003; Verjee, 2012). Racial disparities between urban service-learning classrooms and communities, as well as the long history of institutional racism and sexism in the academy, further legitimate the efforts of universities as the sole purveyors of knowledge, providers of service, and creators of solutions to communities whose members lack the means (or interest) to help themselves (Green, 2006; Lin et al., 2009; Verjee, 2012). As d’Arlach et al. (2009) strongly point
out, “It is easy for the university, financially dependent and behaviorally entrenched in its expert role, to see the community as deficit-based and impose expert solutions” (p. 5). In cities such as Detroit, racial and economic disparities existed decades before the first service-learning programs were developed to combat the city’s many troubles. Drawing from Sugrue (2005), Darden et al. (1987) and Thompson (2001), White (2011) encapsulates the complexities regarding Detroit’s past and present crises as well as their adverse impact on residents:

The recent transformations of the automobile industry, along with the subsequent shrinking of the working and middle classes, have left Detroiters mired in poverty-induced challenges, including reduced city services, poor-quality education, high rates of unemployment, crime, housing foreclosures, and little or no access to healthy food. (p. 14)

The multitude of urban problems creates a wealth of opportunities for universities to develop service-learning initiatives to unilaterally lend expert knowledge to formulate solutions to communities. Popular campus programs such as Alternative Spring Break often provide short-term solutions including tutoring services to underserved youth and neighborhood clean-up efforts as a way to engage students, assist community members, positively promote universities, and “celebrate” diversity. On the other hand, such programs are indicative of the “safe” approach to tackling urban problems rather than uncovering the roots of such problems by taking a social-justice approach that is more critically engaging and mutually transformative (Mitchell, 2008; d’Arlach et al., 2009).

Havin’ Our Say: Placing Womanist Service-Learning Counternarratives

In their critical race analysis of dominant (or master) narratives in education, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) shed light on the unchecked stories that portray conditions
attributed to white privilege as “neutral” and “objective” while distorting, silencing, and/or excluding the stories of people of color—especially impoverished women of color. As a result, implicit assumptions are made based on racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes (Ikemoto, 1997). For example, within the framework of these unchecked, implicit assumptions, White middle-class women who live in Detroit may be potentially perceived as brave, “hip,” and enterprising for supposedly making the choice to reside there, whereas low-income Black women residents are potentially assumed to be there due to a lack of social mobility or a series of “bad choices” (such as drug abuse, single motherhood, or welfare dependency) that force them to live in a “dangerous” city. From such assumptions a correlation is made between Black inner-city communities populated by “welfare moms” and “bad” neighborhoods; all things White and middle-class are seen as “good” and “thriving” (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). Counternarratives, on the other hand, are intended to disrupt dominant discourses constructed to maintain the status quo for groups in positions of power and privilege. Such stories provide an alternative view of the world by elevating the voices of group members who have been historically marginalized and shifting attention to their interpretations of the world. In essence, counternarratives “flip the script” by offering lived stories that challenge negative stereotypes designed to diminish and dehumanize Others.

Such counternarratives could also apply to geographic and cultural space. Contrary to service-learning practitioners who see urban communities like Detroit as “dying” spaces in need of enlightenment or rescue, these spaces could be regarded as sites of resilience as well as struggle. As Wells explains, the public sphere “is not a ‘neutral container’ for students to fill: ‘it has its own vexed construction, its own
possibilities of growth and decay” (qtd. in Coogan, 2006, p. 668). While traditions found within critical pedagogy could be used in urban service-learning to reveal areas of inequality and to engage in projects that work to resolve them, it is important to first challenge assumptions relevant to this approach to experiential education—especially those assumptions shaped by grand narratives such as “helping others help themselves” (Butin, 2005). College campuses juxtaposed to “at-risk” urban communities are themselves at risk of adopting a colonizing mindset in which educators—including critical pedagogues—seek opportunities to “empower” students and communities (Ellsworth, 1994).

Counternarratives force us to listen to the unheard voices and bear witness. Although much as been written about the positive experiences of privileged academic partners who participate in urban service-learning projects, limited research has surfaced regarding how community members have shaped those experiences while they themselves are situated in the center of racial and economic struggle (Butin, 2005; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Haymes, 1995). By teaching a critical pedagogy of place, community partners may engage in what Gruenewald (2003) refers to as decolonization and reinhabitation: the recognition of past causes and injuries through exploitative measures as well as the process of “learning to live well socially and ecologically in places that have been disrupted or injured” (p. 9). As engagement scholars seek new ways to strengthen campus-community partnerships, it becomes imperative to see sites of service-learning from the ground view—that is, from the community member’s perspective.

To explore the role of service-learning through this lens, this dissertation will examine more closely the counternarratives produced by Black women urban gardeners
who engage in service-learning with postsecondary faculty and staff. I focus on this particular group in Detroit because of their deep involvement in grassroots organizing that reflects their sense of self and other community members, as well as their personal and political relationships to urban space (White, 2011). Within the context of urban higher education, this approach to service-learning could be likened to hooks’s (1990) concept of “homeplace,” a site of resistance created by women of color in intimate spaces such as kitchen tables and church basements for the purposes of conducting anti-oppression work, as she illustrates here:

Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (p. 42, emphasis added)

In order to more fully integrate the narratives of Black women community members who co-construct service-learning pedagogical practices, the study will employ a womanist theoretical framework. Originally coined by Walker (1983) in her critically acclaimed book, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, womanism centers on the lived experiences and worldviews of women of color as a means of uplifting all members of society. Situating womanism into urban-based pedagogy takes into account the voices of community members as co-participants in the learning experience and “offers…a methodology for promoting equality and multiple visions and perspectives that parallel Black women's attempts to be and become recognized as human beings and citizens rather than as objects and victims” (Omolade, 1993, p. 31). A womanist approach connects space, identity and discourse not as a means of further problematizing urban-
based education but as a tool to develop proactive teaching and learning. An important goal of this study involves deconstructing dominant discourses through counternarratives by Black women community members, a group traditionally silenced in not only academic and service-learning practice but also in a broader social context within U.S. culture (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1994).

As Floyd-Thomas (2006) suggested in her exploration of womanist ethics, Walker’s original definition can be pedagogically applied through four tenets: radical subjectivity (self-determination through agency), traditional communalism (heterogeneity through community-centeredness), redemptive self-love (holistic embodiment), and critical engagement (liberation from multiple sites of oppression) (pp. 8-11). The need of a pedagogical homeplace through critical service-learning takes on greater significance when urban community partners interact with academic participants while making sense of the spaces that bring them together. I draw on Walker’s definition and Floyd-Thomas’s tenets to posit an urban womanist pedagogy that not only takes into account the intersections of class, race, gender, and space as critical elements of progressive pedagogical practice but also forms a basis of research from which teaching and learning in communication education could be done as a means of facilitating positive social change within an urban context—using resistance as a vehicle for community transformation and empowerment. As more urban universities incorporate service-learning as part of their curricula and as more urban communities seek to work with academics to collectively address problems that continue to persist within inner cities, this study has the potential of further developing a more inclusive service-learning model
in communication studies. Given its emphases on praxis and community, this practical approach is ideally situated within experiential learning models.

**Purpose of Study**

As it continues to be an expanding body of research, critical communication pedagogy can further examine how service-learning is taught as a means to create counterhegemonic discourses within urban academic institutions. While a significant amount of service-learning literature reproduces master narratives based on the favored experiences and outcomes of students and faculty facilitators, there is an emerging body of critical research that challenges such models (see Butin, 2007; Mitchell, 2008). Thus, greater emphasis must be placed on marginalized populations—especially individuals who live in urban spaces rife with social inequalities—who are actively involved in transforming their communities and are actively collaborating with participants in academic service-learning programs. By examining critical service-learning using a womanist theoretical framework, the voices of Black women community members can serve as a pedagogical model rather than an example of a population in need of charity.

In urban community gardens in particular, service-learning from a womanist perspective provides another example of homeplace that draws connections to one’s sense of self, sense of agency, and sense of place as community members construct their realities through lived experience. By creating dialogue between cultural studies and critical communication pedagogy, this study will contribute to the body of research seeking to deindustrialize education in hopes of shifting the educational paradigm from consumer-driven pedagogical practices to community-driven ones. This is in many ways
a reflection of the greater shift towards a human-conscious education that focuses more on connecting learners to the wider community and its citizens through cooperative learning and interdependence than merely on student competition, student outcomes, and individual achievement (Rendón, 2009; Rifkin, 2010, p. 5). This dissertation is a qualitative analysis that should deepen understanding of how critical service-learning closely focuses on social issues related to race, gender, class, and power within an urban context; challenges deficit discourses that portray underrepresented participants and their communities as lacking agency; and offers a multi-methodological approach to critical communication pedagogical research. To further investigate the issue, I examine the following questions:

**RQ1:** In what ways do Black women community members connect positionality and urban space as forms of resistance?

**RQ2:** How can Black women community members work with service-learners to address power and identity in urban space?

**RQ3:** Within a womanist pedagogical context, how can the counternarratives of Black women community members be applicable to social justice education in urban service-learning?

A closer examination of place-based womanist approaches to education through service-learning at the college level will help fill the gap in current research pertaining to issues relevant to communication education, urban studies, and critical cultural studies. Given the complexities of the subject and its participants, the convergence of narratives should not be explored through a singular methodology. Rather, this dissertation calls for the use of interviews and critical autoethnography to provide a richly-layered study as to
how Black women are challenging the ways in which service-learning narratives are created and urban spaces are represented.

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW** Chapter Two, “Planting Fertile Seeds: Placing Womanist Thought within Critical Service-Learning,” reviews the literature related to critical pedagogy and its applications to U.S. higher education. The analysis uses a womanist/Black feminist lens to examine some of the limitations that the critical pedagogy literature currently presents with regard to gender, race, and space. The chapter reviews relevant literature that distinguishes traditional and critical service-learning models, emphasizing the need for community voices in the broader service-learning discussion as well as exploring Detroit as a focal point for such discussions.

Chapter Three, “Creeping the Vines: Performing a Rhizomatic Womanist Methodology,” employs a mixed-methods analysis of this study to extend beyond the multitude of symbolic acts resembling the heterogeneous, decentralized rhizome described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987/1988). In addition, the chapter emphasizes the multivocality of womanist discourse (Sheared, 2006). This approach also parallels the ways in which womanist pedagogy creates a reflective space for community members’ diverse voices to articulate their experiences from multiple perspectives—a “conversation” taking place at Detroit’s socio-cultural intersection (DeGenaro, 2007). Through a womanist epistemological framework, the study centers on place, community and praxis (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2008). The research design is intended to “creep the vines” by blending qualitative interviews of Black women community gardeners who work with postsecondary service-learning students in Detroit as well as my autoethnographic introspection as participant-researcher in the study.
Chapter Four, “Ditichin’ the Master’s Gardening Tools for Our Own: An Auto/ethnographic Discussion in Multiple Voices,” collaboratively reflects on the research project’s findings. Indicative of a womanist methodology that centers on Black women’s lived experience through the construction of counternarratives, the chapter is told from the perspective of community members and myself as a “participant-learner” working with community (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). As a Black feminist service-learning co-participant, I include my reflections through autoethnographic narrative in contribution to this project.

Chapter Five, “Bearing the Fruits of Our Labor: Towards a Sustainable Service-Learning Pedagogy,” presents a review and overall reflection of the project. The study’s limitations and implications for future research are also included.
CHAPTER TWO

PLANTING FERTILE SEEDS:
PLACING WOMANIST THOUGHT WITHIN CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING

Critical Theory

As the cornerstone of critical pedagogy and its applications to this study, critical theory creates a lens by which to examine service-learning discourses formed within an urban context. Grounded by the work of Marx and later advanced by the ideas of Gramsci (1992) and Foucault (1972), critical theory examines systems of power in relation to capitalist and rational dominant ideology. The advancement of Marxist thought by Western European philosophers from the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory created a framework for critical theory that could potentially satisfy the need to “deal with the complex changes arising in industrial-technological, postliberal, capitalist society” while also becoming “a material force in the struggle against domination of all forms” in order to achieve emancipation (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 8). With contemporaries such as Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer, the Frankfurt School centered its values on critiquing the “world of objective appearances and the underlying social relationships they often conceal,” examining how such relationships were forged at the expense of oppressed groups (Giroux, 2009, p. 27). The shifting political climate in Germany during the early part of the 20th century and the rise of Nazism had a significant impact on the philosophers’ developing theories. Given the emphasis on positivism in order to construct objective and empirical realities, Frankfurt’s members stressed the importance of critiquing this narrow view of the world through rational thought. Horkheimer (1968/1972) articulated his practical vision for critical theory by
emphasizing instead the need for social inquiry in all facets of life in order for a
democratic society to have the potential to exist and thrive:

The future of humanity depends on the existence today of the critical
attitude, which of course contains within it elements from traditional
theories and from our declining culture generally. Mankind has already
been abandoned by a science which in its imaginary self-sufficiency thinks
of the shaping of practice, which it serves and to which it belongs, simply
as something lying outside its borders and is content with this separation
of thought and action. Yet the characteristic mark of the thinker’s activity
is to determine for itself what it is to accomplish and serve, and this not in
fragmentary fashion but totally. (pp. 242-243)

The idea that people produce their own reality gestures towards human agency, a concept
that seems to be missing in much of the service-learning literature in terms of the agency
that community members have in their own lives. Given the all-encompassing nature of
this charge and even broader definitions of *emancipation* and *social life*, Marxist critical
theory has been used as the basis for other revolutionary frameworks such as critical
pedagogy and womanist theory.

In addition to challenging narrow worldviews, early critical theorists formed
another significant critique: the use of dominant ideology to make meaning and “to give
order and meaning to the social and political world in which we live” (Darder et al.,
2009, p. 11). As a social construct, the formation of knowledge is based on the dominant
culture’s reflection and interpretation of reality, thus affirming “the central values,
interests, and concerns of the social class in control of the material and symbolic wealth
of society” (McLaren, 2003, p. 75). This form of control is perpetuated in social
institutions such as schools in order to strengthen the position of the elite class as one that
is natural, inevitable, and permanent. As McLaren (2003) notes, the primary goal of
critical theorists is to uncover oppressive ideologies as systems of control rather than
seeing socioeconomic problems as merely isolated incidents or deficits among individuals; the act of exposure becomes the first step towards lasting social change. Brookfield (2005) aptly mentions the reproduction of the “natural state of affairs” through “the dissemination of dominant ideology” by which people are convinced that such ideologies reflect the best interests of the public and must be implemented for the good of all (p. viii). As elucidated through Gramsci’s (1992) interpretation of Marxist theory, cultural hegemonic tactics can be employed by the ruling classes to maintain the flow of information to the masses in order to control them without the need of brute force, torture or imprisonment (McLaren, 2003). Through mass media, formal education, kinship networks, and the like, the reinforcement of dominant ideas presented as “common sense” and “truth” prove to be more effective (Darder et al., 2009). As McLaren (2003) vividly describes it, hegemony “is a cultural encasement of meanings, a prison-house of language and ideas, that is ‘freely’ entered into by both dominators and dominated” (p. 77). In order to keep the prison “walls” intact, however, the oppressing dominant class creates the cultural boundaries by framing their version of reality and promoting that reality—one that maintains relations of power and privilege—as a “unified” worldview (p. 77).

Critical Pedagogy

With a charge to understand and eventually change systems of inequality, the application of critical theory to education makes it possible to subvert dominant hegemonic values produced and reproduced in classroom settings. In theory and practice, critical educators are dedicated to creating opportunities for subjugated groups to create a
more democratic and egalitarian society on their own terms (McLaren, 2003, p. 78). Critical pedagogy uses learning spaces to liberate those who have been marginalized by oppressive social structures while at the same time exposing the historical and cultural operations designed to protect the dominant social order (McLaren, 2003). As Giroux (1988) argues, in order to practice democracy in the classroom, it is important to expose existing non-democratic elements that reinforce power dynamics while also exploring “political and social struggle that occurs outside school sites” in addition to the struggles taking place within conventional learning environments (p. 202). In his preface to McLaren’s *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* (1986/1993), Giroux contends that critical pedagogy scholars are committed to deconstructing and exposing traditional learning institutions as cultural sites “actively involved in the selective ordering and legitimation of specific forms of language, reasoning, sociality, daily experience, and style” (p. xxiv).

Through “dialectical thought” and critique, educational theorists can examine the function of power in social institutions such as those produced in learning environments to “teach” order as a means of promoting a “civil democracy” (Giroux, 2009, p. 35). It is through this ordering system that social norms are maintained; deviations from established norms result in consequences extending beyond the classroom: ostracism, incarceration, physical violence, or even death.

In his groundbreaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/2000) challenges imperialist and capitalist systems through revolutionary approaches to education. In the struggle for liberation, he writes, oppressed groups “must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (p. 49). Although Freire continues by stating that
this perception does not in itself bring about liberation, the awareness of one’s “situation” can motivate the oppressed and their oppressors to free themselves through action (p. 49): “Human beings are because they are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it” (p. 109). This act of resistance through consciousness-raising (conscientizado/conscientization) can be best achieved by praxis, the bridging of theory and practice that is “a self-creating and self-generating free human activity…emerging from an on-going interaction of reflection, dialogue, and action” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 13). The balance of theory and practice is paramount in order for individuals to practice intellectual agency, as Freire argues:

Curiosity about the object of knowledge and the willingness and openness to engage theoretical readings and discussions is fundamental. However, I am not suggesting an over-celebration of theory. We must not negate practice for the sake of theory. To do so would reduce theory to a pure verbalism or intellectualism. By the same token, to negate theory for the sake of practice, as in the use of dialogue as conversation, is to run the risk of losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice. It is for this reason that I never advocate either a theoretic elitism or a practice ungrounded in theory, but the unity between theory and practice. In order to achieve this unity, one must have an epistemological curiosity—a curiosity that is often missing in dialogue as conversation. (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 382)

Freire (1970/2000) also posits that in order for one to achieve conscientization, critical thinking through reflection must be done through substantive interaction, without which no communication (and, consequently, no “true education”) can exist (p. 92-93; Darder et al., 2009, p. 13). He makes a clear distinction between critical reflection as that which is action-oriented and transformative, whereas naïve thinking can be characterized as static, accommodating, and normalizing (p. 92). Rather than accepting unjust conditions as matters of fate, individuals whom Freire would identify as oppressor and
oppressed can engage in open dialogue to shift the power dynamic between the two groups. Through this lengthy process, the oppressed learn over time to value their own voice and knowledge while the oppressor “listens to the wisdom in the oppressed, rather than ignoring their voice or imposing what he/she thinks is the solution” (d’Arlach et al., 2009, p. 7). Challenging the dominant “banking concept” of education by which knowledge is considered a “gift” bestowed by teachers upon passive recipients who know little (p. 72), Freire repositions students (and in this study, service-learning community members) from mere objects of the learning process to knowledgeable subjects capable of becoming agents of change. As d’Arlach et al. (2009) illustrate,

An individual who is conscientizado understands a social problem, places it in a historical context, critically reflects on its causes, views the problem as solvable, and acts to alleviate it (Freire). The conscientizado recognizes his or her place, and contribution, in the struggle for liberation. (p. 7)

**Feminist Pedagogy**

By examining teaching through a Freirean lens, critical pedagogy can potentially create not only transformative learning spaces but also new worlds and realities. In addition, it can form sites of resistance within academic institutions themselves. Aspects associated with Freirean pedagogy—critical thinking through dialogue and reflection, as well as an increased focus on social inequality and transformation—are also practiced in feminist pedagogy. Akin to Freire’s opposition to the banking concept of education, feminist pedagogy challenges authoritarian relationships between teachers and students and encourages engaged learning among all participants as a form of political action and collective power (Shrewsbury, 1987).
Despite these similarities, critical pedagogy has been firmly ensconced within class struggle due to its Marxist origins; as such, it has been subject to critique by theorists working simultaneously within and against the paradigm including feminist researchers such as Ellsworth (1994), Gore (1993), and Lather (1998). Because critical scholars before them emphasized social class as the site of oppression, feminist educational theorists raised the concern that the basis of critical theory and critical pedagogy was deeply lacking: as power differentials function within education across multiple sites of oppression, these theories significantly overlook the intersecting issues related to gender, race, and sexuality in addition to class (Darder et al., 2009). Given its Western European male influence through the Frankfurt school and its classical approach to intellectual development, the discourse produced through critical pedagogy served to silence voices marginalized by systems beyond class through methods such as the exclusive use of masculine pronouns, the use of esoteric language, and “consequent inaccessibility to those most affected by social inequalities” (Darder et al, 2009, p. 15; McLaren, 2003; Weiler, 1991).

Feminist pedagogy also takes a significant departure from its Freirean counterpart through the ways it involves building community and challenging social structures within academic institutions—this as opposed to informal settings championed by Freire’s popular educational approach with local laborers in his native Brazil. As Ellsworth (1994) argues, the key assumptions of critical and feminist pedagogy—namely “empowering students” by “giving voice” and facilitating dialogue—are “repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (p. 91). By requiring students to participate in course activities (including service-learning ones) or to “speak up” in class,
they are forced to engage and are not permitted to practice their own forms of resistance including the need to remain silent (Ellsworth, 1994). Shrewsbury (1987) contends that *power* should not be defined merely in terms of limiting resources to one group and redistributing them to another as a means of fighting oppression; instead, power could be viewed as a collective energy with the capacity to create change: “At the core of feminist pedagogy is a re-imagining of the classroom as a community of learners where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality with others that is congruent with the developmental needs of both women and men” (p. 10). In higher education institutions (where many feminist pedagogues laid the groundwork through the establishment of women’s studies programs and research), desires to transform classrooms and society are often countered by the prevailing system that is patriarchal, hierarchical, competitive, and individualistic (Verjee, 2010; Weiler, 1991). Administrative and structural control over colleges and universities continues to be held predominantly by males. The academy is structured as a top-down model with units reporting to their supervising authority as a way to demonstrate accountability. Instructors are responsible for “educating” students and are required to administer grades. The established reward system recognizes individual accomplishments (consider grade-point averages and tenure reviews) and may perceive collaborative endeavors as suspect. Given this inherent imbalance of power within academia, feminist pedagogy includes a recognition of traditional meanings of the concept of power that embody relations of domination…It accepts the antihegemonic potential of liberatory education and provides a model of interrelationships that can be incorporated into a developing vision of a world in which hierarchical oppressive relationships are exchanged for autonomy within a community that celebrates difference. (Shrewsbury, 1987, pp. 8-9)
The feminist pedagogical vision to “celebrate difference” within classrooms and communities, on the other hand, reveals significant limitations pertaining to its representation of inclusivity. Although White feminist theorists have acknowledged the importance of difference within its framework and in pedagogical practice, White feminism has taken on a universal nature with proponents claiming experiences as those shared among all women regardless of race and class. Embedded within the theory’s historical context, consciousness-raising (CR) groups were largely homogenous and the shared experiences among participants were largely articulated by White, heterosexual, middle-class women (hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Weiler, 1991). Analogous to Freire’s assumption that men are commonly situated in their oppression and will experience similar paths to liberation (conscientization), feminist pedagogy situates women’s knowledge and experiences as unified entities (Fuss, 1989; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Weiler, 1991). Given the complexities of women as embodied subjects, feminist pedagogy centers on recognizing different social positions but falls short in developing methodologies and practices based on these differences. Drawing from the Combahee River Collective’s 1977 statement of Black feminist struggle, unity, and liberation, Weiler (1991) emphasizes this need and the importance of the work that must be done in order to fully “read the world” for change:

The investigation of the experiences of women of color, lesbian women, women whose very being challenges existing racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class dominance leads to knowledge of the world that both acknowledges differences and points to the need for an “integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” (p. 468)
Black Feminist/Womanist Theory

Drawing from Walker’s (1983) original definition and Collins’s (2000) later contributions to the subject, womanist theory crafts a cultural lens by which Black women have a “particular vantage point” to better recognize and understand the interlocking system of oppression, the importance of social transformation through “individual empowerment and collective action,” and the embodiment of humanism that “seeks the liberation of all, not simply themselves” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2006, p. 280). This theoretical paradigm also grew from the “legal counterdiscourse” of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) that “sought to inject the issue of racial oppression into the debate about the law and society” with the goal of eliminating racism by linking it to other forms of oppression such as sexism and classism (Lynn, 1999, p. 609).

In order to further explore the scaffolding of critical theory, critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and womanist pedagogy to build the framework for this study, it is important to examine the epistemological foundations of Black feminist thought and its applications to teaching and research. As critical and feminist theorists such as McLaren (1986/1993) and Collins (2000) have previously identified, epistemology is traditionally associated with the ways in which physical reality is interpreted through the use of symbols and validated as true—a “system of knowing” that is “linked intimately to worldview” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 399). In addition, epistemology determines how knowledge is assessed as well as what and who are believed to be legitimate (Collins, 2000). From this perspective, what traditionally has been counted as “actual” knowledge has widely been based on Eurocentric, male-dominant, positivistic models of knowledge.
creation perpetuated by individuals who internalize the dominant worldview (Ladson-Billings, 2003). As Collins (2000) attests,

Black feminist thought’s core themes of work, family, sexual politics, motherhood, and political activism rely on paradigms that emphasize the importance of intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix of domination. But expressing these themes and paradigms has not been easy because Black women have had to struggle against White male interpretations of the world (p. 251).

Emphases on rationalism, objectivity, adversarial debate, and value-freedom have positioned Black feminist knowledge claims as inferior and invalid because of the inability to “prove” Black women’s experiences as the basis for truth (hooks, 1994).

In relation to power, it is important to note that dominant epistemologies are not exclusive to White men since “White women, African-American men and women, and other people of color may be enlisted to enforce these connections between power relations and what counts as truth” (Collins, 2000, p. 253). Scholars, for example, run the risk of assuming this role by employing exclusively positivistic approaches to their research for the sake of establishing credibility as “serious” scholars and purveyors of knowledge. So long as the interests of those in power can be protected by its members and can be maintained by others who desire membership and the privileges associated with it, credential-controlling entities such as postsecondary institutions can further suppress alternative forms of scholarship and interpretations of the world by delegitimating approaches to knowledge production beyond the experimental. In the case of womanist epistemology, such alternatives center on lived experience, dialogue, and personal accountability (Collins, 2000, p. 258).

Because womanist theory is grounded in the lived experiences of African-American women in relation to race, gender, class and sexuality, such knowledge claims
are needed to adequately represent the ways in which meaning is created from these intersections— for our voices to “demand attention” after their long silence (Sheared, 2006). Collins (2000) stresses the importance of “ingenuity” while studying Black women’s subjugated knowledge “because subordinate groups have long had to use alternative ways to create independent self-definitions and self-valuations and to rearticulate them through our own specialists” (p. 252). While Collins’s use of the term alternative here automatically positions Black women’s knowledge—and the practices that emerge from it—as something oppositional to the dominant “standard,” the term could also be used to describe the subversive manner by which such subjugated knowledges develop and operate. As trained sociologists and women of color, Collins (2000) and Ladner (1971/1995) found that the positivist approaches to social science research were insufficient to the study of African-American women by African-American women. Similarly, the methods required for my study are grounded in womanist theory and call for a womanist methodological approach to guide its inquiry.

Collins (2000) identifies dialogue as the second criterion for Black feminist epistemology. Rooted in the African oral tradition and African-American culture, the inclusion of traditionally silenced voices—particularly voices of U.S. Black women—requires the active participation of all group members to create “polyrhythmic realities” (Sheared, 2006, p. 277). This practice of sharing common experiences in turn creates a collective wisdom that is passed on and agreed to be true (Collins, 2000). Citing African-American sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman, Collins (2000) points out that the sharing of lived experience also distinguishes between “educated fools” who acquire knowledge solely through “book learning” and individuals who develop wisdom by possessing
“mother wit”—the favored criterion for assessing genuine knowledge (p. 257). “In the context of intersecting oppressions,” Collins (2000) goes on to say, “the distinction is essential. Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (p. 257). This study centers on the often-unheard voices in service-learning: those of urban grassroots community groups headed by African-American women, who actively participate in the co-creation of community knowledge (Barkley-Brown, 1990; Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

Collins’s (2000) third womanist epistemological dimension, personal accountability, strengthens the roots through connectedness and interaction as the result of dialogue. This form of Black discourse, she argues, is a necessary component of knowledge validation and essential in validating one’s existence. With regard to Black women’s existence, such interactions also center on what she refers to as the “ethic of caring,” suggesting that uniqueness, emotional appropriateness, and empathy are crucial in assessing and validating knowledge claims. This ethical practice parallels with how Ladson-Billings (2003) identifies the emergence of “ethnic epistemologies” and Dillard (2008) emphasizes the importance of responsible research through an endarkened feminist epistemology, one that creates a racialized and gendered intervention to historically dominant paradigms intended to “enlighten” others without the need to identify Self in relation to others (Wright, 2003). Dillard (2008) advocates for research indicative of womanist ethics, that which is “answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry” (p. 280). In her groundbreaking work Tomorrow’s Tomorrow, for example, Ladner (1971/1995) had to reject White middle-class assumptions and emotionally-detached research methods in order to provide
a more accurate ethnographic account of low-income Black adolescent girls in St. Louis’s inner city. Rather than adopting the dominant perceptions of deviance among urban African-American youth and distancing herself from Black women, Ladner (1971/1995) had to situate herself within the participating communities to avoid becoming the “dispassionate scientist” who claims to conduct research that is objective and value-free. She explains,

As I became more involved with the subjects of this research, I knew that I would not be able to play the role of the dispassionate scientist, whose major objective was to extract certain data from them that would simply be used to describe and theorize about their conditions. I began to perceive my role as a Black person, with empathy and attachment, and, to a great extent, their day-to-day lives and future destinies became intricately interwoven with my own…On the one hand, I wanted to conduct a study that would allow me to fulfill certain academic requirements…On the other hand, I was highly influenced by my Blackness—by the fact that I, on many levels, was one of them and had to deal with their problems on a personal level. (p. xxi-xxii)

As I will explain in the following chapter, my positionality as an African-American, working-class, urban-identified woman influences how I situate myself in service-learning teaching and research. It would have been disingenuous of me to disassociate myself from Detroit’s Eastside community and its members while conducting research in order to clear an academic hurdle in fulfillment of doctoral degree requirements.

It is through a Black feminist epistemology and methodological framework that makes it possible to “enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice” (Collins, 2000, p. 269). Just as Collins (2000) argues that all Black women can produce knowledge in their own right, similar forms of knowledge production rely heavily on the lived experiences of anyone who lives within intersecting patterns of oppression (Sheared, 2006; Dillard,
In her book *Talking Back*, hooks (1989) describes the act of defiant speech among marginalized groups as a necessary step toward self-determination and liberation:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (p. 9)

Dillard (2008) also addresses the importance of articulating womanist epistemology as a means of “talking back to the oppressive and alienating conditions of Western conceptions of knowledge and the marginalization of indigenous, feminist ways of knowing and being” (p. 280-281). By engaging in this practice, the researcher engages in a reciprocal, spiritually-centered, and community-focused healing methodology (p. 281). Although contemporary U.S. womanism has strong ties to Christian liberation theology, I draw on Dillard’s (2006) broader definition of spirituality that has African roots but is more widely applicable. Service-learning counternarratives are a form of “back talk” directed towards homogenized service-learning discourses that renders underrepresented participants invisible and silent (Butin, 2003; Butin, 2007; Spigelman, 2004). My voice, along with those of community members who participate in service-learning projects, organically interweave our realities and “creep” the discursive vines for this study.

**Womanist Pedagogy**

In order to fill the gaps left open in critical and feminist pedagogy, womanist educational theory responds to the absences of race and gender while also addressing issues of class, power, literacy, and culture (Darder et al., 2009). Given how the overlooked experiences of women of color created this point of departure from Western
feminism (i.e., the positionality of White, heterosexual, middle-class women primarily residing in the United States), it could be argued that a womanist approach to urban pedagogy best articulates the needs, concerns, and experiences of Black women in particular and the community in general. As womanist educator Omolade (1993) points out, the goal of Black feminist pedagogy is “to develop a mindset of intellectual inclusion and expansion that stands in contradiction to the Western intellectual tradition of exclusivity and chauvinism” and to offer “student, instructor, and institution a methodology for promoting equality and multiple visions and perspectives that parallel Black women’s attempts to be and become recognized as human beings and citizens” (p. 31). Omolade does not suggest that womanist pedagogy is designed specifically to serve the instructional needs of women of color to teach about women of color to female students of color; rather, womanist pedagogy helps to fill the educational void that renders marginalized subjects silent and invisible in learning spaces, including those spaces designated for service-learning. Drawing from Spivak’s (1988) concept of “strategic essentialism” as a means of creating solidarity among women, minority groups, and those she identifies as the “subaltern” to present a more united front to advance social change, I argue that womanist pedagogy presents a tool for liberating subjugated knowledge: a tool that is designed from—not specifically for—a Black woman’s standpoint. This basis of inquiry directly places “U.S. Black women’s experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences” (Collins, 2000, p. 228). An urban womanist pedagogy crafts a lens through which critical service-learning can be examined, drawing from a Black feminist theoretical foundation that explores intersecting social inequalities and the means by which Black women’s empowerment
can resist encompassing “structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power” (Collins, 2000, p. 203).

By bringing a critical Black feminist consciousness into the urban classroom, it becomes possible to simultaneously address issues that affect the everyday lives of all participants in educational projects such as service-learning. Social justice work—the establishment of hooks’s “homeplace”—goes well beyond identity politics and directly challenges the dominant institutions and the privileged discourses produced within them. Collins (2000) made it clear that it is not enough to serve families, students, and communities to facilitate social change; rather, institutional transformation requires a more “radical political thrust” that requires direct engagement (p. 207). This notion of group survival through acts of resistance ties into the womanist tenets presented by Floyd-Thomas (2006), who argued that radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement work in concert with one another in order to foster agency through empowering relationships. While Freire, Giroux, and even White feminist scholars present this vision of transformative practices through social justice pedagogy, some Black women who address systems of oppression also navigate those intersecting systems inside and outside the service-learning classroom.

Examining service-learning pedagogy from a womanist perspective takes Collins’s epistemological vision and Floyd-Thomas’s tenets into dominant institutions such as higher education. Personal experience, dedication to community, and commitment to caring provide the cornerstone for this pedagogical approach in order to “transform current positions of powerlessness” among marginalized community members that centers on—but can also extend beyond—people of color (Omolade, 1993, p. 38).
Collins characterized this extension as the “community othermother role” that symbolizes the “important connections among self, change, and empowerment in African-American communities” (p. 210). The othermother’s primary responsibility was to utilize education as a vehicle for empowerment and racial uplift rather than focus on technical skill development, employability, and acceptance into White society (p. 210). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2006) also focuses on the idea of the maternal as a basis to contextualize womanist pedagogy as one of sacrifice, nurturing, and care on behalf of community. By centering on the role of othermothering as a proactive measure, it is possible to make a stronger connection between womanist pedagogy and urban activism. This is especially the case when applying Naples’s (1998) concept of “activist mothering,” which includes activities ranging from public protests for greater community control to neighborhood caretaking as examples of “good mothering” whether or not resident community workers have children. These activities also include “self-conscious struggles against racism, sexism, and poverty” (p. 114) in which women of color could infuse their experiences with their political and personal practices.

With its emphasis on community, an urban womanist pedagogy can create holistic service-learning spaces that are more conducive to social justice education. This vision somewhat contradicts feminist cultural critic Mary Louise Pratt’s (2002) thesis in “Arts of the Contact Zone,” which she defines as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths” (p. 4). Although Pratt argues that “contact zones” could be mutually beneficial to all learning participants, this definition is problematic because it gives difference a somewhat negative connotation. An assumption
has been made that the multicultural classroom is in fact a site of conflict and not mutuality, supporting the hegemonic principle of dominance over difference as means of maintaining social control. Drawing from Freire while maintaining a Black feminist position, Lorde (1984) asserts that “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors’ tactics, the oppressors’ relationships” (p. 123). Womanist pedagogy calls into question oppressive teaching tactics designed to demoralize and alienate participants and creates in their place new methods that emphasize collaboration and self-determination.

This approach is not intended to avoid conflict or to romanticize difference, but instead to identify difference as a vehicle for resistance. As Lorde (1984) argues in her essay “Uses of the Erotic,” the power of difference is not exclusively designed to tear down patriarchal Eurocentric paradigms and render itself superior; rather, it serves as the “lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (p. 55). By fostering change through praxis while also addressing the interlocking systems of racial, gender, and class oppression as articulated from a womanist pedagogical standpoint, critical educators can use an erotic sense of knowing—and the “historical, geographical, and cultural” spaces where the work of education is conducted—to constitute identity (Pensoneau-Conway, 2009, p.177). Womanist service-learning would create a safer space within urban communities not only to further challenge the inherent powers of racism, sexism, and classism, but also to welcome community members in the process based on their unique set of experiences and their
relationships to space. They in turn generate their own transformative energy, acting as co-teachers and co-creators in the fullest sense of the term.

**Traditional and Critical Service-Learning**

From a traditional service-learning perspective, there is a growing need to integrate participatory democratic practice to place-based education in order to make postsecondary teaching more relevant and engaging. For example, Furco (2001) defines service-learning programs as those that are “distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring” (p. 12). Mendel-Reyes (1998) defines the practice as “a pedagogy for citizenship [that] integrates the academic study of democracy and the experience of democratic community service” (p. 34). Regardless of how service-learning is defined, the aim towards balancing community outreach and reflective learning outcomes is key (Butin, 2003; Kendall, 1990; Varlotta, 1997a).

The process of building bridges across the service-learning hyphen has been a slow yet continuous one, partly as a result of “concurrent trends reflecting an increasing emphasis on individualism, decreasing sense of civic responsibility, and general alienation from community” (Crabtree, 1999, p. 125). What has been problematic within the practice is the ongoing emphasis on positive student outcomes while ignoring the voices, concerns, and contributions of community members. In his 1995 *Western Journal of Communication* article, Nakayama stresses the importance of student-centered experiential learning by stating, “Communication scholarship can (and should) make a difference in the everyday lives of people” (p. 174). At face value, the traditional model
has proven effective in enhancing students’ communication skills and leadership development, as well as “producing students who are more tolerant, altruistic, and culturally aware” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50). Research supports the argument that service-learning encourages students to practice critical thinking and problem solving more often than students who learn exclusively in the classroom (Eyler & Giles, 1999). As a result, service-learning provides a supposed win-win scenario for students searching for practical learning experiences and the communities in need of being “served.”

While the emphasis on democracy and reciprocity within these campus-community partnerships is often represented in the existing literature, it is more often written from the perspective of academics “teaching to” students and “speaking for” community partners throughout the service-learning experience (for examples and analyses, see Birdsall, 2005; Bushouse, 2005; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Ward, 1999). While extolling the merits of communication service-learning as a means of building social capital, Applegate and Morreale (1999) paradoxically position students as passive, privileged learners who should participate as an act of noblesse oblige:

Service-learning presents each act of learning as a resolution of the dialectic between the individual and society. Each successful resolution enhances both the perspective of the individual and society...Students are reminded that the privilege of higher education brings an obligation to serve. (p. x)

As Robinson (2000) indicates, this flawed traditionalist foundation further perpetuates systems of inequality by producing a “glorified welfare system” (p. 607). Pompa (2002) shares this sentiment, targeting the overemphasis on service as “an exercise in patronization” (p. 68). Rather than presenting students with opportunities for civic
engagement—and direct engagement with community members—traditional approaches to service-learning instead reinforce us-them dichotomies that create a wider chasm separating schools and communities (Cipolle, 2010; Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Wade, 2001).

Butin (2003) and Boyte (2008) also critique (and simultaneously reinforce) this lopsided traditional approach to service learning, addressing the potentially repressive and exploitative nature that could result in denying student-participants the opportunity to develop their sense of civic agency during the experience. Instead, the students are silently “serving” professors for the sake of earning a desired grade while at the same time are exploiting communities in order to gain experience and exposure to “foreign” (usually urban) environments in hopes of feeling good about themselves through volunteerism (Mitchell, 2008). As Cipolle (2010), Stoecker and Tryon (2009), and Verjee (2012) have argued, such constructs of service-learning are more detrimental to the neighborhoods left behind and offer little benefit to academic participants whose privilege and negative perceptions of “recipient” communities go unchallenged before, during, and long after their service-learning experience.

Critical service-learning, in contrast, addresses and directly combats social inequalities as an integral part of its practice (Hayes, 2011; Mitchell, 2008). Crediting Rhoads for introducing the concept of “critical community service” in 1997, Mitchell (2008) notes that a “critical approach embraces the political nature of service and seeks social justice over more traditional views of citizenship” (p. 51). Cipolle expands on this definition by stating that

for service-learning to be critical, students and teachers need to examine issues of power, privilege, and oppression; question the hidden bias and
assumptions of race, class, and gender; and work to change the social and economic system for equity and justice. (p. 5)

Drawing from an example provided by the National Youth Leadership Council, Cipolle (2010) identifies four distinct dimensions that illustrate service, learning, service-learning, and critical service learning:

- Cleaning up a riverbank is SERVICE.
- Sitting in a science classroom looking at water samples under a microscope is LEARNING.
- Science students taking samples from local water sources, then analyzing the samples, documenting the results and presenting the scientific information to a pollution control agency is SERVICE-LEARNING.
- Science students creating public service announcements to raise awareness of human impact on water quality in order to change community attitudes and behavior is CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING. (pp. 4-5)

Though she does make adequate distinctions among these educational models, Cipolle (2010) inadvertently provides another problematic example of service-learning’s erasure of community agency by presenting students and faculty as participants who “raise awareness” to eventually “change community attitudes and behavior” while not integrating the voices, experiences, and knowledge of community members. Where do their stories of environmental racism, health concerns due to poor water quality, or previous grassroots efforts to enforce antipollution regulations in local industries factor into Cipolle’s definition? This question continues to elude service-learning researchers
and practitioners as this pedagogical approach becomes more institutionalized in higher education (Furco, 2003; Gilbert, Johnson, & Plaut, 2009; Holland, 1997; Jacoby, 1996).

Butin (2006) and other critical community engagement scholars are pushing to establish a homeplace within service-learning, thus “creating an academic home for critical dialogue and scholarship, as was done in women’s studies” as part of greater collective social movement to transform schools and communities (Gilbert et al., 2009, p. 59). Based on critical service-learning’s emphasis on community-centered activism, for example, Mitchell (2008) identifies three elements associated with the practice: the redistribution of power among all service-learning participants, the formation of authentic relationships in the classroom and community, and the dedication to “work from a social change perspective” as opposed to the traditional pre-professional perspective (p. 50). The elements are more conducive to womanist applications to urban service-learning that identify community members as co-planners and co-teachers.

Critical service-learning is developed with the goal of redistributing power among academic and community participants and to ultimately “deconstruct systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50). Warren (1998) challenges the notion of “diversity education” as the cornerstone of service-learning experience, noting that “diversity often implies different but equal, while social justice education recognizes that some social groups in our society have greater access to social power” (p. 136). Given the inherent power differentials of any community-based endeavor sponsored by higher education institutions, critical service-learning can shed light on such imbalances by encouraging community members to join students and faculty in dialogue and discussion regarding
issues of power within their relationships (Mitchell, 2008). According to Mitchell (2008), “It requires confronting assumptions and stereotypes, owning unearned privilege, and facing inequality and oppression as something real and omnipresent” (p. 56). To further address power imbalances, d’Arlach et al. (2009), Mitchell (2008), O’Grady (2000), and Stoecker and Tryon (2009) strongly support the full integration of community members in co-developing curricula so that their voices and experiences are recognized throughout the planning and implementation process. Rather than merely acknowledging the existence of “those people,” critical service-learning practice demands that the community plays a central role in building the course, directing projects and creating questions directly addressing the injustices its members face.

Much of the service-learning literature focuses on the role of the student. While this focus is important, I want to shift that focus to hone in on the important role of the community members. This latter group is too often left out of the service-learning equation, except for the ways in that they become recipients of the service of students. While much of the service-learning literature centers on the formation of authentic relationships between faculty and students, little is known about the relationships between community members and their academic partners. Though their research primarily focuses on student development within service-learning practice, Mitchell (2008) and Kendall (1990) advocate for an increased emphasis on connection through reciprocity and interdependence among all service-learning participants. Forming such connections, however, must be done with care. Citing Collins (2000), Mitchell (2008) reminds readers that “most relationships across difference are squarely rooted in relations of domination and subordination” (p. 58). While common goals and mutual respect can
be cultivated though reciprocity, the potential for “servers” to regard the “servees” as subordinates is ever-present (Varlotta, 1997b). A significant way to prevent “othering” is to “incorporate community knowledge” that intentionally includes community members as co-teachers (Mitchell, 2008, p. 55). As the designated “insiders” of the service-learning experience, community members are looked upon as valuable sources of information and providers of needed socio-cultural context, rather than passive recipients of academic benefactors. Bearing these possibilities in mind, Enos and Morton (2003) call for a move from “transactional” to “transformational” partnerships in which campus and community members “come to understand that they are part of the same community, with common problems, common interests, common resources, and a common capacity to shape one another in profound ways” (p. 20).

By performing service-learning from a social change perspective, participants work towards creating a “more just and caring society” while engaging in the deeper work of understanding the roots of social and economic injustice (Mitchell, 2008, p. 55). While service projects such as neighborhood renewal, tutoring, and assisting in soup kitchens may provide learning opportunities for students to gain experience in an urban setting, these activities alone do not require students to fully explore why the services are needed—or what structural inequalities created the need—in the first place. By collaborating directly with community members, students and faculty can become co-facilitators of change. Readings, community roundtable discussions, reflective writing assignments (facilitated by community members), and capstone projects can not only add a variety of traditionally unheard voices to the service-learning experience but also could provide a multivariate approach to addressing community-identified concerns. As
Mitchell (2008) argues, “A critical service-learning pedagogy brings attention to social change through dispelling myths of deficiency while acknowledging how systems of inequality function in our society” (p. 55). Rather than employing a traditional model that equates community *need* with community *blame*, a social justice-oriented pedagogy focuses on working collaboratively for positive change.

*Detroit as Homeplace: A Womanist Exploration of Urban (Safe) Space*

I am an endangered species  
But I sing no victim’s song  
I am a woman/I am an artist  
And I know where my voice belongs

The geographic, economic, and political conditions of Detroit construct a narrative, itself unique to Detroit. Once regarded as a pathway to freedom and employment opportunities for many Black Americans who escaped racial discrimination and dismal work prospects in the South during the first half of the twentieth century, the city’s industrial might also manufactured more insidious by-products of racism and economic oppression. Discriminatory hiring policies that relegated Black workers to “hot, dirty ‘nigger jobs’” (Darden et al., 1987, p. 68) operated in concert with housing practices that prevented Black families from integrating into White neighborhoods and remain in mostly substandard structures. As the booming automobile industry created the demand for highway construction and expansion during the 1950s and 1960s, flourishing Black neighborhoods and businesses became collateral damage in the name of urban renewal. Decades later, the effects of such policies are still being felt as allegations of government corruption, population loss by the hundreds of thousands, and spiraling unemployment have eroded the city’s Black economic and political power despite its Black residents
representing about 80 percent of the population. In March 2013, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed Kevin Orr as Detroit’s emergency manager, a position that rendered the elected leadership voiceless and powerless. Months later the city filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy, the largest municipal filing in United States history. Detroit’s identity, it appeared, was one stripped of its agency.

Womanist principles applied to urban service-learning may allow deeper exploration into the intersection of identity and place. As college service-learning initiatives are more heavily implemented in conjunction with urban-based organizations, it becomes crucial to examine the practice within an urban context and to discover the ways in which counternarratives are formed within city spaces. As Kinloch (2005) argues, more work needs to be done to narrow the sociological and discursive distances between academic and community spaces, of which she gives this explanation:

> Academic spaces such as classrooms, computing laboratories, and libraries, for example, are more engendered with ideals of privilege, power, and literacy than community centers, basketball courts, and the gathering places of front yards and porches. (p. 101)

Even in service-learning practice where reciprocity and mutual understanding are inscribed in curricula, the construction of privilege/non-privilege dichotomies remains pervasive in community-based environments, and resulting partnerships are “predicated upon and motivated by how identities, politics, and practices are formed by and/or imposed on communities of people” (Kinloch, 2005, p. 102). To reimagine urban service-learning, it is important to also reimagine the spaces in which service-learning is practiced from the intersections of race, gender and class.

Central to this topic is the establishment of community agency—the means with which to determine individual and collective change using the resources necessary to
bring such change to fruition—to alter urban spaces on members’ terms through *repurposing* and *renaming* community spaces as acts of resistance. The agentic actions of Detroit artist Tyree Guyton offer a clear example of repurposing. Rather than petitioning local government officials to clean up debris polluting an East Side neighborhood, he instead created the Heidelberg Project: two blocks of open art exhibits comprised mainly of discards such as abandoned tires, liquor bottles, toys, and clothing that “provoke thought, promote discussion, inspire action and heal communities” (“Who We Are,” n.d.). Akin to the tenets of womanism (Floyd-Thomas, 2006), Guyton’s installations create stories of community struggle, spirituality, and justice, as Kinloch poignantly describes here:

Guyton's replica of the Rosa Parks bus represents past public struggles—locally and nationally—over freedom, liberty, and fair treatment of black people. The project's insignia of biblical scriptures and names of biblical figures such as "God" and "Noah" signify the presence of faith in the community. The memorial at the street's end is a symbol of public remembrance of the victims of gun violence in Detroit in 1994. The broken, cracked hubcaps depict the increase in the community's broken family units; the stuffed animals represent child's play, or in other words, the lost childhood of youngsters forced to take on adult responsibilities (caring for the family; working to help pay bills, making sense of decay). (p. 123)

Given the Project’s international acclaim as an example of vernacular culture (McDougall, 1993), Guyton’s use of found objects to formulate urban counternarratives presents alternate discourses within city space that reaches across cultures (Kinloch, 2005). Paradoxically, previous efforts by city officials to dismantle Heidelberg parallel the delegitimation of Black women’s subjugated knowledge based on lived experience (Collins, 2000).
Another example of repurposing is the community gardening efforts in spaces such as Manistique Community Gardens and D-Town Farm located on the far East and West Side, respectively. According to White (2011), members of Detroit Community Food Security Network (DCFSN), operators of D-Town, address issues of food insecurity and public education challenges—exacerbated by what members view as “racial and economic apartheid” (p. 19)—by initiating grassroots efforts rather than soliciting non-governmental organizations and local government to build more grocery stores, better schools, and safer neighborhoods. Relevant to this study’s scope is her emphasis on Black women gardeners who use farming as a form of resistance, by which they [use] mobilization, education, policy advocacy, and physical improvements in neighborhoods to increase the food supply and prevent hunger, thereby enhancing the health of residents, revitalizing neighborhoods through shared activities that also improve and strengthen the community's local economy, and building a sense of justice, equity, and self-determination. (pp. 15-16)

Organizers of the Manistique Garden, home of Feedom Freedom Growers, share a similar vision with its motto, “Grow a garden, grow a community” (“Feedom Freedom Blog,” n. d.). Through regularly scheduled roundtables, potlucks, and children’s art programs, Feedom Freedom transforms abandoned lots to provide nutritious foods and the foundations for community-based economic development.

Parallel to how many Black Detroiters refer to the fiery uprising during the summer of 1967 as a “rebellion” as opposed to establishment media’s label of “riot” (Boggs, 1998), city spaces are being reclaimed through renaming. Advocates of the economically challenged Cass Corridor, a popular community-service site, are fighting a “quiet turf war” to maintain the community’s name and identity in spite of efforts to transform the area into “Midtown” to attract developers, young professionals, and
businesses (Sands, 2012, para. 1). In their refusal to be marked as political castoffs in a community in need of gentrification, activist-residents are taking an active role in their city’s redirection in an era of deindustrialization (Boggs & Kurashige, 2011). As DeGenaro (2007) posits, such acts of resistance demonstrate how Detroiter work together to create a dynamic counternarrative in opposition to the feel-good narratives produced through the lens of the White (liberal) authoritarian gaze:

We are constantly at locations like Eight-Mile and Woodward, the site where the key north-south and east-west roads come together, separating east side from west side, city and suburb. In the face of liberal imperatives to obscure, homogenize, or romanticize difference, these Detroiter at intersections show us all how attention to the materiality of identity can be disruptive, agonistic, and productive. (p. 136)

This “agonistic” flexing is aptly reflected in Marback’s (1998) reference to the Joe Louis Memorial, a 24-foot bronze fist suspended statue commissioned in honor of the late boxing champion and Detroit native son. He argues that the statue’s outstretched arm and closed fist symbolizes the bold material and rhetorical resilience that embodies the people of Detroit as opposed to the dominant images of open-handed welfare-dependent inner-city residents seeking handouts and service-learning provisions. Cutting through these contrasting images, Swiencicki (2006) challenges hegemonic White liberal “awareness” narratives that position Whites as oppressors who become “enlightened” through the “inspiring” lives of the Black urban poor. While Swiencicki does well to point out the need to deconstruct even the best-intentioned endeavors performed by liberal anti-racism (and service-learning) advocates, DeGenaro (2007) also critiques Swiencicki for limiting (working) class identity as merely tangential to race rather than an integral part of the “dynamic interplay among multiple markers of identity” that “can
reveal an awareness of systemic power structures, an awareness of how those power structures place groups in contest with one another in order to prevent social change” (p. 137). Though issues of race must be placed in the center of discussions regarding Detroit given its longstanding history (see Sugrue, 2005), this dissertation will also examine intersections of gender and class as they pertain to critical service-learning in urban space.

From a womanist pedagogical perspective, deepening roots in the city provide a way of conceiving and constructing spaces at the intersections through eyes that see the unseen, to imagine possibility where empty lots and abandoned homes stand—to “make a way out of no way,” a term originally used in African American Christian contexts but is now often cited during times of economic hardship and resilience among low-income Black women (Coleman, 2008). Shifts in perceptions and paradigms are necessary to continue the transformation process within urban spaces from despair to hope, from desolation to sustainability. By crafting this alternate lens, resident-activists construct Detroit as a counternarrative unto itself while working towards the city’s revitalization and collecting stories among community members. As Detroit-based activists Boggs and Boggs (2008) illustrate in Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century, such efforts will not only have a positive effect on Detroit and its residents, but Detroit itself will also serve as a model to help change the world for the better through holistic community endeavors:

We can no longer view the American people as masses or warm bodies to be mobilized in increasingly aggressive and more massive struggles for higher wages, better jobs, or guaranteed health care. Instead, we must challenge them and ourselves to engage in activities at the grassroots level that build a new and better world by improving the physical,
Because this project centers on Black women community members who also participate in urban service-learning with academic partners, more emphasis will be placed on their experiences, concerns, and visions for critical service-learning. Though research specific to this population and their contributions to urban service-learning is limited, this study will explore their relationships to urban space as the basis for their community activism and service-learning efforts.
CHAPTER 3
CREEPING THE VINES:
PERFORMING A RHIZOMATIC WOMANIST METHODOLOGY

The call for a recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution—one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy. (hooks, 1994, p. 30)

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the key theoretical tenets of womanism are radical subjectivity, redemptive self-love, traditional communalism, and critical engagement (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). Drawing from Walker’s (1983) definition as a means to construct realities and produce knowledges apart from the cultural hegemonic paradigm, womanist scholars such as Collins (2000) have taken these tenets to build an epistemological foundation derived from lived experience, dialogue, and personal accountability. According to Dillard (2006),

[T]he underlying understanding of the nature of reality and the forms of discourse one employs (or is encouraged or permitted to employ) to construct realities in research … significantly impacts not only what can be said and how it is said, but where it is said” (p. 1, emphasis added).

This is especially relevant to multicultural education research centered on urban communities and populations of color. Womanist epistemology challenges assumptions requiring such groups to be represented and “spoken for” based on a singular conception of “truth” through a positivistic lens (Dillard, 2006, p. 4). Given its commitment to Black female cultural expressions, everyday conversations, and life stories, womanist epistemology and theory seek to disrupt dominant ways of knowing. As such, both have strong implications in research, creating an ethos of responsibility that not only provides a space for unheard voices to speak but also builds meaningful relationships among
community members and researchers that ensure more accurate representation extending well beyond data collection and interpretation.

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods used for this ethnographic case study and examines the methodological considerations for womanist pedagogy through ethnographic interviewing, participant observation, and autoethnography. Grounded in a critical, interpretive paradigm, the study focuses “on the ways in which gender, class, culture, race, ethnicity, and power intersect to shape inequities” as well as the co-construction of situated meanings within a particular cultural environment (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 46). Given these intersections, this paradigmatic lens works well when examining service-learning discourses within an urban womanist context. The research methods add insight to this critical qualitative inquiry. The chapter concludes with a discussion of my social position and how it factors into my role as co-researcher and co-participant in this study.

Method

*Ethnographic Case Study*

Ethnographic case study research provides depth in examining the service-learning course profiled in this study. The case allows me to take a tripartite view of urban-centered critical service-learning (the construction of counternarratives by community members and the instructor) and to explore the case as a singular “functioning body” (Stake, 2005, p. 444). Although there is no strict protocol related to developing case studies due to its multiple design approaches, I am using criteria based
on Merriam’s (1988, pp. 11-13) definition that identifies four properties present in a qualitative case study:

1. Case studies are *particularistic* within a bounded system such as a setting, event, individual, or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

2. Their end products are *descriptive* through the use of “thick” description that describes the investigation in the richest possible detail.

3. Case studies are *heuristic* by providing readers new ways of understanding explored phenomena.

4. They are *inductive* through the redrawing of generalized facts and insights from the data presented (Stake, 2005).

Floyd-Thomas (2006) defines case studies as inquiries that use narration to illustrate “real-life situations that cause us to reflect on moral dilemmas” (p. 70). Such narratives serve as snapshots reflecting a social concern that requires deeper investigation as to “What happened?” “How did it happen?” and “Why did it happen?” (p. 71). From a womanist perspective, case study analysis represents Floyd-Thomas’s tenet of traditional communalism as a means of building an ethos of responsibility to the collective health of Black women and to the “survival and wholeness of [an] entire people, both male and female” (p. 69) based on Walker’s womanist vision. This dissertation presents a case study of urban service-learning experience as observed by Black women participants, both as community members and faculty (myself).

While the case provides the structure necessary to draw attention to counternarrative construction through critical service-learning practices, its purpose is to advance understanding of the larger issue at hand: The need to destabilize hegemonic
discourses in service-learning that rely on deficit thinking to distinguish privileged academic participants from “disadvantaged” urban “recipients.” Such distinctions can protect the existing power dynamic between campus and community through the exoticization of the “at-risk” Other. At its core, the study calls into question the ways in which traditional service-learning is taught and dominant representations of agency within urban service-learning practice are presented to potential stakeholders. The use of case studies to explore various aspects of service-learning in communication studies has been established, albeit limited given the slow emergence of this pedagogical method to the discipline (for examples, see Droge & Murphy, 1999). The case study in this dissertation will contribute to the existing literature on the subject.

Why Autoethnography Matters

Since the late 1970s, autoethnography has evolved in range and scope to take on multiple definitions and applications across the disciplines. Originally coined by anthropologists who needed a descriptor for researchers conducting studies of their “own people” and wanting to embed their personal accounts into their observations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), autoethnography is now an umbrella term that includes similar first-person narratives such as personal writing, critical autobiography, ethnographic memoir, ethnobiography, and confessional tales. (For a more comprehensive listing, refer to Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739-740.) Given the myriad definitions and terms used in the genre, I prefer to apply the term “autoethnography” to this study since it best describes the type of personal research writing I employed; for the purposes of this project, I also drew from Ellis & Bochner’s (2000) definition of autoethnography as “an
autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). By positioning the researcher as both subject and object of study—while also inviting the readers as co-participants—this evocative, embodied, and reflective prose allows researcher, reader, and text to collectively bear witness to social, historical and political “aspects of their personal experience,” shifting all authorial power away from the capital-A academic as the sole observer and interpreter of culture (Ellis & Bochner, p. 739).

As a method, autoethnography provides a space for researchers and readers to create new forms of sense-making based on the interaction between them. Pollock (1998) identifies in her influential chapter, “Performing Writing,” that this type of textual relationship shifts from the function of merely reporting to that of doing as an “important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life” (p. 75). The spoken-word poetry that William-White (2011) weaves into her experiences teaching multicultural education while simultaneously confronting microaggressions associated with sexism and racism in academia, for example, makes “doing” autoethnography a direct action of sorts: the writer and reader must be critically and discursively engaged in order for the connection to have meaning. Similar to the way in which William-White uses evocative storytelling techniques to help readers ride the wave of tensions reflected throughout her narrative, autoethnography presents a new opportunity to engage the senses and while developing new ways of engaging with language for the writer and reader.

Autoethnography addresses the philosophical aspects that explore how truth and value are weighed through written reflections. In his book, Writing the New Ethnography,
Goodall (2000) considers localized formations of truth as one of the “gifts” of postmodernism (as also shown by his reference to postmodernist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard), arguing that deconstructing rational linear modes of thought helps pave the way to recognizing multiple realities as opposed to a singular reality: “Postmodernists assert that the logical assumptions and scientific methods guide—some say, privilege—a particular reasoning elite’s consensual view of reality: the grand narrative of Western, mostly White, mostly male, science” (p. 12). As co-authors Adams and Jones explain in “Autoethnography is Queer” (2008), the purpose of this form of writing is to “set a scene, tell a story, and create a text that demands attention and participation; makes witnessing and testifying possible; and puts pleasure, difference, and movement into productive conversation” (p. 375).

This approach to storytelling should not be mistaken for the use of personal narrative for the sake of achieving awareness or enlightenment commonly found within the canon of White feminist literature (Dillard, 2008; Swiencicki, 2006). While Black feminist scholars and writers such as Collins, hooks, Walker, and Floyd-Thomas have made significant contributions to womanist ethics and theory building, the literature pertaining to womanist-specific research methods is significantly limited. Given the growing body of literature dedicated to autoethnographic writing that focuses on creating dynamic relationships between researchers, readers, and texts, I chose this performative approach as a means to situate my inquiry within indigenous urban educational spaces as a contribution to spiritually-centered “activist praxis” in critical service-learning research (Dillard, 2008, p. 279). Similar to how hooks (1994) describes her first encounters with
theory as a “location for healing” (p. 59), autoethnography intersects holistic practices and qualitative research.

Crafting the HeART of Ethnographic Interviewing

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing debate regarding the direction of ethnographic research, particularly in regards to the ways relationships develop between researchers and participants (Heyl, 2007). Emerging from this debate has been an increased interest in ethnographic interviewing, with its roots in cultural anthropology, as a means to gather rich data directly from participants as they give an account of their lived experiences (Heyl, 2007; Smith, 2007). In response to the limitations of qualitative methodologies challenged by feminist, critical race, and poststructuralist scholars, greater emphasis has been placed on projects in which researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds. (Heyl, 2007, p. 369)

Analogous to Kvale’s (1996) description of interviews as a shared journey between travelers, these relationships cultivate a richer exchange between parties as participants walk together through each question and response. Scholars have made considerations as to how deeper researcher-participant relationships have a direct impact on the ways knowledge is co-constructed as a result of their interactions (Heyl, 2007; Kvale, 1996; Spradley, 1979). A significant way the partnership distinguishes itself from other forms of qualitative inquiry (such as surveys and questionnaires) is that it relies heavily on the participants’ own language and interpretation of events to generate meaning, as opposed
to researchers directing their studies based solely on their cultural standpoint (Spradley, 1979). As Spradley (1979) explains in *The Ethnographic Interview*,

> Ethnographers adopt a particular stance toward people with whom they work. By word and by action, in subtle ways and direct statements, they say, “I want to understand the world from our point of view. *I want to know what you know in the way you know it.* I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?” (p. 35, italics added)

The interviewer’s genuine interest in the participants’ interpretation of the world is representative of womanist methodologies centered on dialogue and collaboration. Regarded by many feminist researchers as conversational and interactive, ethnographic interviewing provides a space in which both parties are shaped by the process (Heyl, 2007). The *nature* of such interactions, however, is still a matter of debate: I, for example, question DeVault’s (1999) essentialist assertion that interviews between women involve both participants engaging in “woman talk” as a means to co-construct meaning (p. 101). Heyl (2007) and DeVault (1999) raise valid points when arguing that language is often imported from male-dominant categories and transplanted into interviews with women.

Another point of contention lies within the power asymmetry often overlooked in ethnographic interviews (Burman, 1997; Kvale, 2006). While liberal and humanistic approaches to interviewing have made qualitative research less alienating than its objective positivist counterpart, this is not to suggest that the relationship between researcher and interviewee is egalitarian and knowledge is jointly constructed (Kvale, 2006). Because the researcher controls all aspects of the interview (such as scheduling, initiating questions, determining length, and concluding the process), the interview
becomes a one-way dialogue rather than a conversation in which both parties actively seek knowledge (Kvale, 2006). Given this skewed interaction, the interview becomes an instrument used to collect narrative data while positioning the researcher as the “big interpreter” who can construe participants’ responses to satisfy her or his research interests (Kvale, 2006, p. 485). While respondents can employ countermeasures such as member checks and refusals to offset the power imbalance, the interview may be potentially exploitive as the researcher maintains full sovereignty throughout the process and has the most to gain materially from the knowledge produced with each interview (Burman, 1997).

Bearing these tensions in mind, I am more aware of the ways in which power can be exerted regardless of the researcher’s intentions. In his concluding remarks, Kvale (2006) notes how qualitative interviewing can be beneficial as well as detrimental, similar to Derrida’s depiction of *pharmakon* as possessing both medicinal and toxic properties:

> Interviews are a sensitive and powerful method; they are, in themselves, neither ethical nor unethical, neither emancipating nor oppressing. In a critical social science, interviews may contribute to the empowerment of the oppressed. In management and consumer research, interviews can contribute to the disempowerment of workers and consumers. A key issue concerns who obtains access and who has the power and resources to act on and consume what the multiple interview voices tell the interviewing stranger. (p. 497, italics added)

From a womanist context, interviews provide additional resources for researcher and respondent to support their communities based on the knowledge they both produce from varying social positions. Rather than seeking consensus to unify (or manipulate) ideas, a *dissensus* approach “allow[s] for a multiplicity of competing stories…to come forth with contrasting perspectives on the topic of study,” thus making differing perspectives
between the interviewer and respondent more explicit (Kvale, 2006, p. 488). As the current and subsequent chapters will demonstrate, womanist research is inherently multivocal and is at the heart of counternarrative production. Through their relationships to place and community that encompass an activist praxis, both interviewer and respondent are co-participants in the research process and must rely on each other’s knowledge to jointly seek solutions promoting sustainable change. Though Burman (1997), Kvale (2006), and other research scholars critique the use of dialogue to describe the interviewing process, I argue that the term aptly depicts womanist qualitative methods. Given the nonhierarchical nature of critical service-learning and womanist methodology, I am working collaboratively with community members to ensure that I do not take interpretative liberties with the data collected and keep the lines of communication open throughout the study. As Heyl (2007) suggests, empathetic interviewing requires the following processes to strengthen the dialogic relationship between participants as a means of reducing harm:

1. Listen well and respectfully, developing an ethical engagement with the participants at all stages of the project;

2. acquire a self-awareness of our role in the co-construction of meaning during the interview process;

3. be cognizant of ways in which both the ongoing relationship and the broader social context affect the participants, the interview process, and the project outcomes; and

4. recognize that dialogue is discovery and only partial knowledge will ever be attained. (p. 370)

Contrary to my theoretically dominant position as the academic researcher, my interview partners and I are on equal footing due to their deep and personal connections with the
Research Process

As Stake (2005) writes, “[T]he author has some responsibility for the validity of the readers’ interpretations” (p. 453). To reduce the likelihood of reader misinterpretation, Stake (2005), Maxwell (2005), and Creswell (2009) suggest using triangulation to effectively integrate multiple qualitative research methods to clarify meaning from multiple perspectives. Given its womanist framework, this study concentrated on the articulated experiences of critical service-learning participants from various social positions. Because critical service-learning creates a space for participants to articulate their experiences, the study focused primarily on the “voices” of Black women community members but also included my voice as co-instructor and co-researcher, along with my ethnographic participant-observations. “Triangulation,” according to Stake (2005), “helps to identify different realities” (p. 454).

Given Black feminism’s emphasis on lived experience as the basis for co-constructed knowledge and realities, I requested community members to participate in semi-structured interviews to ensure that their voices and experiences were included in the data. The interview questions dug more deeply into their history with Detroit, their work in community activism, and their experiences with service-learning (and with service-learning academic partners). They constructed counternarratives that reflected their visions of Detroit as a site for engaged learning and transformation, standing in opposition to pervasive negative images of the city and its people.
As the “second voice” of this study, I shared my personal experiences as a Black feminist instructor who was being “schooled in Detroit” through her experiences with community members. While I explored my own intersections of identity and place, I constructed a pedagogical counternarrative that seeks to challenge the ways in which urban service-learning is hegemonically produced. Through personal photographs of Detroit, recorded observations of previous service-learning courses I co-taught in the city, and references to e-mail dialogues I had with community members, I chronicled my journey to “growing homeplace” using an urban womanist approach to social justice education. The self-reflections placed my Self as the “outsider within” (see “Researcher’s Positionality” later in this chapter) who struggled to navigate the spaces between community and academia while co-creating meaning with community partners in inner-city Detroit. Throughout my analysis and discussion, I refer to several different service-learning experiences with which I was involved. Many of my encounters took place while teaching a third-year communication theory course with a service-learning component at multiple community sites. Upon course completion, I continued working at these sites as a volunteer (though I could argue that the service-learning course continued with me as the sole participant). In addition, I chronicle my experiences developing a second-year critical service-learning course (Gender, Race, and Urban Environmental Space) at another institution. As is indicative of autoethnographic writing and research (Chang, 2008; Pollock, 1998), I constructed an autobiographical timeline that focused on my border-crossing experiences as a graduate student and educator operating inside and outside the traditional classroom.
After completing the interviews and textual analyses, identifying the recurring themes, and integrating my personal narratives to connect with those themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2000), I had a sufficient amount of data to respond to the following questions presented earlier in this study:

- In what ways do Black women community members connect positionality and urban space as forms of resistance?
- How do Black women community members work with service-learners to address power and identity in urban space?
- Within a womanist pedagogical context, how can the counternarratives of Black women community members be applicable to social justice education in urban service-learning?

Given the interpretive nature of the methods used, each research participant (myself included) interpreted their experiences and applied meaning based on those experiences; therefore, no outside coders were used.

Data Collection

*Participant Observation*

In contrast to direct observation in which the researcher records data from a distance, participant observation requires the researcher to become embedded in the site of inquiry and an interactive member within that community (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). The process centers on the researcher building rapport and trust among community members in order to fully convey the complexities of the human experience reflective in the study (Guest et al., 2013). It is not the goal for the researcher to gain
complete “insider” status over time; rather, it is to ensure that the community’s narrative is told as accurately as possible both from the perspective of the participant-observer and from the community members themselves. With roots branching from the rich anthropological tradition of Zora Neale Hurston, this methodological approach aligns with a womanist ethic that emphasizes the voices and experiences of Black women as units of analysis (Harris, 2010). The womanist paradigm differs from its dominant academic counterpart in its commitment to “coming to voice” as a form of resistance (Collins, 2000; Harris, 2010, p. 159). Bearing this commitment in mind, the purpose of recording Black women’s experiences is not simply to illustrate sociocultural phenomena within that particular group; it is to deepen understanding of interlocking systems of oppression as it relates to Black women’s lives with the intent of disrupting those systems.

In order to accurately record field experiences relevant to the study, I became an active member of Feed Our People Detroit (a pseudonym) and regularly attended its monthly meetings. I also volunteered at its farm most weekends, selecting the location over other agricultural sites in the city due to its closer proximity to my residence as well as organizational structure (the farm consistently maintained volunteer hours every weekend). I attended the two-hour meetings for seven consecutive months, taking field notes on the agenda during and shortly after each gathering. Due to the hands-on nature of farm labor, I documented my observations on a digital audio recorder that centered on a particular theme as recommended by Guest et al. (2013). The recordings ranged from 20 to 30 minutes in length. I later took notes from the recordings and transferred them to
the margins of the transcribed interviews (see below) to provide context and details for respondents’ comments related to experiences I observed.

Autoethnographic Writing

As Chang (2008) suggests in *Autoethnography as Method*, using autobiographical timelines is an effective means to collect personal memory data relevant to a particular subject. My journey into critical service-learning from a Black feminist perspective did not occur in a vacuum; intense emotional events took place within my immediate environment at a particular time. My evolution from a traditional to a social justice educator was part of a process of self-discovery and displacement, driving my desire to find a homeplace that unites my teaching and activism. The physical and symbolic border-crossings that Chang (2008) refers to also “challenged my presuppositions and perspectives at the time they happened, have sometimes derailed me from my comfort zone, have broadened the horizon of my life, and have shaped me as a multicultural educator” (p. 158). In addition, these experiences shaped my views concerning urban-based higher education. As part of the data used for this study, the following chapter provides a timeline of my border-crossing experiences in a variety of cultural and educational contexts. The entries include brief parenthetical descriptions of how the experiences affected me personally and professionally.

To provide more depth and accurate recollection to my experiences as a participant observer, I included personal comments in the audio recordings that reflected on my emotional responses to specific conversations and significant events involving community members. I later converted these recorded reflections into brief typewritten
notes that were chronologically dated. The notes were labeled to correspond with the themes that emerged from the interviews I conducted with community members. In order to maintain the confidentiality of participants, I assigned pseudonyms and altered place names during the note-taking process. Drawing from the autobiographical timeline modelled after Chang (2008) and data collected from personal documents (i.e., digital photographs, poetry, journals, and e-mail correspondence), I pulled together recollections of experiences relevant to the study. By using personal accounts and emotional touchstones to create meaning in this case study, I am positioning myself as a “participant learner,” whose “knowledge is constructed by using one’s agency to learning from the context and one’s training to work to resolve the moral crisis described by the individuals in the case” (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 70). Chronicling my service-learning experiences as the “outsider within” a particular social context, I created a thick description of interactions, settings, and situations from the reflexive position as a researcher working in solidarity with community members.

*Semi-structured Interviews*

This study included semi-structured interviews that “obtain[ed] descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting [their] meaning” (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Although Dillard (2008) includes deep listening as a means of demonstrating community and dialogue from a womanist methodological approach, it is also fitting to include it here as part of interviewing practices that require genuine professional interaction and a desire to know the respondent on a deep and personal level (Seidman, 2006). As Seidman (2006) argues, in-
depth interviews can develop connections between the participants’ recorded experiences and the lives of the readers, creating an “alternative to generalizability” for the interview researcher (p. 52).

To generate a participant pool of four community members, I directly requested former service-learning partners for face-to-face interviews. As part of the selection criteria, the participants had to self-identify as Black/African American, female, adult (18 years of age or older), long-term Detroit residents (ten years or more), community gardeners, and service-learning collaborators with at least one academic semester of experience. Due to the challenges associated with locating members of this targeted group, I also employed “snowball sampling” (Kvale, 1996) measures by asking participants for additional names of prospective interviewees who fit the selection criteria.

Participant Introductions

The following profiles the community members who graciously participated in this study and provided insights into life experiences that have shaped their approaches to service-learning in Detroit:

- The ages of the four women ranged from 30 to 59
- The women found themselves in various occupations, including youth conservation leader, information technology technician, and middle-school teacher
  - Kipanga (Married to a self-identified Black male; mother of adult children; grandmother; born and raised in Detroit; grew up in a middle-
class household; full-time nonprofit professional; previously enrolled in college courses)

- Bea (Divorced; mother of adult children; born in Detroit; attended integrated and segregated Detroit Public Schools; raised in middle-class household with dual-career parents; full-time public sector professional; never attended college; self-educated)

- Amaka (Mother of school-aged children; married to a self-identified Black male; biracial but self-identifies as Black; raised “struggling” middle-class in Detroit by single White mother; full-time nonprofit professional; earned college degree)

- Kasi (Single grandmother; born and raised in U.S. South; two-parent home; spent summers with grandparents in rural South until early adolescence; relocated to Detroit as an adult; full-time non-profit professional; earned college degree)

While gathering the personal narratives of community members, I conducted each interview using open-ended and probing questions to maintain flexibility throughout the process (Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 2006). The interviews lasted up to 90 minutes each and were administered at a time and location agreed upon by the participant and me as being safe, convenient and relatively quiet, specifically at establishments familiar to community members (Seidman, 2006). To further contextualize the construction of counternarratives in relation to urban spaces, the interviews took place inside the city of Detroit. I digitally audiotaped each interview and took notes to ensure reliable collection of data (Creswell, 2009; Seidman, 2006). The goal of collecting community members’ interviews was to
further explore how their relationships with/in Detroit shaped them personally and politically, how those relationships informed the ways in which they engaged with service-learning partners, and how such relationships could possibly inform the ways in which critical service-learning can be more inclusive from the perspective of community members.

The interview schedule (Appendix A) was a more in-depth exploration into the participants’ connection to Detroit and how that connection informed their activism. The questions were also separated into categories: Background Information (that includes their upbringing, and earlier views of “place” in relation to their social identity); Detroit and Community Activism (focusing on possible spiritual/religious influences, personal views of Detroit, current activities related to revitalizing Detroit; and Detroit and Service-Learning (concentrating on their roles in service-learning and their relationship with students). According to Seidman (2006), in-depth interviews with select participants provide deeper insight into a particular phenomenon and increase the likelihood of connecting with readers. In addition, the community members provided rich examples through what Patton (1990) refers to as intensity sampling “from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purposes of the research” (p. 169). Though some of the community members are viewed as public figures featured in documentaries, newspapers, and social media outlets, measures were taken to protect their identity; they either selected a pseudonym or requested I assign one to them.
Digging In: Rhizomatic Womanist Methodology

In order to adequately explore service-learning counternarratives derived from urban Black women’s experiences, the application of an integrated qualitative research model would produce the best outcome (Maxwell, 2005; Steinberg, Bringle, & Williams, 2010). I laid the groundwork for a critical womanist methodology that attempts to distance itself from traditional paradigms and instead aligns itself with a cooperative and empathic approach to social research rooted in critical connections relevant to race, gender and class (Collins, 2000; Ladner, 1971/1995). Given the rich complexities of service-learning experiences in Detroit and the impact of those experiences among participants, I constructed a research design that cultivates a poststructural rhizomatic womanist methodology—one that freely moves, stretches and interweaves between social identity and spaces. Based on a term coined by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987/1988), the metaphoric rhizome “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (p. 8). Consistent with womanism due to its heterogeneous and decentralizing nature, the metaphoric rhizome is not bound by hierarchies or starting/stopping points of existence that facilitate growth. It does not rely on a single source to direct its horizontal movement; rather, the rhizome continually creeps underground as it connects counterhegemonic shoots and roots in the process. Similarly, a rhizomatic womanist methodology creates a counterhegemonic frame of reference for pedagogical research using critical indigenous methodology that emphasizes place, community, and praxis (Dillard, 2008)³. In this context, members within communities
can produce and share knowledge without the need for experts or a prescribed curriculum to make learning possible (Cormier, 2008).

*Rhizomatic womanist methodology centers on place.* In a womanist context, place provides a foundation for connecting self and others as a means of *touching the earth* through shared experiences (Dillard, 2006). For the purposes of this study, my approach to methodology expands upon Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) use of *bricoleur* and *quilt maker* as metaphors to describe the assemblage work involved in qualitative inquiry; both images imply that the researcher engages in piecing together “everyday” materials as a form of storytelling. With regard to service-learning research, however, the methodology is centered on *place* and much of the storytelling occurs in relation to a particular place. I suggest, therefore, that the metaphoric *gardener* be applied instead because it involves planting and nurturing a diverse crop, relying on various sources of indigenous knowledge to make sense of the “gardening” process relevant to social justice education and research (Freire & Faundez, 1989; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2005). The gardener-researcher uses place-based connections to inform the inquiry, seeking participants to “speak their truth” as they cultivate their identities in service-learning situations from various social locations. As Anzaldúa (1990) posits, the interaction of reflection, interaction and action strengthens the link between “face” (self-inscribed identity) and “place,” making it possible to develop a hybrid (*mestiza*) consciousness necessary for border-crossings that intersect race, gender, and class in relation to geographic and cultural space (Anzaldúa, 1999). She writes,

> In our self-reflectivity and in our active participation with the issues that confront us, whether it be through writing, front-line activism, or individual self-development, we are also uncovering the inter-faces, the
very spaces and places where our multiple-surfaced, colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect (1990, p. xvi).

While working alongside community members in a Detroit-based service-learning course, I observed how “face-making” (in Anzaldúa’s sense) took place in various spaces: in a traditional communication classroom, in an inner-city community garden, and a church-owned neighborhood commons. What makes the Detroit learning experience “rhizomatic” is its potential to spread beyond the city’s boundaries and sprout in other areas where formal and informal learning takes place through the cultivation of realities and subjectivities. Boggs (1998) describes the People’s Festival, the predecessor of one of the service-learning projects in which my students and I participated, as “a Multi-Generational, Multi-Cultural celebration of Detroiter’s, putting our hearts, minds, hands and imaginations together to redefine and re-create a city of Community, Compassion, Cooperation, Participation and Enterprise in harmony with the Earth” (pp. 231-232). As my students and I were supporting Festival organizers with planning, logistics, and activities, many of us were also learning lessons in interdependence, resilience and radical creativity literally on common ground. As community members taught us the history of the area and its current use, the students and I relied heavily on their organic knowledge to help us navigate the space. Rather than assuming our academic “expertise” would be sufficient in completing our assigned tasks, we worked closely with our partners as they guided us.

From a womanist perspective, the Festival could also serve as a reflection of Black women’s historical relationship to space. Mistinguette Smith, a community activist and Black feminist researcher states, “Black women tend to talk about their relationships
to land and place in very specific ways. They focus less on who owns the land and more on how it is used — to build self-sufficiency, hospitality and connectedness” (as cited in Dermont & Wadley, 2011, p. 1) Another group of students and I relied on the mother wit of community members who taught us not only the fundamentals of neighborhood gardening but also the reasons behind the practice. During a pre-service roundtable discussion at the Boggs Center on Detroit’s Eastside, the students and I listened to Black women’s stories of community survival and the efforts being made to bring sustainability to fruition. Through gardening and storytelling, the women grew their rhizomatic roots across centuries of historical trauma related to land loss (e.g., slavery, sharecropping, restrictive covenants, highways via urban renewal, and so on) as well as the daily acts of love connected to the land, creating a sense of homeplace and self-determination for all who enter (Smith, 2011). Although she does not directly situate Black women in a rhizomatic connection to Detroit land, community activist and blogger Adrienne Maree Brown (“Interview,” 2009) aptly describes this connection in radically relevant terms:

Detroit is full of “midwives.” They say, “We’re birthing it. We have to do love. We have to transform ourselves.” In all of our cities, we have to begin to live the world we want to see. Our actions have to be towards the world we want. We need to be guerilla gardening and turning people’s heat and water on. We need to be the guerillas putting up solar panels in the hood…. In terms of sustainability, I don’t believe we can have a green future or any future, unless we understand that we have to change the power dynamics based on race, class, and gender. We have to invert the power structure. We must pour our resources and relations into those who are the most impacted and have the most need—that means our children, our elders, those who are sick and dying. They should become the recipients of our energy. That’s where our wisdom comes from; and our future (para. 5; para. 14).

Black women’s connection to urban land can also be a source of healing from the trauma caused by “soul loss,” an estrangement from the natural world and reification of
the mind/body split as a result of industrialization (hooks, 2002). Though critiques of Western modernity extend beyond the scope of this inquiry, it is important to note the ways in which “progress” has devalued earth-based sources of traditional indigenous knowledge as it relates to women of African ascent. Their oral traditions, spiritual practices, community interdependence, and deep understanding of diverse ecosystems parallel with contemporary womanism and its strong sense of place (Dillard, 2008; Floyd-Thomas, 2006; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2011). During the first half of the twentieth century, advances in industry detached Black bodies from their land: Substandard apartments and segregated neighborhoods reserved for factory workers and their families replaced the front porches and farms regarded as safe spaces within Black communities (for examples in Detroit, see Sugrue, 2005). As she compares the agrarian societies of the South to those found in northern industrialized cities during the Great Migration, hooks (2002) argues that land loss and soul loss are closely linked to other forms of social dis/ease:

Unmindful of our history of living harmoniously on the land, many contemporary black folks see no value in supporting ecological movements, or see ecology and the struggle to end racism as competing concerns. Recalling the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard land and nature will determine the level of our self-regard, black people must reclaim a spiritual legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth. (p. 32)

The reconnection is taking place in cities such as Detroit with Black women leading the charge. Gloria Lowe—one of the community partners involved with this study’s service-learning project—is a former automotive laborer who founded We Want Green Too, a nonprofit whose mission “is to re-educate, retrain and rebuild a 21st century, sustainable Detroit” by enlisting homeless veterans to rehabilitate houses (Lowe, 2011). While
working as a final line inspector for Ford, she personifies the mind/body split that hooks asserts: “I understand what it means to not be able to think and what that takes away from a person because it took it away from me. They said, ‘Just do the job—don’t think about the job’” (Lowe, 2011). Forced into retirement as a result of a work-related traumatic brain injury, Lowe now shares her vision of Detroit and its people, part of a place-based counternarrative that centers on the womanist tenets of radical subjectivity, redemptive self-love, and communalism that facilitate transformation (Floyd-Thomas, 2006):

I woke up this morning with this thought on my mind about language. In the news you hear, “The poverty-stricken citizens of Detroit. Oh, the devastated communities. It’s so desolate…and homelessness is everywhere and despair.” That was enough to make you feel bad. What if it read, “The spiritually-rich citizens of Detroit, experiencing abandoned homes, have now decided to embrace—with love and hope—their communities and rebuild for a future”? That sounds different. (Lowe, 2011)

Lowe’s use of “spiritually-rich” language to describe communities in Detroit parallels the goals of womanist research and directs the researcher to work with/in the city. Through radical subjectivity, research participants must be regarded as subjects rather than objects that serve as backdrop for urban decay; their voices and visions must be taken into account. For the purposes of this study, I used member checks to give interview participants opportunities to make meaning along with me as the researcher. In addition to presenting entire transcriptions for review, I highlighted interpreted sections of themes and patterns to verify accurate interpretation of each participant’s account. As active co-researchers of the project, interview participants employed what Doyle (2007) refers to as “participative member checking” (p. 908), wherein participants had several choices of procedures before giving me final approval to publish quoted narratives
(Carlson, 2010). I e-mailed transcripts of interviews to respective participants to review for accuracy and make necessary changes and clarifications upon request.

*Rhizomatic womanist methodology centers on community.* Dillard (2008) stresses the need for researchers to engage in “unconditional love,” the “experience that creates more reciprocal (and thus more just) sites of inquiry” (p. 287). It is through deep understanding of self and others that re-situates the researcher to work beyond the “self-gratifying rewards of the research project” alone, focusing instead on how the project will be used in service to others (Dillard, 2008, p. 287). Similar to the ways in which womanist epistemology challenges hierarchical structures that determine how knowledge is produced and valued, womanist alternatives to traditional research methods are necessary to fully examine the complex intersections of race, gender, class, and other identities involving researchers and co-participants (Mullings, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). One of the tenets of womanist theory, communalism, also requires the researcher to focus on the shared responsibility of rebuilding communities while also maintaining “allegiance and substantive connections to the very communities under study” (Dillard, 2006, p. 2).

Expanding on Dillard’s concept, *community* goes beyond the conventional definition that makes the term synonymous with *place* (see previous section). For the purposes of this study, I draw from Floyd-Thomas (2006) and Walker (1983) to describe the collective formation of “the various gifts, identities, and concerns of black people in general in order to use every resource available” to support and enhance the lives of all members regardless of physical location (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 9). In an interview with
Bowles (2006), an African-American grassroots activist illustrates “community” on a local and global level:

We’re in Mexico, we’re in Africa, we’re in Europe, and so we have to embrace all of our people wherever they are. And if someone is hurting in Africa, that’s the same as my family member who maybe [sic] hurting here. So, as people of color, and particularly of Black people living in America, we have to understand that [we are all] around the world and we are all hurting, all going through the same thing. (p. 57)

Bearing this definition in mind, womanist methodology is inherently participatory, situating the researcher into a collaborative relationship with members through activities such as cultural events, neighborhood-centered projects, and community organizing. In order for me to establish credibility and trust with service-learning partners, for example, I had to have first demonstrated a genuine commitment to Detroit’s grassroots efforts before, during, and after the service-learning experience. I often participate in community events and provide additional logistical support for activities sponsored by community members. Months after teaching a summer service-learning course, for example, I returned to one of the neighborhood gardens to assist with harvesting and preparing the soil for winter. The community members and I have kept in regular contact, exploring other opportunities to expand the garden and collaborate on future service-learning projects. Mitchell (2008) identifies continuity as one of the essential elements to maintaining meaningful relationships through critical service-learning instruction and research, and I strongly agree with this notion.

Just as Collins (2000) advocates for an ethic of caring, an ethic of passion and compassion are required to conduct community-centered research. Because this study presents a critique of how urban service-learning “victory” narratives do not take into
account the diverse voices and experiences of Black female community partners, this community-centered approach to qualitative inquiry is essential to womanist pedagogy and critical service-learning. The combination of autoethnographic accounts of my service-learning journey, interviews with community partners, and participant-learner observations will remove me as the lone authoritative voice in the study. The love is unconditional in the sense that my narrative, as well as those of community members, will not only reflect the complexities of working with/in urban space but also will demonstrate how our deep connections to Detroit inform our healing approaches to social injustice, grassroots activism, and service-learning collaboration.

*Rhizomatic womanist methodology centers on praxis.* As mentioned in Chapter 2, praxis is the acquisition of critical awareness through reflection and action (Freire, 1970/2000). In her groundbreaking womanist treatise, *Katie’s Canon*, Cannon (1995) reconsiders how “we define, elaborate, exemplify, and justify the integration of being and doing” while constructing bodies of knowledge in opposition to “Eurocentric, male-normative” forms (p. 70). According to Stevens (2003), “African American social thought has evolved to become pragmatic, urgent, and concerned with merging social theory and action” (p. 25). These practical forms of social activism within African-American communities can be traced to Black women “improvising with self-styled social welfare systems and education programs designed for racial uplift and community enrichment” (Lindsay, 1956; Stevens, 2003, p. 26). Through her interviews with women activists of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), White (2011) powerfully illustrates how these members use gardening as a means to exercise political agency and empowerment. Through their efforts, the women work with other
DBCFSN members to transform vacant land into a localized source of healthy food (as opposed to petitioning local government officials for more grocery stores and increased access to fresh food). In addition, they use food as an entry point for African Americans to discuss other paths toward self-determination and self-reliance. Through praxis, the women regard their connection to place, community, and the earth as “all[ies] in the struggle for liberation because [they provide] a living learning space and a refuge for communities that experience racial and economic apartheid” (p. 19). It is the union between “being” and “doing” that makes homeplace possible, creating ways of knowing that inscribe a sense of history and engender a connectedness to the natural and physical environment where Black women congregate, celebrate, and collaborate as acts of resistance (Bowles, 2006; White, 2011).

The relationships developed through critical service-learning practice provide the opportunity to create research that is itself a declaration of love in action: an “erotic” combination of theory and practice (hooks, 1994). Womanist research should not only value women but also directly benefit women through social change. Although DeVault (1999) emphasizes the use of feminist research to benefit women exclusively, I expand on this approach by applying Walker’s (1983) definition of womanist to not only address oppressive systems from a Black feminist perspective that brings Black women’s voices to the fore, but also creates an inclusive space for any individual to explore these systems from their own social positions with the goal of supporting holistic, inclusive communities to affect positive social change (Rendón, 2009). It is insufficient (and oppressive) for service-learning participants to solely “fix” the problems present within urban communities without uncovering the social and historical forces that perpetuate the
problems. Instead, researchers should rely on subjugated/indigenous knowledge of community members to inform pedagogy that questions exclusively Western approaches to urban-based instruction and disrupts the dominant discourses that inscribe them. This methodology in turn “challenges White privilege, rejects notions of ‘neutral’ research or ‘objective’ researchers, and exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26; see also Delgado Bernal, 1998). Hooks (1994) calls attention to the practice of radical scholarship that suggests that indeed the experience of black people, black females, might tell us more about the experience of women in general than simply an analysis that looks first, foremost, and always at those women who reside in privileged locations (p. 53).

Womanist research in critical service-learning seeks to hear multiple voices involved in the practice, supporting communities while keeping the embodied knowledges of marginalized participants at the heart of the work. By establishing praxis, the research offers suggestions for sustainable implementation that extend beyond curricular add-ons (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2005).

Justification of Research Methods

While there is no single definition of what constitutes qualitative research or researchers engaged in its methods, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) best describe this form of inquiry as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). These practices are also interconnected and interpretive, making it possible for qualitative researchers to learn more about a particular subject through various representations of the subject (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Because I am interested in the construction of
service-learning counternarratives as they relate to identity and urban spaces, I need a multi-method approach to make sense of the accounts and observations that will inform my study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Flick, 2002). Integrating community member interviews and autoethnography to dialogically construct womanist pedagogical practices within urban space, this dissertation will bring the rich, complex stories of those involved—as well as Detroit’s own developing counternarrative—into living color. The study is rooted in the womanist epistemological tenet of multivocality, bringing voices and narratives into the project. Qualitative research methods such as interviews and autoethnography best satisfy this need given their use of thick description and heuristic approaches to explore social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Flick, 2002). Within this context, the act of storytelling can provide “insight into the personal, institutional, and social dimensions of education systems” experienced by service-learning participants (Polansky, Andrianoff, Bernard, Flores, Gardocki, Handerhan, Park & Young, 2010, p. 306).

Researcher’s Positionality

Womanism is grounded in spirituality, community, and activist praxis, all of which construct my standpoint as a Black feminist educator, cultural worker, and researcher for this study. I also identify as working-class, low-income, and lesbian. Because I have an advanced college degree, reside in an affluent university town forty miles west of Detroit, and teach at the university level (albeit part-time without benefits), the amalgamation of marginalized and privileged identities positions me as the “outsider within,” what Collins (1998) describes as “the location of people who no longer belong to any one group” (p. 5). “Under conditions of social justice,” she continues, “the outsider-
within location describes a particular knowledge-power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining the full power accorded to members of that group” (p. 6). In regards to my work in urban service-learning, my placement within particular social locations is constantly shifting: Though I identify strongly with both, I am neither a full member of Detroit’s Black grassroots activist community nor a full member of the academic communities. My philosophical orientation is grounded in the naturalistic-constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), from which there are multiple, holistic “realities” from myriad perspectives as opposed to a singular, objective construction of “reality.” The experiences I and my participants brought into this study may have differed due to our disparate realities and unique orientations to Detroit, yet our interactions co-constructed new realities in the process. As a researcher, I am learning to be mindful of the tensions formed as I navigate the spaces between inclusion and exclusion (Collins, 1986). The next chapter explores these lessons in greater depth.
1975  Began formal education in Saginaw, Michigan—(separating from informal learning environment at home to structured, competitive learning environment)

1981  Teacher assigned me to the “best desk” adjacent to hers due to my high academic performance (designation as academically different from other students, alienated from classmates, teased for being the “teacher’s pet” and for being “proper”)

1982  Assigned to “gifted group” that was excused in the middle of class—learned advanced math, competed against local schools in spelling bees and “Battle of the Books” (gained legitimacy and recognition for being a “good”/“bright” student)

1986  Identified as “poor” by White middle-school administrator to qualify for summer federal education program; earned stipend for taking classes in bookkeeping, BASIC programming, and CPR (made the connection between continuing education and financial reward)

1991  Married a White man at 19/moved to Norfolk, Virginia (entered early adulthood in White heteronormative patriarchal context; identity and mobility centered on being “private property of a U.S. sailor”)

1994  Gave birth to my first child (new identity as mother)

1996  Secured enough financial aid to enroll in community college in Virginia—cried in the car upon receiving award letter. Weeks into the first semester, husband called me “lazy and worthless” during an argument for spending more time studying than caring for family (conflicted feelings regarding my place in higher education and my role as a wife/mother)

1996  English professor wrote on my final essay opposing school vouchers: “You are a compelling writer, Vanessa.” (feelings of accomplishment, validation, freedom)

1996  Foreclosure of Virginia home— forced to drop out of community college and move family back to my parents’ home in Saginaw (feelings of homelessness, loss, despair, failure, disillusionment of marriage)

2002  Graduated with Bachelors degree (English) (increasing independence and sense of self, awakening sexual identity)

2003  “Came out” as lesbian, separated from husband, began graduate school at the University of Michigan-Flint (exploring sexual and racial identities within urban contexts, developing awareness of social inequalities in relation to public policy)
2004  Joined local LGBT group and became actively involved in social/political activities (civic engagement experiences, developing a sense of belonging within affinity group, embodying “the personal is political”)

2005  Began teaching English part-time at community college located in rural mid-Michigan; took a traditionalist approach to instruction (adoption of the “banking” concept of education, belief that instructor was the sole constructor of knowledge, myopic focus on instructor “teaching difference,” lacking sense of place in relation to course material)

2005  English department chair pulled me aside during office hours to discuss students’ complaint of my being openly gay in the classroom—suggested I move to a more diverse place like Detroit; began searching for other employment (awareness of lower “adjunct” status in academia)

2006  Accepted full-time civic engagement coordinator position at LGBT community center in metropolitan Detroit; moved to Troy, Michigan with children; work with various constituents including homeless LGBT youth; divorce finalized (feelings of financial/personal independence, development of social justice as foundation for education)

2007  Began teaching communication courses part-time (COM 1010) at Wayne State; began PhD studies in communication (excitement about career prospects in academe/pursuing the “life of the mind”)

2007  Became active member of James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership; invited Grace to speak with my COM 1010 students regarding 1967 Rebellion—students excited to learn about community empowerment and gardening initiatives in Detroit neighborhoods (emerging awareness of Detroit grassroots community; making stronger connections between urban communities, sustainability, and social justice education)

2008  Taught first service-learning course in Detroit (in conjunction with Hannan House)—students and elder citizens share histories/personal stories about volunteerism in Detroit (seeing traditional service-learning as form of resistance education, breaking away from confined classroom settings)

2008  Enrolled in graduate course, “Rhetoric, Cultural Studies, & Detroit”—only to discover that the class would not be venturing outside the communication library (growing frustration with “placeless” rhetorical education/critical theory)

2009  Moved with children to Ann Arbor—closer to significant other (first open lesbian relationship with another Black feminist/mother/educator/public figure)
2009  Mother passes away unexpectedly—I lose only biological family member interested in my studies/teaching (feeling completely disconnected from home community)

2010  Taught another COM 1010 special-topics course focusing on grassroots activism in Detroit; class included “field trips” to Heidelberg Project, Spiral Collective, and U.S. Social Forum at Cobo Hall (excited to see students share their civic engagement experiences and incorporating those experiences with interests in education, visual arts, business, and music production)

2010  “Married” significant other in Ann Arbor in the presence of family, friends and colleagues (first time my past “home” and present “academic” communities converge—nervous about the “mixing” going on, feeling out of place living in affluent college town while still receiving public assistance and sleeping on a couch)

2010  Began teaching “Introduction to Gender and Sexuality” for Women’s and Gender Studies department at another urban institution in Southeast Michigan; became actively involved in part-time faculty union (seeing myself/radical pedagogy as “rhizomatic” and without borders, melding working-class identity into my academic identity)

2011  Taught COM 3400 as service-learning course (with Feedom Freedom Growers and We Want Green, Too); students worked directly with community partners, learn more about efforts to put the “neighbor” back in the “hood” (experiencing sense of purpose, though unsure of my place in the professoriate—tenure lines across disciplines disappear; approach to academic service-learning reflects charity-based model seeking to “help” community members)

2011  Dr. Pensoneau-Conway introduced me to “critical service-learning,” which more adequately describes the desired direction of my pedagogy; joined the “Teaching in Context” faculty study group at Eastern Michigan University; selected readings and films examining Detroit within political, economic, and historical contexts; biweekly discussions with EMU faculty and staff focused on how Detroit informs our teaching and scholarship; field visit to the city included stops at Belle Isle, Ossian H. Sweet Home, and Heidelberg Project (making stronger connections between critical service-learning and urban food justice using solidarity model, seeing Detroit as a site of grassroots-oriented participatory research)

2013  Joined Sunday Volunteer Crew at People’s Farm and officially become a member of Feed Our People Detroit; consult Detroit community members and submit proposal for EMU critical service-learning course “Gender, Race, and Urban Environmental Space” (recognizing myself as Detroit stakeholder, teaching and scholarship more intersectionalist and community-centered)
CHAPTER 4
DITICHIN’ THE MASTER’S GARDENING TOOLS FOR OUR OWN:
AN AUTO/ETHNOGRAPHIC DISCUSSION IN MULTIPLE VOICES

Lessons from Sankofa: An Introductory Retrospective

*Oh Sankofa high in the heavens you soar*

*My soul is soon to follow you back to yesterday's moon*

*Will it remember me back to yesterday's sun?*

*It will rekindle me*

*Rekindle the spirit into tomorrow and high on the wind*

*Sankofa flies again and again*

After I give a research presentation based on my dissertation last year, a student audience member asks about the study’s origins and how I became interested in the subject of critical service-learning as it relates to womanist pedagogy and food justice in Detroit. Though I have shared this narrative on numerous occasions, I often dwelled on the theoretical (why Black women’s experiences needed to be included in community-based teaching and research) as opposed to the personal (how my experiences played a role my own teaching and research). It was easy enough to religiously cite hooks’s (1994) arrival at theory as a place of healing, but I played it safe by not sharing my own painful narrative. It was easier still for me to write about my experiences with food insecurity (Marr, 2013) for the sake of publication, only to pray that my words remain locked between unturned pages while vowing never to speak openly of its contents. The discomfort I was experiencing during the Q & A forced me to recognize this sin of
omission and render myself vulnerable. As a result of this reckoning, I honestly and nervously began to respond to the student’s inquiry:

Like bell hooks, I also arrived at these intersections while searching for relief—a pain I am still learning to understand and articulate. While researching a very different dissertation topic a few years ago, I was watching my mother die from the ravages of diabetes and supporting two children with federal food assistance. I did not make a connection between the two until a few years ago.

Diabetes and food stamps are not foreign to me: they were part and parcel of a childhood unfolding in another industrial city two hours north of Detroit. In my home there were always conversations about someone having “sugar” and meals made from government cheese or items purchased with the most colorful currency I’d ever seen. Nothing was said as to where the cheese and “funny money” came from or why we used them. They were just there.

The funny thing was that we also grew our own food, but not on a regular basis. I can clearly remember Mama’s garden situated behind the garage. My five siblings and I helped out as best we could with watering and weeding. Our next-door neighbor, Mr. Osuna, worked weekends at the harness raceway and would bring us fresh horse manure for fertilizer! Though the stench was overpowering in the summer heat, Mama didn’t bat an eye and made us tend to that garden. When we saw only dirt and horse crap behind a weather-worn garage, she saw the sweetest tomatoes and green beans on the block. In addition to our home-based activities, we would pick collards and strawberries in seemingly endless lots owned by family friends on the other side of town. Though the fresh fruits and vegetables were not among our kitchen staples, they were a life-saver
when the cheese and food stamps ran out before the end of the month. I realize now how much I took them for granted, but I’m gradually finding my way back through the literal and figurative gardens of Detroit. Borrowing from Alice Walker (1983), as I recognize the beauty, strength and struggle of Black women, I am not only searching my mother’s garden but also my own.

I am learning this and many more lessons through my teaching and research, largely through the stories and wisdom shared by Black women who have invited me into their lives. Through naturalistic inquiry, I seek to further understand how they as community members use urban gardens as sites of resistance and resilience in their daily lives. In addition, I examine the conditions under which these relationships inform the development of critical service-learning courses and facilitate the co-construction of service-learning counternarratives with faculty. The voices of the four women interview participants for this study (all pseudonyms), as well as the remarks I describe as a “participant learner” (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p.70) will be heard throughout this chapter. In response to the research questions posed for this study, comments and themes are guided by the following assumption: In an urban womanist context, a series of geographic and cultural border crossings must take place with/in faculty in order to establish a critical service-learning relationship with community members. Through situated interactions, I examine this assumption by 1) further understanding how Black women community gardeners and faculty define themselves in relation to urban space. That is, I consider how they use urban agriculture to confront the social realities and structural inequalities relevant to their lived experiences in Detroit (and outside Detroit if they live or have lived elsewhere); 2) exploring how Black women community gardeners
and I (as faculty) articulate our racial, gendered, socioeconomic, sexual, spiritual, and geographic identities while collaborating in urban agricultural activities in Detroit; and 3) identifying the counternarratives co-constructed through this community member-faculty relationship forged through such activities, forming the basis for social justice education through critical service-learning.

*Prepping Tender Roots: The Researcher as Seedling*

As I pick up the phone to request permission to interview Kipanga, my heart quickens its beat. The nervousness I am experiencing forces me to stop dialing all her numbers twice before. The third time has to be the charm—avoidance is no longer an option. Though we had worked together on the communication service-learning course and often gravitate to the same Detroit activist circles, somehow I feel like a complete stranger attempting to make initial contact. My fear of being the academic outsider—or worse, an *impostor*—begins rearing its ugly head. How many researchers have come before me to “collect data” on this woman as though she was just another specimen to be examined? Despite my best intentions, how am I any different?

Another reason why I am feeling nervous about contacting Kipanga is because of the residual effects of that previous service-learning course. Though there were a few powerful experiences that emerged from the students’ perspective, I was—and still am—convinced I made some egregious errors in developing the course. For starters, I never asked her what she envisioned the course to be or how she wanted students to engage with community. Though I did not intend the course to reflect a charity model, it turned out to be exactly that. I encouraged students to “get messy” by “doing theory” without
critically engaging them in this process. Some students were assigned to help Kipanga in her community garden without fully examining why the garden was needed in the first place. When we saw her neighborhood in ways that mirrored mainstream news media broadcasts—the dilapidated houses, the crime, the negative depictions of its residents—I did not ask the hard questions or challenge students to peel back the dominant narratives affixed to such images. When the feel-good accounts began filling the pages of their written reflections, I focused more on mechanics and length requirements while patting myself on the back for encouraging students to step out of their comfort zones and into parts of the city that were alien—even dangerous—to them. I inadvertently regarded Detroit as the Great Laboratory among ruins for students to poke and prod as needed in order to satisfy the course’s learning objectives.

Despite Kipanga’s appreciation for the extra help and a handful of students who felt more connected to the city and its communities through the lessons, I still saw the course as a failure on my part. Rather than fully collaborating with her and other community members to navigate the tensions and discomfort as teachable moments, I took this on as a solo project and called on the community to make cameo appearances throughout the term. The questions I asked of Kipanga and other respondents came from my need for guidance from them. To make critical service-learning meaningful and effective, I had to seek their wisdom not only through the lens of a researcher and educator, but also the participant learner searching for guideposts that lead the way home.

During our interview, I am upfront with her about my apprehensions. Not wanting to be intrusive, I have a difficult time contacting her despite my desire to learn from her and the other women in the community. As someone who wants to engage in critical
service-learning to the fullest extent, I understand the importance of transparency and am quick to articulate my non-member status. In addition, I make sure that the respondents’ words are handled with care. As Kipanga states (while providing me some reassurance), the relationship between researcher and participant requires more reciprocity than is often practiced:

Sometimes I feel a little bit resentment—it depends on who’s asking the questions. I’m like, “What are you gonna do with the information?” And my answers were so very raw and so very real. It isn’t like you’re a missionary. You’re a stakeholder. I mean, you’ve got students. You care. Cuz some people come here with the attitude that they glean and don’t leave anything. And they really don’t walk away with anything. It’s like they’re just writing an article or just…taking and really not giving. I think a lot of us in the city have been drained by them. We—and when I say “we” I mean social activists, growers, environmental activists, social change agents—are saying, “C’mon now. Either you have time to invest or really exchange, or ’Hey, you pay me and I’ll talk.”

Her sentiments regarding this delicate balance echo in other respondents’ reflections.

Bea, an active member of another food justice organization (pseudonymously referred to as Feed Our People Detroit), discussed her vulnerability while partnering with academics due, in part, to not holding a college degree:

I’m always amazed at what we’re doing seems to be so great in academic circles. That always amazes me, how this is something—that because I’ve always wanted to give my children healthier, better food and how I’ve always wanted to give them the very purest and the very best—how somehow that is just…fascinating. So I have the greatest, greatest respect for academics, I do. I didn’t finish college; it’s something that I really—I’m not going to bother with it now...I’m quite intimidated by it, actually, by academics. Quite intimidated. And then I remember that they want to come and figure out what I know or pick my brain and figure out why it’s wired, and why I wanna do this and what’s leading me to do this, and I relax some. But it is just something that I marveled at my whole life.

The developing community member-faculty relationship is rarely discussed in service-learning texts, largely because such interactions are often kept to a minimum. Academics who design such courses are more likely to seek institutional support through a service-
learning office that serves as an intermediary between instructors and community partners. If no office exists, faculty may contact nonprofit agencies directly to place students. Hearing directly from community members helps me understand more deeply the relationship as they perceive it to be, as opposed to my interpretation that positions us as equals (though I argue that they have the greater advantage given their community knowledge).

Bea’s response is particularly interesting because I never considered myself to be an “academic” in the conventional sense. My parents never completed high school (my mother eventually earned her GED while raising six children) and two of my siblings dropped out by tenth grade. I nearly flunked out during my senior year and did not begin college until I was a 25-year-old mother and Navy wife. I am the first person in my family to pursue college beyond a two-year degree. As a result of my academic achievements later in life, I have been detached from my community of origin and at times have difficulty communicating with my immediate family back home. Building relationships with community members in Detroit intimidates me as well, which surprises Bea, too. By sharing my own vulnerabilities as an outsider and struggling academic, I am articulating a desire to co-create a point of entry through critical service-learning that combines the personal and the professional aspects of my persona.
Positionality + Space = Resistance

One of the first meetings my service-learning students and I attend is a community roundtable at the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership, which is located on Detroit’s Eastside and about 15 minutes away from our campus. Students who have never before ventured beyond their dorms are blowing up my cell phone, desperately asking for directions. Before becoming too impatient, I remind myself that it is a sunny Saturday afternoon; the fact that students are spending a non-instructional day to participate is worth the extra time getting them there. I do my best to verbally navigate each route for them while struggling to recall the one I am taking from Ann Arbor. The side streets and intersections seem to know I am going in circles; I have passed by the same landmarks three times. I do not want to admit these errors to the students who have faith in my instructions to push outside their respective comfort zones. Though I regard getting lost in Detroit as another experiential lesson in spatial literacy, I worry that students may see the situation (and me) in a more negative light. They may assume that because I identify as an urban, Black, working-class woman, I am grounded in the city and automatically know my way around it. Nothing could be further from the truth.

After a few misguided directions and U-turns, I finally arrive at the Center’s unassuming home. A handful of students are already there while others are finding their
way to their destination as ineptly as I did. I make our way upstairs to a large meeting space where dozens of chairs are organized in a circle. Community members representing several Eastside neighborhoods, including one which hosted our service-learning project that term, occupy the majority of seats. I notice the uncertainly in a few students’ eyes, only to dismiss my observation as an attempt to overanalyze the scene. My overt excitement may be interpreted in much the same way.

Our first collective exercise is to go around the room and briefly describe our residential communities. Many of the community members—predominantly Black women and lifelong Detroiter—speak of their neighborhoods as villages, places of struggle as well as transformation. They talk of the elders who interact with them regularly, the various block-club activities taking place to distribute food from their gardens, and collaborations with churches to create safe places for children to play. I immediately think about the womanist practice of “othermothering” (Naples, 1998) when I hear these stories. There is a connection to community that goes beyond acknowledging the existence of individuals residing in or frequenting the same area. Rather, the focus is on thriving towards wholeness through the sharing of resources. Though I am inspired and energized by each account, my sense of placelessness becomes nearly palpable by the time it is my turn to speak. I reside in an income-based housing cooperative in an affluent college town that is 70 percent White and less than 7 percent Black. With the exception of a close friend who lives a few doors down from me, not much cooperating takes place; residents exchange pleasantries but exist as individuals for the most part. As much as I want to concoct my own story of radical interdependence, I resign to share what I know
with the roundtable and wonder if a city like Ann Arbor was ever intended to include people who look like me.

“As a woman and as a minority,” Amoo-Adare (2013, p. 8) writes, “I am particularly disadvantaged with the politics of space.” A womanist positionality “recognizes that critical consciousness must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, political, and sexual issues” (p. 8) in relation socio-physical space. For Black women navigating urban spaces, the connection between personal and spatial is often first developed during the formative years as aspects of identity become more salient. The respondents’ recollection of their earliest memories supports this claim, revealing the juxtaposition of diametrically-opposed social realities that the women learned to navigate at an early age. In Kipanga’s case, for example, her comfortable neighborhood during the middle part of the 20th century afforded a level of conventionality even in the wake of the 1967 uprising and the subsequent changes that took place around her:

All my life in Detroit, on the Eastside—not very far from where I am now. Very normal. Protected…almost sheltered from a lot of things that were transpiring during that time that I am aware of now. … I never heard it referred to as a “Rebellion” until a few years ago. Before then it was always a “riot.” [Pausing] I remember the military vehicles in the street. I remember having a lot of White neighbors. A lot of White store owners. I remember fresh food markets. I remember going to the Eastern Market as a kid…I remember seasonal fruit as a kid, seasonal vegetables as a kid. I remember my grandmother holding on Southern ways: cooking, being extremely polite, “Yes ma’am, no ma’am,” fold the linen, iron the linen, stuff like that. (laughs) … It just became so easy to conform because it was so abundant everywhere—there were so many grocery stores.

There were elements of curiosity because the times were changing…There were grocery stores, Black-owned markets, White-owned markets…There was a pool hall, Black-owned cleaners, beauty and barber salons, there was a Black-owned restaurant right in the neighborhood. Everything you could possibly imagine, needed, or wanted—there was shoe repair, shoe shine…all of it. And after the Rebellion all the White owners left. The buildings weren’t burned down—they were still standing when they left.
And I remember being allowed to go to those stores. We knew all the owners by name. I remember an influx of Arab or Chaldean store owners coming into play at that time, in the mid-‘70s. It was met with a little apprehension.

Bea, who grew up in the city during the same timeframe, recalls what she describes as an idyllic childhood—replete with youth summer camping and family vacations to northern Michigan—shadowed by the “traumatic” experiences she endured while attending both predominantly White and predominantly Black schools during the era of desegregated busing:

[B]ack the ‘60s, there were no Blacks anywhere across Greenfield. There were no Black people across Greenfield Road in Detroit. And so it was very scary…I was like many of those kids on Eyes on the Prize: I didn’t know, but we had to run from dogs while walking three blocks from Six Mile to the school. I didn’t understand it until I was an adult that people were letting their dogs out on us. I had to learn how to jump on cars at the age of seven years old, cuz that’s how I old I was when I was bused. I reflect back, and people had signs in their windows: THIS FAMILY WILL NOT BE BUSED. We didn’t get a good reception at the school; we were looked at as—I don’t know—some sort of invaders. As a child I didn’t know exactly what was going on. And even some of the teachers, I can recall vividly, treated us Black kids differently—all these Black kids coming to this all-White school—we were absolutely treated differently.

I remember my mother decided, you know, That is OK, you don’t have to go to that school; you can go to our local school. …Anyway, they were, like, the worst scho:ols! And, you know, I was a sheltered child—me and my brother. [T]hese kids were rough. I mean, I was physically assaulted, OK? I said, Well, I’m really caught between a rock and a hard place with this whole school thing. And because I always needed glasses—except I couldn’t communicate properly to my parents that I couldn’t see—and the hostile environment that I was in all day at school, of course I was a terrible student. Plus, the other thing I found out is a child cannot pay attention to what they cannot see. But my parents didn’t know that—they were trying to live a middle-class life, being the first Black people on the block. And that’s what we were: the first Blacks in the neighborhood, bought a house they could not afford—I mean, they did end up being able to afford it…They were busy, you know, living a middle-class life, working every day. I really didn’t feel like I could impose on them—you know, all this that was going on in school.
The youngest woman among the respondents, Amaka did not experience the same spatial tensions as Bea and Kipanga did while growing up middle-class in Detroit. She identifies herself as a biracial woman who is Black and was raised by a single White mother. A student who “found trouble” while attending racially integrated schools during the latter part of the 20th century, she describes how she had to navigate Black and White spaces both internally and externally:

I definitely felt safe inside my home. But I always kinda in...different worlds, you know, being multiracial. At home was a different world than school, and I was an only child so I felt like I had to hide one world from the other world—like I couldn’t really meld the worlds, you know what I mean? I was comfortable in my home. I would definitely be sensitive to the White jokes at school, like I would be embarrassed to have my mother come around. And then I would say, like, I had to learn a lot about the culture cuz my father wasn’t around when I grew up. So I was learning about the culture and felt different on the inside but...I dunno...And [my mom’s] light. Like, people will see me and they’re like, Is that your mom? cuz she’s not like—she’s around a lot of Black people and there are White people that are like, Well, you’re kinda Black, you know—but she’s she’s kinda straight-laced. (laughs)

As a girl growing up in the urban U.S. South in the 1960s, Kasi’s fondest memories were spent every summer with her grandparents in a rural community about 70 miles from her urban hometown. The visits took place annually for almost ten years and had deeply influenced her awareness of self in relation to nature, an awareness that guided her when she relocated to Detroit decades later as an adult. Her understanding of the natural elements of her grandparents’ rural environs, compared with the modern amenities found in her urban home, is evident here. Though most of her recollections center on those experiences, she discloses some of the tensions that occasionally arouse between her parents and grandparents concerning the lack of modern plumbing in their rural home:
There used to be a little stream that ran right across from my grandparents’ property, and I remember us drinking from that stream. And I remember the outhouse, and it never bothered me. ...[A]s a matter of fact, I remember a heated discussion between my parents and my grandparents because my parents wanted to put in indoor plumbing. But Granddad said that wasn’t natural that you go to the bathroom in the house. He just said that wasn’t natural, and he would not allow them to put an indoor bathroom in the house. I knew that this was the way it was in [my grandparents’ town], and this is the way it is at home. One thing that did disturb me was—and I began to understand as I got older—my mother’s response whenever she was there, especially when she had to use the outhouse.

As Kasi further explains, the tensions she observed in her mother and grandmother reflected a deeper pain associated with rural U.S. southern life that they likely experienced in their own youth, representative of the “soul loss” hooks (2002) poignantly describes as part of the lasting trauma suffered by African-Americans who endured chattel slavery and sharecropping systems of agriculture:

When I was younger I thought that it was strange that she would have a negative response to that since that’s where she grew up. But later on as I began to learn who my mother was and I began to understand some of her pain, I realize those were the things she was trying to get away from like so many of our parents and grandparents at that time. And it was not that she was trying to get away from home; she was trying to remove herself from much of the degradation that represented. And there was a time when I resented that. I kinda resented it. It would make me angry…but as a child how do you voice that? I also remember getting upset on a couple of occasions because my older cousins who lived [near my grandparents] picked cotton. Well, all I knew was that these were my big cousins that I just admired, and whatever they did I wanted to do. My grandmother told me, “You will never pick cotton.”... It was only as I got older that I began to understand what that meant.

The earliest memories of the respondents in their respective spaces provide an introduction as to how they learned to relate their identities to the places they inhabited. It can be argued that both geographic knowledge and self-knowledge were intertwined and developing concurrently. This association aligns strongly with womanist thought that
identifies Black women’s self-definition through situated lived experience (Amoo-Adare, 2013; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2002; Smith, 2011). Their early understanding of how race, gender, and class constructs are formed within certain spaces provides the basis by which they co-create geographic knowledge through interactions with others. This co-creation is dependent upon other participants’ personal connections to space and their relations to power within a particular space (Rose, 1997). In a womanist context, Collins (2000) and Dillard (2006) both point out the significance of place as the basis for fostering dialogue, demonstrating Floyd-Thomas’s (2006) womanist tenet of radical subjectivity. Such interactions helped orient me, a geographical and cultural “outsider” to Detroit, as I begin examining urban womanism in critical service-learning. These relationships between self and land also appear to lay the groundwork for my and the respondents’ activism, an essential element found in womanist pedagogical practice.

*Learning to Touch the Earth*

Amid the tensions the women respondents experienced in their youth, they shared extensively how they were introduced to the land through hands-on learning with family members. This connection to the land helped shape their identity and deepen their sense of who they were as Black women activists later in their lives. Demonstrating my conceptualization of womanist epistemology as inherently social justice oriented and centered on place, community, and praxis, the respondents situate their self-awareness—as women of color involved in struggle—into localized action. Since childhood, Kasi has been able to make this connection and continues to do so in Detroit. For Kipanga and Bea, on the other hand, these learning experiences directly grew into community activism during their adulthood:
Kasi: Community activism has always been a part of me. I can remember being a leader in one of the walkouts in [my hometown] when I think I was only in middle school, for African-American history classes at my middle school. I was in eighth or ninth grade. It’s just always been a part of me, knowing that when things are unjust it is my role and my duty to speak out—and more importantly, to find a solution…Nobody is gonna save us BUT us.

Kipanga: It was in [my husband’s] head all the time. It was in him. He just needed somebody to make it happen. Tenacious…I’m very tenacious, and I’ve always said, “When I’m doing something, I’m all in or all out.” And so we had this idea, and he had an application and said, “We can get some seeds, too!” (laughs) …I’m like, “What are you going to plant with all those seeds?” I knew how many seeds my grandmother had me put in the ground; he had bunches of seeds—puttin’ them in bags and I’m like, “Are you trying to feed the whole block?” He said, “Now you got it.” I had no idea what he really had in his head, but as it started to shape up and as we started digging the soil it started to feel wonderful. I started getting a little bit by little bit of it when he started telling me about the people he knew. Everywhere we’d go he’d know these remarkable people: they were all these busy activists—great, wonderful, busy people doing these wonderful things. It was such an opening up for me being exposed to these people. They were serious: justice, equality, fairness, struggle.

Bea: My children grew up activists. I mean, I can’t even tell you how many protests—I’m talking about Washington, D.C. to Jena, Louisiana to Cincinnati, Ohio—they’ve been everywhere, protesting and standing up for Black people at a very young age. I’ve got a picture of my son at age nine or ten with a sandwich sign on, protesting in front of the federal court in Cincinnati when the schools where taken over in Michigan by [the governor]. There was an organization that sued, so we went there to support that. My upbringing was more like come home, play outside with kids on the block, do homework (or not), get up and start all over again. My children had to eat while we were at the meeting, do homework as soon as we got home, get in the bathtub, hurry up and get in the bed. It was different…I didn’t have a lot to do with farming—that didn’t happen until after my father, who wasn’t really an activist but he really did everything that activists were doing. For example, once I decided, through his encouragement, to listen to more Black talk radio and to raise my consciousness with what was going on with our people. He felt like I kinda took it too far when I wanted to send my children to African-centered school. It’s like, “But Dad, you’ve paved this street.”

After hearing respondents share their border-crossing experiences into and inside Detroit, I see how my social location in relation to community members (as well as to
Detroit itself) must be examined more critically as I challenge my own privileges, assumptions, and prejudices as an instructor of urban service-learning courses (Mitchell, 2008). From a Black feminist standpoint, the women’s stories of redemptive self-love (Floyd-Thomas, 2006) and healing reflects not only their lived experiences but also the threaded narratives that speak of Detroit’s condition. By exploring the city through their lens, I can examine more closely how “the roles of institutions, individuals, groups, histories and even the service itself” factors “in perpetuating or transforming the problems” found within that space (Kinefuchi, 2010, p. 79). As Black women who are fighting structural oppression and microaggressions in their everyday lives, the respondents lend voice to a marginalized existence within a city that is itself marginalized. In critical service-learning, it is necessary for academic partners to see community transformation as witnessed by members themselves rather than expound on their own theories as to how these changes took place over time. Such adverse actions would instead privilege “dominant language and practices that are disempowering to community members” (Kinefuchi, 2010, p. 79), thus further perpetuating the very cultural sexism, racism, and classism inherent in hegemonic service-learning work.
I attend the first monthly meeting of the year for Feed Our People Detroit. I had previously asked Kiongozi, the executive director, if I could make an announcement requesting additional interviewing participants for the dissertation, and he gladly approved. During introductions we state our name, affiliate organization, and the reason for our attendance. I often struggle with these kinds of introductions because I try to shore up enough credibility to justify my presence in grassroots organizations led and populated by Detroiter. When it comes my turn to speak, I stumble over my words as expected but manage to get my point across in as few words as possible. I try not to think how out of place I am due to my wardrobe choices: a bland “academic” open-collar pale blue oxford, gray sweater vest, and black pinstriped slacks in a room made alive with dashikis, cowry-shelled locs, and a few brilliant head wraps. The chairs are arranged in a circle, so sliding to the very back is not an option. My race is the only thing I feel I have in common with anyone else despite our shared passion for food justice in the city. A few attendees ask about my dissertation topic and ask to write my name and phone number down for possible leads. Others appear excited about my area of interest and want to know more. I feel less like an interloper after concluding my announcements and allow myself to relax on the folding chair.
Later in the meeting, attendees are asked to describe what “food security” means. We work on definitions individually before writing our responses on yellow Post-It Notes and sticking them on a larger sheet of white paper in the front of the room. Kiongozi reads off the answers and ask respondents to elaborate when necessary. He reads a slip written by a young Black man who is attending the meeting for the first time, and asks what he meant when he wrote that food security involves “returning mankind to its natural state.” I assume the young man is referring to a return to healthy fruits and vegetables, which would make sense in a city widely recognized as a “food desert” with gas stations stocking the worst processed foods “regulated” by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. To my surprise, however, the young man explains in almost a defiant tone that his definition of food security includes working to combat proponents of “unnatural” ways of living such as gay rights. The room grows quiet, so much that I can hear the blood pounding in my ears. My throat tightens as though by sheer will. I try to remind myself that I am a guest in this space, soliciting interview participants for the sake of building solidarity with Detroit’s Black community. I remind myself that the voices in this room should especially be honored and heard, even if it is painful to hear. The organization is heavily influenced by Black Nationalism through which many of the movement’s members regard homosexuality and other acts of desire as a betrayal to Black bodies poised for resistance and liberation (Ongiri, 1997). As far as I can tell, no one here knows I am a lesbian. Being in the closet has never been an option for me; now the option is staring me in the face. I feel my body splitting in two, but I struggle to keep my Blackness and queerness intact. Within seconds—somewhere between “Your silence will not protect you” (Lorde, 1983, p. 41) and my reaction to the comment—I push the
closet option aside like a weighted curtain and speak: “With all due respect, young man, I am a lesbian and I am 100 percent natural because I was lovingly made by my creator.” My voice—along with the rest of my body—is shaking. Kiongozi interrupts the young man’s retort to keep the meeting going. As other participants take turns claiming their written answers, I wonder whether my words will have an adverse effect on the study and future service-learning opportunities with the organization. How can I be trusted by community members if I address homophobic discourse in this presumably heteronormative space? For the rest of the evening I struggle to close the wide V-neck opening of my collar, lest I be accused to flaunting my sexuality.

Afterwards I talk with a few attendees who are interested in my study and fishing for potential community contacts. No one appears to be fazed by my coming out; in fact, one man congratulates me for “educatin’ a brotha” but then half-jokingly goes out of his way to solicit me for sex. My smile fades and disappointment sets in. For a moment I am confused as to why he would be interested in someone who professes an exclusive attraction to women, but then I recall how lesbians are often fodder for heterosexual male fantasies (Gill, 2009). To this man, the embodiment of my Black womanhood creates a present-day jezebel that deviates sexual norms counter to the other “respectable” Black women in the room (Collins, 2000). I am more annoyed than offended at his proposal: throughout the meeting his boastful—even comical— remarks regarding his experiences with recreational drug use makes him a man not to be taken seriously. I am not in the mood to confront anyone else. Still emotionally drained from the earlier exchange with the young man, I choose instead to excuse myself from the chat and scan the room in search of more respectful company. Much to my relief, a woman approaches me. This is
where I meet Bea for the first time. Throughout our conversation she talks of her experiences the organization’s farm, on which she leads a crew on Sundays. I feel at ease in her presence. Near the end of our exchange she agrees to participate in the study and gives me a date and time to schedule an interview. It is through her that I eventually meet Amaka and Kasi, whom she works with in the community.

Before departing back to Ann Arbor, I fold several chairs and place them against the wall on the other side of the bright open room. The young man who inadvertently brought a lesbian to his first meeting walks toward me. Uncertain of his intentions, I narrow my eyes to appear guarded but not hostile. He responds by extending his right hand towards mine. Before I return the gesture, I wait for his accompanying words.

“I apologize for offending you,” he says. I reach out my hand in acknowledgement, but draw him in for a hug at the last minute. The tensions experienced earlier in the evening are replaced by cautious optimism.

“Why don’t you get to know us before passing judgment? We’re partners in struggle here,” I say to him immediately after the embrace. He doesn’t make any promises to do so, nor do I expect him to. I just want to be heard and my voice to be respected. I attempt to strike a delicate balance in this space. The long drive home to Ann Arbor is cluttered with running thoughts, coupled with twinges of fear. In order for the study to gain traction, finding and maintaining common ground is paramount. To accomplish this goal, I make the decision to join the organization and commit to working on its collective farm every weekend.

At the heart of critical service-learning are situated tensions, as well as the ways in which participants navigate them. As the researcher for this study and a service-
learning practitioner in historically contentious Detroit, I am cognitively aware of conflicts that may arise during the experience. Experiencing conflict and difference firsthand, however, has been an ongoing lesson for me as my personal and professional identities sometimes clash with other service-learning participants.

**Power and Identity: Uprooting Privilege**

Months after my service-learning course with Kipanga, I return to her community garden one chilly Saturday morning as part of the fall clean-up brigade. By the time I arrive, there is a hearty group of people already at work. The majority of the volunteers are African-American, which is a welcoming sight for someone who usually sees White and Asian people tending gardens in her current city of residence. This image alone is worth the two-hour round trip. I see Kipanga on the far end of the garden and I walk directly to her for hugs and updates. Since our class ended, we continue to connect and share stories; I try to visit her whenever I am on her side of Detroit to work the garden or simply just to talk. Although mindful of the importance of building rapport and creating authentic relationships with respondents, I am careful not to compromise the data by diluting her stories with my own interpretation of events (Seidman, 2006). Conversely, I am working towards building a more authentic relationship with her long after our service-learning course (Mitchell, 2008). I pick a spot near the hoop house and dive in, talking with others working nearby including a high-school junior who is making college plans and an energetic 6-year-old who introduces me to a freshly-dug worm that she has adopted as her new friend. As she holds “Wormy” closer to my face, I maintain composure and tighten my smile. Since I am still reacquainting myself with gardening
and my aversion to annelids runs deep, I consider befriending worms as a form of exposure therapy.

While I am pulling dried vines from the frosted soil, I notice a small group of White co-eds standing and talking on the opposite end of the garden. Their distance from the rest of us also is noted by other adults in my area. Some of them look up and direct their glares toward the co-eds, who appear to know each other given the casual stances of each member. Mutterings accompany the glares but I cannot decipher what is being said near my work group. When I finally inquire about the co-eds, an older woman tells me they were from a university “nowhere near here” and are working as part of their community-service project at school. As tempted as I am to approach the students and bombard them with questions regarding their project choice, I hold back and continue working. I wait to see whether the students attempt to interact with anyone else besides their peers, wondering if they realize the rift forming with each passing hour.

While compiling data for the dissertation, I think about students in my previous service-learning courses and silently hope they were more engaging with community members than the ones I observed on that autumn morning in Detroit. I know for a fact that some of them were far worse, as they rushed to complete their projects in drive-by fashion and spoke to no one during that time. Still, I hold out hope. As researcher, I am drawn to the ongoing disconnection between academic and community service-learning partners though I also am aware that the issue is often addressed from the perspective of faculty (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Strand et al., 2003). Based on participants’ stories, collective acknowledgement of oppressive silencing and “colorblind” privileged social positions is a crucial first step:
Kipanga: That was one of the things we avoided coming up: Can’t talk about racism and Black this and White that, ya know? My Southern roots wouldn’t let me. You know who you are, you know who they are so don’t say nothin’ and don’t exist. That’s prevalent even today. Kids don’t think racism exists if you ask them; ask another group and they like, *I feel it.* Or we just deal with it but don’t want to talk about what’s happening, the dynamics—how’d we get to be in these silos… We talk about it. Why are you here? What do you hope to gain from your experience [here]? And where are you with anti-racism? Cuz that’s definitely where we’re coming from with the work that we do.

Amaka: Just because you have a degree, baby, or went through four, eight years or whatever, doesn’t mean you have the right to come in and control this populace. So that work has opened my ability to articulate these things around white privilege. It’s given me confidence to talk about on a personal level with people. A lot of times they’re very open to it, but it still upsets me because it’s between particularly White college students and this Black populace that we have this power dynamic. They’re coming back to help this city. They don’t know this city, but they have power in this city.

The “power” that Amaka describes here and what I observed in Kipanga’s garden could provide further evidence of the ways in which privilege interferes with community-engaged practice. It could be argued that the lack of interaction between the White college students and Black urban community members minimizes—even erases—the need for academic partners to recognize racial difference and class disparities during the service-learning experience, thus further perpetuating power differentials in vulnerable community settings. Amaka and Kipanga share Green’s (2003) concerns regarding how privileged students possess limited knowledge of the spaces in which they conduct their “service,” and as a result may observe their relationship with community members as irrelevant or deem any interactions with them unnecessary. What becomes valid, however, are the students’ interpretations of how service-learning is performed from their own social locations. In this case, the only knowledge being constructed is that which is
outside the community itself. Nonmembers can avoid interacting with marginalized groups and avoid addressing their own privileged status by maintaining a “safer” distance away from both (Green, 2003). Systemic racism can be rendered invisible or nonexistent when privileged experiences are examined through the clouded lens of colorblindness.

Kipanga also addresses some of the unintended consequences of “outsiders,” whom many Black Detroiter refer see as mostly being White suburbanites who populate the city as temporary workers or individuals who relocate to become permanent residents as a means of gaining access to resources. According to her observations, the majority of individuals—including a large number of college students involved in service-learning projects—identify as White, which may discourage community members of color from engaging in efforts that are designed with them in mind. Though Stoecker and Tryon (2009) and Lin et al. (2009) do not discuss these consequences in detail, one could foresee an outcome in which community members are rendered invisible as academic visibility increases through this type of arrangement. In the passage below, Kipanga not only voices her frustration regarding this imbalance but also shares her womanist vision of drawing more of her Black neighbors to a path toward self-determination and collective empowerment as part of the “survival and wholeness of entire people” (Walker, 1983, p. xi):

The issue is not with White people; the issue is with people who look like me. We don’t have no stores, we have a couple restaurants, we got a couple beauty and barber supplies, we got a tire shop…We goin’ let ‘em grow all this food, too? Having those kinds of conversations in the neighborhood are very, very, very, very heartbreaking at times because we’re so caught up in trying to make ends meet… We’ve got more people struggling where I’m living at right now. “We ain’t got time to be growing no food”—well, they figure they don’t, and so they look at the race stuff and what’s happening at the garden: “That’s nice—they got all them White people down there.” And I get mad and said, “I don’t want no
more volunteers if they’re not Black.” I don’t want any more because it’s deterring them, because they figure they goin’ work and there’s a lot of money involved and it ain’t.

As a faculty member who practices service-learning, I must also be mindful of my own social location and how privilege manifests itself through my teaching. Though there are ways in which I could strongly identify with community members based on race, my commutes to and from a more affluent college town 40 miles away—in addition to the quasi-middle class status I am afforded through my professional identity as a university instructor—aligns more with White academic partners. Whenever I bring my predominantly White classes into inner-city spaces to interrogate systems of inequality, I do so to the potential detriment of the communities with which we are collaborating. As neighbors look upon students working on their streets, in what ways does our presence preclude them from joining? How can power be redistributed as is indicative of critical service-learning paradigms?

As the participants illustrate here, uprooting privilege in critical service-learning is a process that involves community members and academic partners questioning motives, challenging perceptions, and participating in active dialogue. Described in more detail below, these acts of “uprooting” illustrate how an urban womanist approach to critical engagement can connect the social locations of all participants to the spaces they enter and work together. The process is not intended to be one in which community members and academic partners achieve mutual harmony. More importantly, it is not intended to generate a greater sense of comfort among academic partners working within vulnerable urban spaces (DeGenaro, 2007; Green, 2003). The larger goal is to identify oppressive elements such as racist attitudes and classist mindsets often found within
charity models of service-learning, and instead creating sensemaking opportunities to foster a more holistic, solidarity-centered relationship between parties.

**Critical Engagement as Process**

All respondents identified the need for academic participants to communicate directly with—not to—community members as the basis for critical engagement. This dialogic foundation strongly aligns with womanist ethics that emphasize the use of agency to speak one’s truth, acknowledge differences, make meaning with others, and resolve crises collectively (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). To begin the process, Kasi suggests that academic partners work towards being more than passive participants when directly engaging with community members:

One of the ways is to not be afraid to ask the questions; to be able to actively engage in dialogue. And what I mean by *actively* engaging in dialogue, it means a two-way street; “active” means that you are listening and you’re processing the information that you hear, so you’re not trying to talk at or above but you’re actually being a part of the conversation. In being a part of that conversation, you are open to both constructive criticism as well as a seeker of solutions.

*’Leave Your Arrogance at Eight Mile Road’: Challenging Assumptions*

Just as Collins (2000) identifies *accountability* in her examination of womanist epistemology and practice, it is also an essential element in increasing community members’ voices in critical service-learning. Akin to “tellin’ it like it is,” a direct form of truth-telling found in African American Vernacular English, this mode of calling out social inequalities not only draws attention to existing power imbalances between
community and academic partners, but also demands that those who are in positions of power hold themselves accountable before and during the service-learning experience.

One of the ways in which accountability can be obtained is through challenging perceptions related to marginalized urban spaces. As Kasi explains, it is a process that involves a certain level of risk for the service-learner to “see” beyond dominant controlling images of communities that have suffered racial and economic oppression:

It’s not how I want them to see Detroit, because they are going to see what they see. So it’s not so much of how I want them to see Detroit, but how they need to understand what it is that they see. And that’s a difference, cuz they gonna see what they see…but understanding and processing what it is that you see is what’s important to me. We’re not charity. We are not incapable. We do have challenges…understanding why those challenges exist and taking on the risk of actually being able to acknowledge that much of what you see is by design. Takes a lot of courage. If you’re willing to do that, you won’t have a problem…but you’ll have to leave your arrogance at Eight Mile Road.

The conscious act of “leav[ing] your arrogance at Eight Mile Road” is important to note here. This site of critical analysis—an intersection in which gender, race, and class collide—requires individuals who enter to engage in introspection beforehand. Kipanga explains further what this process entails: It begins with self-checking, the need for the service-learning partner to examine her or his attitude regarding community space and the assumptions that come with it. As Green (2003), Mitchell (2008), and Kinefuchi (2010) attest, the privileged assumptions associated with traditional service-learning often present community sites and their members as problematic. Conversely, it is assumed that academic partners are regarded as not only problem-solvers but also individuals whose worldviews and behaviors are deemed superior and do not require corrective action. Citing Butin (2005) and Mitchell (2008), Kinefuchi (2010, p. 83) emphasizes an “exploration of assumptions, biases, unearned privileges, and power and the linkage
between power, knowledge, and identity” as essential to fostering critical consciousness in service-learning practice.

“Leaving arrogance” thus requires academic partners to question any images that may reinforce existing stereotypes while also knowing how to place such images in historical and contemporary contexts. Though service-learning coursework may include readings and films that provide this context for reflection, the narratives of community members must also be included when this contextualization takes place in order to interrupt the dominant images and messages already in place. Mitchell (2008) and Kinefuchi (2010) point out that such activities should extend beyond abstract examinations of broad issues such as “racism in Detroit” or “poverty among Black women”; to do so would diminish the need for academic partners to hold themselves accountable and to reflect on their own power, privilege, and prejudices. To accomplish this task, faculty and students must first prepare to “receive” their lived experiences in order to holistically process what is being “seen” around them. As Kipanga explains,

Please don’t go in with the attitude that you’re going as a missionary, that you’re saving. Go in with a degree of respect and understand that there’s work going on while we speak… [C]ome with an attitude to learn, to receive, to understand. It might take an anti-racism workshop, but understand the history of the place. Please understand the history of the place. It’s been enough trampling over or calling somebody a beast because you don’t understand their ways, or passing harsh judgment because you don’t understand why they do what they do.

Traditional service-learning pedagogy often emphasizes the “two R’s,” reciprocity (mutually beneficial campus-community partnerships) and reflection (student-produced analyses) (Jacoby, 1996). Another R—respect—should be integrated more fully in the practice. Hayes (2011) argues that in order for any critical service-learning project to be relevant and purposeful, it first must “intentionally and explicitly” engage
community members in a process by which their lived experiences and cultural knowledge are “surfaced and leveraged as points of entry for subsequent knowledge production” (p. 65). As Kipanga and Amaka point out, establishing respect—that is, the acknowledgment and validation of community members’ understanding of existing conditions—is an integral part of that process:

*Kipanga:* If you wish to be respected, you have to give that. Just like you would want someone to come into your home and respect it, it’s the same. When you come to my home, respect. Believe me, I did not vacate that house over there; I did not create that lot over there. *I am just as disturbed by it, but I’m disturbed in a different way because I see it every day.* You’re disturbed because you heard about it secondhand, third-hand, or whatever. You just know we should be pissed about it…Look at the role you play in society. Is your attitude making the situation better or worse? Before you even go, prepare to give and receive. Yes, we want to make transformation but you have to start with Self. You always have to look at what role you’re playing. Like I had to look at what role I was playing when it came down to mowing tall grass, or growing food.

*Amaka:* Our whole mindset tries to classify people. We’re always trying to figure out the ways we can separate and classify people. It’s a scientific, linear mind that does that in our society, and college is one of those classifications. *Have you got your degree?* It’s sort of a caste system, and it’s a way to say that these people get this and these people can’t. It’s a way to delineate resources, and with the delineation of resources comes a delineation of respect. So, I have access to more resources, I have the right to more respect than people who have less resources or less access to more resources. I’ve encountered that ego mind of a college person who’s doing an internship for social science or something, and they’re getting a master’s in social science but have this very demeaning kind of attitude…And it’s well-intentioned—it’s not even overt, usually—it come in this package of, like, *I wanna help*…We’ve have people 50, 60 years old who’ve been gardening all their life—it’s in their bones—and you come and you’re like, 21…What do you really tell this person? Like, absolutely nothing.

Adding emphasis on the missing R is not to negate Jacoby’s two other components; rather, it expands on the idea to present a holistic approach indicative of critical service-learning. As Kipanga and Amaka expressed in their responses, how can
there be adequate reflection and reciprocity during the service-learning experience without respect for community? In order for authentic relationships to develop, it is necessary for faculty to intellectually and emotionally prepare themselves and their students before entering the homeplaces of community members (Levinson, 1990). While Levinson (1990) advocates for programs that emphasize deeper student engagement and commitment, the same level of intense engagement could be applied to instructors who facilitate service-learning. By performing self-assessments of existing perceptions and attitudes, such participants are better equipped to make the cultural knowledge and contributions of community stakeholders more explicit (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Mitchell, 2008).

"Help Me and Let Me Help You" (Cooperation and Interdependence)

Homeplace as Spiritual Refuge

On my first Sunday crew shift at People’s Farm, I wake up early for the occasion. Snow is still on the ground even though spring is only three days away. I am prepared for the frosty weather: my winter jacket, hiking boots, and sweatshirt had been set aside the night before. My new Sunday best, I think to myself as I get dressed. It has been years since I regularly attended church; I hadn’t found the right fit after making the rounds among more liberal denominations. White churches, while usually queer-affirming, did
not embrace the Black aesthetic in their worship. Black congregations, on the other hand, loved “being in the spirit” so long as that spirit was not represented by a homosexual demon. Multiracial queer churches embraced me as a non-Christian, but did not want me to teach non-Christian lessons to children in Sunday school. After one disappointing experience after another, I had given up on Sunday meetings altogether.

Before leaving home for the farm I text Bea, who plans to meet me there. Since I had a chance to get to know about her during our previous interview, I feel more comfortable working on Sundays—that’s her preferred shift. Based on her responses, critical service-learning should require faculty to work with community well before designing the course. Bea introduces me to another Sunday crew member. “She’s here to study us,” she says half-jokingly. I feel awkward hearing her refer to me this way; I quickly respond by saying I’m the student this time, learning from her as well as the other gardeners. As much as I want to focus on community participation in womanist research, the last thing I want people in the community to do is see me as someone who “studies” them. I wonder if Bea and other gardeners see my work at the farm as temporary—a means to an end. Am I merely another academic who works alongside them to “do research” and nothing more? If so, how do I convince them otherwise? How do I convince myself of the same?

She assigns the women “weeding duty” in one of the hoop houses, whereas the men are directed outside to pull up damaged fences. Wanting desperately to demonstrate my more masculine side while attempting to desegregate the tasks by gender, I eagerly volunteer to join the men. She insists that I stay in the hoop house with the women. I
frowned at the sound of this; no self-respecting dyke would resign to pull weeds when muscles could be put to better use.

“I’m a recovering sexist—I know this,” she says. “I just feel that we don’t give our men enough space to do anything anymore. We’re so determined to be superwomen that we just push men out of the way as if to say, ‘We don’t need you to do this or that—just leave it to us.’ After a while they just step back because they feel they have nothing to contribute. ‘Okay—you got this, I’ll just leave it to you.’ I just want them to have a place where they are needed and wanted in our community, too.”

“Bea,” I exclaim, “That doesn’t make you a recovering sexist; that makes you an emerging Black feminist!”

“An emerging Black feminist—I like the sound of that!” She smiles.

Her response evokes something deeper regarding assigned gender roles within predominately Black communities: the need to strategically designate these roles for the sake of facilitating healing among men as well as women, rather than to reinforce sexist cultural structures. For months I had been taken aback whenever I witnessed men being asked to escort women to their cars after monthly meetings, automatically labeling such actions as sexist without fully understanding the meaning and context behind such gestures. Her response evokes something deeper regarding assigned gender roles within predominately Black communities: the need to strategically designate these roles for the sake of facilitating healing among men as well as women, rather than to reinforce sexist cultural structures based on what Frye (2007) refers to as “sex-marking.” Seen through a womanist lens, such actions fully reflect Walker’s (1983) vision: survival of an entire people requires the participation of all members while transcending gendered binaries. As
Hudson-Weems (2008) emphasizes, the solidarity fostered between Black women and men has been one born of shared struggle against systematic racism and an interconnected destiny centered on liberation. This commitment towards survival and wholeness directly aligns with Walker’s (1983) definition of womanist as one who does not engage in separatism “except periodically, for health” (xi). I am reminded of how Myrtle Thompson-Curtis, herself an agricultural activist in the city, referred to this self-determining reaffirmation of Black masculinity in the documentary We Are Not Ghosts (Dworkin & Young, 2012). Black men, especially in urban cities such as Detroit, are often negatively portrayed in mainstream media and depicted as “dangerous,” “aimless,” and “criminal” in what Solórzano and Yosso (2002) refer to as “majoritarian narratives.” Through community gardening, Black women and men are generating a counternarrative the centers on self-reliance and cooperation. As Thompson-Curtis demonstrates in the film,

> We need to be creative in how to take care of ourselves and sustain what we have. We have a lot of young men ages, like, 16 to 24, 25, and they have muscles. We put them to work in a garden and they were talking about issues pertaining to themselves and the society. It develops leadership skills, and “I don’t have to wait for somebody to take care of me. I can do this. I got this. I can handle this.” And then they’re connected with…the soil. You know, you get that humbling.

Bea makes it clear to me that by making space for Black men and boys to reaffirm their own identities through work, we as Black women are contributing to that destiny. Building inclusive communities is not ancillary to womanist praxis; rather it is the “catalytic action” necessary for freedom and survival (Williams, 2006, p. 119). It is the daughter declaring to her mother, “I’m walking to Canada and taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me” (Walker, 1983, p. xi).
It is then I realize I have found my spiritual home at last, somewhere between the soil and weeds caught between my fingers.

Bringing Womanist Praxis to Social Justice Education

In the influential article “Moving Like a Starfish,” Strain (2006) retells the parable of two people walking in the woods who see a baby floating in the river. While rushing to recuse the child, they witness another baby floating past. More babies follow. After assisting her fellow rescuer, one person runs upstream rather than stay behind to pull more babies from the river. When her careworn partner asks where she is going she answers, “I am going to find out who is throwing the babies in the river” (p. 7). The story is often cited in service-learning contexts to describe the capacity-building models that address immediate concerns within communities and the broader social systems that need dismantling over time.

Although the author uses folklore to illustrate a multilinear trajectory of student engagement that combines both charity and social-change paradigms, I argue that the story also can be applied to faculty-community member collaborations as a form of womanist pedagogical practice in urban service-learning. Through this approach, solidarity is emphasized to foster social justice learning from the ground up as opposed to the top-down methods associated with the charity model traditionally associated with service-learning. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, womanist praxis is collaborative and revolutionary (Dillard, 2008; Floyd-Thomas, 2006; hooks, 1994; Walker, 1983). For the purposes of this study, I examined the ways in which Black women’s counternarratives are produced to address immediate concerns while also combating oppression more
broadly. The following section chronicles how the respondents’ stories and other interactions with community members influenced the ways in which I approach service-learning courses designed from a grassroots perspective—another form of counterhegemonic discourse (Mitchell, 2008).

*The Making of a Farmhand: Confronting Positionalities*

Noted by Mitchell (2008), practitioners committed to critical service-learning pedagogy must make the redistribution of power an integral part of the process. While this can be achieved in myriad ways, one of the ways I approach this is by examining my role as academic partner. I first take my cue from Kipanga, who reminds me during our interview that the act of relating to self and others possesses a spiritual component:

> Every connection, the relationships to ourselves, to nature, to each other, to the environment. And then you start to question, “What have I been doing all this time with myself, and how can I make a contribution with what’s left?” It’s really hard for me to put it into words like I want to say it, but just to understand the interconnections and to let it take you where it may…For me it’s very spiritual, and everybody does not get that because not everybody is at that place, because some people work differently. Some people may catch it by looking at the circle of a sunflower like a mathematical problem, but for me it’s a spiritual connection…then the relationships always.

When I asked how faculty and students can best prepare for service-learning in her community, Amaka shares a similar sentiment regarding “being with” members of the community as opposed to “doing for” them. While she also believes that efforts are necessary to further integrate course readings written by Black revolutionary authors such as Haki Madhubuti and members of the Black Panther Party, she places a greater emphasis on practicing presence (a reflection of her own Buddhist leanings) in order to shift existing power imbalances:
Be with the people—that’s all I’m sayin’. Be with them without having to be in power dynamics with them. Just be with them, like sit on a porch with them. ... Work with them and stay connected to the community. ... I know college students live pretty modestly but turn off the laptop sometime, turn off the Facebook and deal with folks. I would ask people a lot of appropriate questions like this about their childhood and shake up their brainwaves a little bit about their experiences and how they view the world.

After my first experience with Bea on that snow-covered March morning, I begin seeing how working most Sundays at People’s Farm can be my chance to practice being with community on a more consistent basis. One of the first lessons requires me to distance myself from the academic knowledge that may have prepared me for this study but not for farming in any capacity. Decades removed from my mother’s garage garden, I willingly surrender to the process and assume the role as student. Though I am reminded of my limited agricultural skills by some of the male crew members who occasionally poke fun at my “book learning,” I take the jabs in stride. My positionality as an academic—a representative of this white cultural institution—is on full display, and such critiques should be made. My status as Black, queer, female and working class adds complex layers to my social position but does not put me on completely equal footing as much as I want it to. I know, for instance, that my penchant for theory offers no suggestions for pest control or tractor maintenance—practical matters that have a direct impact on food production in a city plagued by a lack of healthy food access (White, 2011). More importantly, many of the community members I work with can already make the connection between theory (examining food sovereignty to combat racial oppression) and practice (promoting self-determination among Detroit’s Black residents via urban agriculture). Case in point: While working on the farm during a rainless week, I encountered a flooded area near a newly-installed water pump. After surveying the rest of
the area to dismiss residual flooding from heavy rains weeks prior, I had reason to believe there was a water main leak. When I brought this to the attention of one of the male crew members, my concerns were met with skepticism because of my status as a college instructor with little technical experience. He remarked that while I may have the schooling to be a college professor, he had worked the farm for years and was familiar with the drainage patterns of that particular section. Though I urged him to further investigate the situation, I eventually dropped the subject and left him to resolve the matter as he saw fit. For me to presume to be an “expert” in this context—something often done in service-learning relationships—would replicate the white supremacist model that relegates the community as the unilateral recipients of the university’s legitimated knowledge (Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994; Mitchell, 2008; Smith, 2013). Even when performed in jest, the teasing and skepticism challenge my positionality based on academic privilege.

Conversely, it could be argued that such critiques—particularly critiques directed by men against women of color—contradict the centrality of Black women’s epistemological legitimacy in the construction of knowledge claims. While “[w]omanism seemingly supplies a way for [B]lack women to address gender oppression without attacking [B]lack men” (Collins, 2006, p. 60) and offers a means for Black women and men to form alliances in the work towards liberation, it is not clear whether the reverse holds true. Do I—a Black academic with advanced degrees—automatically defer to Black male community members whose situated knowledge holds merit? To answer in the affirmative would support a false dichotomy here. Though it is important in critical service-learning practice to recognize the organic wisdom and experience that community
members bring to the project, it is equally important to acknowledge the ways in which the lived experiences of Black women faculty—along with their formal academic training—can best be applied in these settings. I agree with Sheared (2006), who argues that from a womanist perspective, both knowledge and wisdom are needed and should be recognized as distinct ways of constructing meaning. As she points out,

Knowledge consists of one’s everyday lived experience and understandings of that reality in terms of dominance and authority. In contrast, wisdom is what one uses to read, interpret, and speak in order to survive, given the information that one receives. (p. 274)

This perspective allows me to examine my social position from a place where knowledge and wisdom intersect. I can embody both the theoretical and situated knowledge being produced in service-learning contexts as opposed to elevating one at the expense of the other. Just as the voiced experiences of community members must not be negated when presented alongside conventional course material, my voice as a Black woman should not be silenced. Drawing from Sheared (2006) and Collins (2006), I argue that dichotomizing on the basis of gender and race in this context is yet another way to distinguish “us” from “them”—an act antithetical to womanist praxis.

_A Lesson before Watering_

Weeks into the growing season when winter frost gives way to spring thaws and blistering summer sun, I eagerly take on whatever tasks needed the most attention. Depending on the number of volunteers present, I usually ask Bea if I can water the beds inside and outside the hoop houses spread out around the farm’s seven acres. Determined to keep up with more experienced crew members with all the middle-aged butchness I can muster, I grab what feels like miles of shoulder-crushing hose and drag them where
they do the most good. After a quick lesson on large-scale watering from Mkulima, a veteran crew member, I am left to my own devises. A believer in getting job done right the first time (thanks in part to his military training), he gives instructions that are quick and to the point. *Walk slowly up each row. Concentrate water flow on the soil, not the plants. Make sure the hose doesn’t cut across seedlings and larger crops. Don’t get tangled. Repeat the steps.* Regardless of my efforts to be efficient, I struggle with the hose the entire time. I double back several times to pull the rubber anaconda from clipped sprout beds. Hours into my watering, the ground looks just as dry as it did when I started. Mkulima notices this when he walks through the area.

“Went a little quick through these rows, didn’t you?” he asks with a smile.

“Yeah, I think so.” My shirt and jeans are soaked and streaked with mud.

“You’re doing all right,” he replies as though responding to my frustrations alone.

“This ain’t like the classroom, is it?”

“Nope, and I’m glad it’s not! How else am I going to learn out here? I’ll go through the beds again. I think I know of another way to move the hose along, so I’ll try that instead.” Despite the heat and exhaustion, I struggle to wheeze out an answer with some semblance of confidence. He laughs softly, and tells me how lucky I am to have a working spigot in such close proximity. This wasn’t always the case: When the farm was still in its early stages, volunteers would have to haul buckets and donated fire hoses around to water crops. After years of physical and administrative struggle (organizers had to petition city officials to install the spigots around the farm), the fight for easier access to water was won. As soon as he leaves, I recoil the hose around my shoulder, take a deep breath, and start over.
Walk slowly up each row.

Concentrate water flow on the soil, not the plants.

Make sure the hose doesn’t cut across seedlings and larger crops.

Don’t. Get. Tangled…

Somehow I still do.

Near the end of our shift, we agree to pick up food for the crew at a nearby Middle-Eastern restaurant. I volunteer to drive given the soiled condition of my work clothes. During the drive Mkulima shares stories of the neighborhoods passing our view. He begins to reminisce about his bike commute through the area to get to his factory job thirty miles away. The city that borders the Detroit was—and still is—predominantly white and working-class. He tells me how that part of the ride was generally the hardest. I assume he is referring to the potholes and traffic snarls that could wreak havoc on any ten-speed. Before long I realize what he is alluding to: As a Black man pedaling through hostile territory, he was sometimes subjected to racist attacks. Once he was knocked off his bike by a group of white teens, one of whom swung a heavy branch at his back. I force myself to mentally reconstruct the event—the imagined sound of wood cracking into flesh makes my stomach twitch. His words, usually gruff but kind, give way to vulnerability I hadn’t seen in him before. I shake my head, unsure of what to say. As though attempting to mitigate his pain by offering some of mine, I share my own racist encounter involving a similar group who verbally assaulted me and my daughter in a shopping center parking lot when she was only seven. We had moved to a predominantly white city north of Detroit two weeks prior and were out running errands. As we were crossing the lot, a red Mustang carrying four young white men slowed down in front of
us. Maternal instinct made me tighten the grip on my daughter’s hand and pull her closer. The blonde driver made the first strike by shouting, “FUCK THE NIGGERS!” to the only Black people present. His passengers followed suit, their cruel laughter hanging in the air with the exhaust fumes they left behind. For a moment I could not will my feet to move, believing somehow that by standing still I could stop time and prevent the inevitable erosion of innocence—the inevitable asking of “Why?” through a child’s brown fear-filled eyes. Their hateful words were a variation of a branch-strike to the spine. Like Mkulima, we were targeted for one reason alone: for not knowing our place and for violating “white” geographical boundaries.

Back from our lunch run, I am relieved to return to the farm and to the present. I understand how others see these acres in Detroit as not only a sacred space but also a safe space for people of color who have experienced racism inside and outside the city’s borders on many levels over time. Mkulima and I switch into distribution mode, passing out sandwiches to the rest of the crew. We do not continue the conversation we had in my car and it does not come up during subsequent encounters on the farm. However, I do experience a gradual change in our relationship dynamic. I begin to see him more as a trusted figure to the point of being more open about my life outside of academia and farm work. He also is open with me about his family life, lessons learned while serving in Vietnam, and mistakes made while learning to grow food in Detroit. Rather than remaining somewhat reticent regarding my lesbian identity, I am at ease talking with him about my life in Ann Arbor with my partner. We talk about the tattoos on my arms and what they signify: the woodcut of Africa in the shape of a Black woman wearing a headdress on the inside of my right arm and the circling pair of rainbow-winged
butterflies on my left shoulder. Parts of my body that were once covered by long sleeves were now exposed; flesh becomes text and the teachable moment. Walls of difference that seemed impenetrable during my first meeting with the group—the gathering where I outed myself as a “natural” lesbian—appear less daunting to me now. The conversations continue.

Later as I am writing the above section for my dissertation, I struggle with Amaka’s notion of being with community and the womanist practice of dialogic engagement (Collins, 2000). I do not regard this deepening interaction with Mkulima and other community members as a panacea for hegemonic service-learning relationships or wish to perpetuate the dominant narrative that often concludes with academic partners (usually students) befriending their community counterpart after experiencing initial tension. On the other hand, I do argue that such commonalities in a service-learning relationship are a means by which being with becomes possible. It is also the means by which we can shift from perceiving service-learning practice as one that solely “performs” knowledge (such as students “act[ing] out concepts developed in class”) to a practice that dialogically “produces” knowledge with community members (Collins, 2000; Mariner, Lester, Sprecher, & Anders, 2011, p. 74). I argue that this co-production counters the dominant model by emphasizing the connection between place and community—two of the three elements I described in Chapter Three to illustrate my concept of a rhizomatic womanist epistemology. My conversations with Bea and Mkulima demonstrate what Mariner et al. (2011) refer to as the “interactive production of knowledge” through the creation of relational space that is “contextually dependent” and
“differs from and compliments the more theoretical, rationalistic approaches that dominate academic discourses” (p. 75). By rendering ourselves vulnerable within relational spaces, we allow for richer, more authentic relationships to develop as we make sense of the places we navigate (Levinson, 1990; Mitchell, 2008; Pompa, 2002). In addition, our interactions reflect the womanist tenet of redemptive self-love, the embodiment of Walker’s (1983) definition that connects across difference. As Floyd-Thomas (2006) explains further:

The erons, what womanists refer to as the erotic energy that is emitted when we do the work our souls must have, and ecstasies of [B]lack women’s culture are redeemed and valued as that which the struggle must have for its soul—loving the spirit, the folk, roundness, food, the moon, and herself regardless of all else. (p. 88)

A womanist pedagogical approach is soul work that evokes a love in action—one that is traditionally universalist and committed to healing an entire people engaged in struggle (hooks, 1994). From a critical service-learning perspective, the knowledge created between academic and community participants must be done in spaces that are both relational and dialogic. It is not intended to be materialized unilaterally from the top down; it requires the building of narratives—including the painful ones—as a means of “humanizing the Other” (d’Arlach et al., 2009, p. 10) and making sense of “othered” places. As community members opened themselves to me and I began sharing more about myself to them, we allowed ourselves to be rendered more vulnerable and more human. Through such interactions, long-standing stereotypes are called into question. I had to challenge my own stereotypes regarding crime in the city whenever community members reminded me and each other to conceal any valuable items, lest “friends of the community” or “cousins” were tempted to lay claim to them. Rather than categorically
labeling these individuals as “criminals,” community members reject the categorization of Black citizens who engage in practices that do not conform to dominant social norms. Indicative of Floyd-Thomas’s (2006) identification of radical subjectivity as one of the tenets of womanist ethics, such actions demonstrate a form of humanizing through self-naming and self-definition (nommo) (Hudson-Weems, 2008). As Kasi declared at a Feed Our People Detroit meeting, “Transformation is real…We can’t throw any of our people away.” Using language to preserve Black personhood is also representative of the collective aim towards wholeness that Walker (1983) emphasizes in her definition of womanism.

Bea also illustrates the notion of humanizing community members while she describes her experiences with white students who conduct service at the farm and are armed with cultural expectations to engage with the racialized, urbanized Other:

Now there are some whites that come, and they just want this Black experience. We had some students, they were from…the western part of the state, and they came last winter because we were working on a big project. They started talking to us about themselves, and how the one young lady had never seen Black people in person—you know, she lived in this really isolated community—and so she was coming to Detroit to the Blackest thing she could find (laughs). And it was really kind of interesting, and I’m really happy she came to us and got this really great experience. … She got a great education. I think really one of the best ways to help teach people is to Number One, arm them with kindness and—a really wise woman once said this and I made it part of who I am—you find what you have in common with people then find ways to build bridges to get your ideas across. That’s one of the things I do: I just leave myself open to hear where people are coming from and just engage that part of me to help get my ideas across.

Amaka takes it a step further by challenging service-learners to engage with the urbanized Other directly while examining issues such as structural inequality and poverty alongside community members. Her sentiments align with those of DeGenaro (2007),
who identifies Detroit as a site for agonistic formations of discourse—a place where tension and discomfort are sources of knowledge production. Though she focuses on students who are in an historically secure geographic location (such as the more affluent college town of Ann Arbor where I reside) and instead practice what Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2006, p. 289) identifies as the womanist “ethic of risk,” I argue that the same could be applied to faculty who teach service-learning in vulnerable areas:

I would see college students living in those communities for some time… Stepping out of Ann Arbor for more than work 9 to 5, actually feeling the insecurity that other people feel in the city—like Oh, snap, I just heard some gunshots. (laughs) You know, like living with that and feeling that as part of the class. I would challenge people to live more modestly that way.

Drawing from Bea’s and Amaka’s reflections, I argue that by engaging in these types of risks—another approach to being with community members—the “links between power, knowledge and identity” become more salient for community and campus partners (Lukenchuk & Barber, 2011, p. 283). The end result makes it possible to solely “take social justice out of the realm of academic, theoretical discussions and into the realities of the lives of people” (Lucas, 2005, p. 172).

Bearing Fruit: Womanist Approaches to Course Design

While checking in via e-mail with Sandy, my dissertation advisor, I share with her my concerns regarding this study. Most of the interview questions pertaining to community-members’ experiences with service-learning require them to recall these experiences as much as possible and to respond retrospectively. After months of interviews and stints on the farm, I am compelled to put womanist theory into practice by co-designing a critical service-learning course in Detroit with community members so as
to bring us all to the present and in alignment with critical engaged learning. She agrees that an up-to-date course would not only be more relevant to the study but also would focus more closely on Black women community-member contributions to the course: conception, curriculum design, assignments, and evaluation. She shares my enthusiasm and encourages me to proceed in that direction.

In addition, I consider the development and implementation of the course as acts of resistance. Rather than using an experiential pedagogical approach to reinforce existing hierarchies and stereotypes (Mitchell, 2008), I am eager to co-design a course with them so that more meaningful connections with students could be fostered while exploring ways to undo social and structural inequalities collaboratively. According to Swords and Kiely (2010, p. 153),

Deeper connections with community members and organizations that offer a structural critique of capitalist ideology and with community members who struggle to survive within such a system, often cause students to develop a more critical understanding of how power relations and existing socioeconomic and political arrangements might be flawed.

This is not to suggest employing community members “who struggle to survive” as cautionary tales from which tragic narratives are constructed. Instead, their experiences and suggestions will create the lens through which we see Detroit—and ourselves moving with/in Detroit—as part of a counternormative service-learning pedagogy that also contributes to the broader work of movement building.

As a relatively new adjunct lecturer teaching women’s and gender studies at Eastern Michigan University, another urban institution forty miles from Detroit, I am interested in continuing the work Kipanga and I started years before. While working at People’s Farm and through conversations with Bea, I also know there is a need for
increased (and more consistent) volunteer participation now—both of which could come in the form of my students who elect to work alongside us during the summer. Recognizing that continuity is an essential element in critical service-learning practice to maintain authentic relationships with community members (Mitchell, 2008), I begin drafting a course outline that would further cultivate such a relationship. In an urban womanist context, the respondents and I explore the development of the course using a four-prong approach: 1) Environmental Insight, 2) Cultural Representation, 3) Reflexive Relationships, and 4) Collective Action.

**Environmental Insight**

During their interviews, all four women emphasized the interconnectedness between themselves and nature and how that relationship informs their activism through community gardening. They also commented on the role Detroit and other cities play in postindustrial society as sites of structural and social change. As Kipanga and Amaka illustrate,

*Kipanga:* Just because it’s happening here and it’s visible, it’s happening in a lot of other places that is not as just as visible. So be prepared for that thing that you thought could never happen…We never thought Detroit would look like this. Who would have thought that the jobs would all be gone, that the financial base—these homes were built for someone—would be empty? We didn’t think that. If it can happen here—and it’s happening in other places—what else is inevitable? So it’s just a lesson; *Detroit is just a symptom* of what is wrong when you depend so heavily and so much on just one industry or that one business. But it’s also so full of that reimagining, and people saying, “We’re not out—it’s not over,” so don’t think for a minute that people are just laying down on the porch and saying, “Awww, forget it.” No, it’s not happening. It’s not happening. I mean, preparing for a future that’s more sustainable is what’s happening.

*Amaka:* I see Detroit as a microcosm of the issues in the nation and the issues we haven’t addressed in this nation. So it’s like a view of a nation
of oppressed people and the manifestation of that oppression is very alive in Detroit...[I]t’s always been a very special city because there are these great Black political minds that come from this type of environment fighting against oppression. You know what I’m sayin’? And it’s got the greatest percentage of Black people across the board, so I would say that Black people from Detroit who do see that oppression have a greater confidence about themselves. They grew up around people who look like them and act like them. It’s a just a great pride in the people and a willingness to face adversity.

Such sentiments relate strongly with hooks’s (2002) assertion that Black people’s cultural identity—and oppression through slavery, sharecropping, and similar tactics—has always been connected to land. By further examining how historical and current policies are relevant to “urban renewal” in the city, course participants can explore the deep layers of issues relevant to land loss among Detroit residents such as redlining, environmental racism, and gentrification. In addition, we can examine how these injustices are tied to an anthropocentric worldview that feeds capitalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia as a means of establishing and maintaining human-centered forms of dominance by rendering other species inferior, exploitable, and expendable. Sections from EcoJustice Education (Martusewicz et al., 2011) will lay the groundwork on the concept. Another introductory text, Walker’s womanist essay “Am I Blue?” (1988), pushes for deeper exploration into the legacy of chattel slavery in the United States and the yearning for freedom present in all creatures. To add a Detroit emphasis in historical and contemporary contexts, passages from Sugrue’s The Origins of the Urban Crisis (2005) describing restrictive covenants and Thompson’s Whose Detroit? (2001) provide critical analyses on the ways in which the duality of the city cuts between it representing a metropolitan “Arsenal of Democracy” to arguably the most segregated and impoverished major city in the country. The readings—coupled with accounts from community members who co-teach the
sessions—provide a multi-layered view of the social construction of urban settings and communities from the intersections of gender, race, and class. As Detroit environmental and food sovereignty activist Charity Hicks eloquently summarizes in the documentary *We Are Not Ghosts* (Dworkin & Young, 2012),

> We’re not just concerned about growing food—we’re also concerned about the quality of food, food literacy in the public, and making sure that Detroit’s Black community has some frames around food, politically, economically, and socially. …What promotes the greatest good? What is our relationship to Earth? And how do we promote the greatest good to the Earth? How do we promote the greatest good to the relationship to self? How do we promote the greatest good to relationships between us?

*Cultural Representations of Space*

*A whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers (both of these terms in the plural)—from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat.*

~Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*

During our interview, Kasi makes mention of a few overlooked cultural institutions in Detroit that students in the course should visit. More popular destinations such as the Heidelberg Project (mentioned in Chapter 2) construct a counternarrative of the city for a mass audience, but the lesser-known places exude similarly powerful messages of creative justice, solidarity, and Black consciousness. According to her, traditionally sacred sites such as the Shrine of the Black Madonna, for example, promote all three elements in its church, cultural center, and bookstore. She also recommends participating in the “Food Justice Fridays” at the Cass Corridor Commons—a progressive shared-use space occupied by the historic First Unitarian Church, East Michigan Environmental Action Council, Fender Bender Detroit, and other social justice
organizations. At the two-hour monthly gathering, organic buffet-style meals are prepared by People’s Kitchen Detroit (another organization located in the Commons) while open-mike performers use spoken-word poetry, hip-hop, and other art forms to address topics including gentrification, environmental injustice, racism, and community violence. Integrating service-learning practices within Black-affirming cultural institutions reflects the womanist ethical tenet of traditional communalism. As Floyd-Thomas (2006, p. 9) explains, creative productions of knowledge in these contexts may render a better understanding of how [B]lack people collectively undo the historically constructed racist-sexist-classist-heterosexual ideologies that have homogenized them in ways that discount the variations of their humanity and that have deprived them of seeing themselves culturally as traditionally capable as well as traditionally universalist, even within the most oppressive of circumstances.

Kasi’s suggestions strongly align with an urban womanist pedagogy that recognizes non-normative productions of knowledge and the manner in which such knowledge is shared. In critical service-learning practice, a more in-depth analysis on urban social-spatial environments is necessary to challenge dominant narratives that portray Detroit and many of its Black residents in the pejorative. Through his examination of the racial implications of U.S. “black culture” vis-à-vis its mainstream counterpart, Hall (1992) also soundly justifies the recognition of Black cultural representations as a counternarrative unto themselves:

However deformed, incorporated, or inauthentic are the forms in which [B]lack people and [B]lack communities and traditions appear and are represented in popular culture, we continue to see, in the figures and the repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them. In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, [B]lack popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of
some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is
different—other forms of life, other traditions of representation. (p. 27)

As part of an effort to “decode” Detroit and its myriad representations, this course
includes a community mapping exercise that takes faculty, students and community
members to areas of the city that are rich in historical context (e.g., Brewster-Douglass
housing projects) but are now rendered silent due to their erasure from Detroit’s
landscape as well as public discourse. Discussion prompts will explore the lasting effects
of “urban renewal” in the city. As Kasi shares her experiences of moving from the U.S.
South to Detroit, she also shares a story of a Detroit that continues to struggle to have its
story heard through the voices of Black residents above the din of redevelopment:

I guess it probably took me about a year to actually get comfortable and
get my bearings, and after that I really began to really love this city, the
way that Black people in Detroit took charge of things. I think when I
came to Detroit [decades before], there was a lot of gentrification going on. …Even with trying to figure out how we maintain our city, how we
maintain our cohesiveness with the onslaught—on one hand you have the
core businesses moving out of the city, then you have this assumption that
Detroit is not a viable city but here we are in the middle of the city—how
we find our roots and our grounding. …[W]hat’s the adage? The more
things change, the more they stay the same. Yeah, it’s coming back full
circle. We’re still at that place.

Based on the first womanist tenet, radical subjectivity, the course will also
examine the different ways in which dominant narratives shape the way in which Detroit
is depicted and how we—both academic and community partners—respond to such
narratives. By comparing similar stories in mainstream and alternative news sources
(especially from the Black Detroit community perspective), students can examine the
ways in which language is used to reinforce and resist negative stereotypes regarding the
city and its predominantly Black populace. Asking questions such as, Who is constructing
the narrative? From which standpoint is the narrative being constructed? Who is the
audience for this narrative? What purpose does the narrative serve? encourages a more in-depth analysis of how place is culturally constructed and language is often used to racialize place. Case in point: When Detroit’s Cass Corridor was rebranded into “Midtown” during the early 2000s, it was done to further stigmatize the former name (one that triggers images of destitution, blackness, and urban blight) and promote the latter, which often connotes whiteness and upward mobility. Material resources that have been allocated to developing sections of Midtown may have been diverted from other areas of the district—primarily those areas traditionally associated with Cass Corridor. Community members who have witnessed gentrification and its aftermath could attest to these municipal changes and lead the interrogation of such changes. Their examinations in a critical service-learning setting would support Mitchell’s (2008) assertion that a redistribution of power is necessary to challenge and disrupt systems and structures of inequality. From a womanist pedagogical approach “imbued with sociopolitical consciousness” (Mule, 2009, p. 77), such strategies are intended to foster awareness of Black-dominant spaces as sites of critical inquiry, self-empowerment, and cultural production to contest the oppressive images that support deficit views of Detroit specifically, and African American communities in general.

Reflexive Relationships

Recalling Kipanga’s suggestions during our interview to encourage service-learning students to “know the history of this place” and question their preconceived notions of community, I think about ways to further integrate these suggestions into reflective practice. In traditional service-learning, the emphasis is placed more on
students’ experiences at community sites and the “lessons learned” within them. The lessons, despite their best intentions, more often than not reproduce the dominant narrative of the “at-risk” Black urban community rife with problems and the academic partner working to “help make a difference.” How can service-learning relationships be authentic, reciprocal, and ethical in this context?

To further explore existing perceptions and prejudices that can cloud service-learning experiences, I intend to use reflexive writing to augment classroom and community discussions to tackle power and privilege directly as a womanist harm-reduction strategy. As Vaccaro (2009, p. 130) points out,

[C]olleges and universities that wish to require or encourage service-learning have an ethical obligation to safeguard communities of color from harm. To make service truly ethical, aversive racism, microaggressions, and structural oppression must be extinguished. However, such lofty aims will require much time and a revisioning of society as a whole.

In contrast to reflection-based writing traditionally used by service-learners to contemplate an event in the moment (“What I observed”), reflexive accounts (“What actions I realized took place in retrospect”) can be applied to the critical service-learning course to deepen understanding of the ways in which intersecting social identities relate to urban space. Drawing from Collins’s (2000) womanist notion of personal—and community—accountability, I consider the following prompts as an effective starting point for students (and faculty) to challenge preconceived notions:

• Describe your own social identity. In what ways do you self-identify as privileged? In what ways do you self-identify as oppressed?
• What one word would you use to describe the community with which you are working? Why did you select that word? What racial/gender/class assumptions informed your choice?
• Describe how you see Detroit as an oppressed city based on race, gender, and social class. What is the basis of this description? How do you relate in this regard (or not)?
• Describe a time when you engaged in dialogue with a community member (as opposed to a community partner such as a nonprofit organization employee). How did the interaction make you feel? Where do you think those feelings originate?
• Describe any tensions you have experienced during your site placement. Explain why you believe those tensions surfaced. How did those tensions influence your perceptions of the situation? How did you respond?

Though not an exhaustive list, I believe that these examples of reflexive writing can make typically “unspeakable” issues persistent in service-learning more salient. By understanding how power and privilege operate in our daily lives and interactions, we can explore the manner in which racial, gender, and class identity development influence our service-learning practice. Using these prompts will further validate the communities working alongside us.
Collective Action

Before I can ask questions about the types of course materials we could include in our proposed course, Amaka rightly centers her concerns on the exclusive nature of academe and encourages me to consider alternatives for community members, such as classes that are open to the community that were free or low-cost so that people use the universities to shake off, to confront. There’s this duality that has to be addressed, and people have to also be lifted up know that they have power in situations speaking their voice and their stories and know that they have value—confronting their own internalized oppression, which is difficult to do both at the same time.

While the purpose of this study is to increase community member visibility in service-learning to promote equitable partnerships, Amaka reminds me that service-learning is still inherently inequitable due to community members’ limited (or nonexistent) access to college resources. Acknowledging community voices within the context of the class itself would differ significantly from those associated with roles such as guest speaker or neighborhood guide; community members would be placed in the center—as opposed to the margins—of the service-learning experience. The fourth tenet of womanism, critical engagement, would be supported by this action. I explore a classroom space at EMU’s Detroit campus location that is large enough to accommodate both university-enrolled students and interested community members. In order to further legitimate non-academic spaces in areas of the city, I also inquire space usage at alternative community locations such as Cass Corridor Commons and People’s Farm. Because I know the university would not pay community members to co-teach the class, I plan to split my adjunct paychecks to compensate them for their time and talents.

While traditional service-learning pedagogy directs academic partners to work in communities to engender social change, it is rarely discussed how internalized oppression
may manifest itself in these situations. Since Black urban community members are typically the recipients of service and not identified as valuable contributors to the project, they may not see themselves as individuals who have anything to provide to the service-learning experience. Some of the Black women I asked to interview declined participation because they “didn’t have much to say.” Several of Amaka’s recorded comments allude to this. When I tell her that the purpose of the project is to finally get our voices heard, our eyes fill with tears. The fight is personal for both of us. She eventually agrees to co-teach a session in the course.

It would be unfeasible—even unethical—to argue for the wholesale rejection of traditional service-learning institutions. Given the amount of resources that colleges and universities have to meet the needs of communities, inner-city organizations and neighborhood groups rely on the “person-power provided by service-learning students” for their very survival (Vaccaro, 2009, p. 130). I concur with Amaka, however, that higher education institutions can do more on the “learning” side of the hyphen by emphasizing increased community access to the classroom. In order to mobilize resources more effectively in communities under attack—the metaphorical “babies in the river” alluded to in the aforementioned parable—community members need to be positioned in the service-learning classroom and active participants in the discussion before the site placements are determined. Critical service-learning not only makes it possible to redistribute power, but also to create ways in which marginalized groups can affirm the power already present in their midst (Mitchell, 2008).
After a few revisions, I submit the proposal for WGST 279, mindfully titled “Gender, Race, and Urban Environmental Space,” to the department’s curriculum committee. It is unanimously accepted and subsequently forwarded to Academic Affairs to be officially recognized by the university as a bona-fide course. I breathe a sigh of relief and immediately share the good news via email with Kipanga, Bea, Amaka and Kasi. I am excited beyond words to see our course—one designed solely by Black women activists moving within the liminal spaces between community and academia—listed in the online summer catalog. Lost in the excitement is the sobering realization of the hard work still ahead: enrolling enough college students to ensure the course’s survival.
Walking into the department head’s office in early May, I already know what she is going to tell me: The collaborative service-learning course, “Gender, Race, and Urban Environmental Space,” will likely be cancelled before the summer term begins. The class that I co-designed with community members—the one that would have been free of charge to anyone in the community—had been on the chopping block for several weeks due to low enrollment. Though the course was scheduled to begin in early July, a predetermined number of students had to enroll by the end of April regardless of their intention to register at a later date. Only one college student, an African American woman, signed up. While several students had verbally expressed interest in the course, many of them also mentioned financial constraints that prevented them from registering before the course cancellation deadline. Due to recent changes in Pell grant eligibility requirements and distribution to fall and winter courses, summer enrollment has dramatically declined among students who rely on such aid throughout the academic year (Duda, 2012).

“I’m not surprised with this news, Suzanne,” I say flatly. “I just wished I had more time to get the word out. Adjuncts rarely get to teach a summer course, so there should be extra provisions for those of us who propose new courses.”

She nods sympathetically from behind her corner desk. “I know what you mean, but there’s only so much I can do on this end. Maybe this class would be better in the fall or winter when there’s higher enrollment.” As Suzanne continues talking about possibilities, I try to imagine the course if scheduled between September and April—
opposite of the growing season. What would be the purpose of bringing students and community members to farm in Detroit when not much is growing during those months? How would anyone bear witness to the fruits of labor and solidarity then? Unsure of the answers, I return my focus to Suzanne and feign attentiveness near the end of her turn. All I can say in response is an uncontested “We’ll see.” Before leaving the office, I wish her a good rest of the summer. She wishes me the same, though I am sure she understands how such sentiments ring hollow to someone who was just informed that she will be again unemployed for the next four months.

Then a greater fear hits me: How am I going to share this news with community members? Worse yet, How will I be able to face them? There were several people who offered to co-teach sessions with me and a handful of residents who were excited about taking an “official” college class in the city, free of charge. Bea was relieved to hear that a corps of students would be available to work on the weekends when volunteer numbers fluctuated during the hot summer months. Overwhelmed by disappointment, I struggle to maintain focus during the ride home.

A Look Back at the Garden: A Review of Research Questions

To gain some needed perspective after receiving the disappointing news, I reflect on the journey in much the same way a farmer looks over a field ripe for harvesting. I recall my first research question, “In what ways do Black women community members connect positionality and urban space as forms of resistance?” Based on the findings I presented in Chapter 4, the women demonstrated the complexities of their layered existence through childhood memories that connected their personal identities to the
spaces they inhabited. The internal and external tensions they experienced while growing up middle-class, Black, and female helped them develop an awareness of the structural inequalities at an early age. The seeds planted by their parents, grandparents, partners, and neighbors deepened their relationships to the land as a means of providing sustenance, creating new ways of learning, and building a movement centered on community transformation and healing.

The second research question, “How can Black women community members work with service-learners to address power and identity in urban space?” delved more deeply into the relationships between community and academic partners. Drawing from critical service-learning practice, such relationships are established and maintained interactively with an acknowledgment of community members as integral participants of service-learning programming. Spatial literacy development within community-directed historical, political, and cultural contexts is also a necessary component and demonstrates a redistribution of power that shifts the “expert” role from academic to community participants. The process includes challenging positions of power and privilege in order for academic service-learners to hold themselves accountable while making sense of their experiences with/in communities and deepening their level of consciousness through critical engagement.

The final research question focused on the practical aspects of a womanist vision for service-learning: “Within a womanist pedagogical context, how can the counternarratives of Black women community members be applicable to social justice education in urban service-learning?” Using a four-prong approach that aligns with Floyd-Thomas’s (2006) tenets of womanist ethics, a critical service-learning course
design should first integrate *Environmental Insight* to make further connections between systems of dominance and anthropocentric ideology. *Cultural Representation* centers on urban indigenous cultural production and counternarrative construction as they relate to space, deconstructing mainstream versions of Detroit while uplifting places that provide alternative learning environments. *Reflexive Relationships* redirects the emphasis from students’ “transformative” experiences and observations to a closer examination of their social positions, assumptions, and prejudices in an effort to mitigate harm as they navigate community spaces. *Collective Action* not only addresses academic capacity building as a means of working in solidarity with community members, but also seeks ways for community members to directly gain access to higher education resources. Such access includes becoming participants in the course as students or co-educators so that community needs are addressed at the beginning of the service-learning project and community voices are heard throughout the process.

**Limitations**

As is often the case, contingent faculty appointments are the riskiest from which to establish a service-learning course. My attempt to collect additional data by developing a critical service-learning course, only to lose the course due to institutional constraints, became a significant obstacle for this study. The experience, however, provided further evidence of one salient issue in contemporary higher education that has become increasingly reliant on contingent labor: Without job security throughout the academic year, many adjunct instructors experience difficulty developing a service-learning course. In addition to course cancellations due to low enrollment, part-time faculty may struggle
with limited resources (institutional as well as financial) while possibly balancing other teaching obligations at more than one college or university. As a result, the time spent fostering and maintaining authentic relationships within community is greatly diminished as well as the effort needed to co-design the course itself. Another time constraint would have been the one dictated by the academic calendar system: Given the social-justice orientation of critical service-learning pedagogy, it would have been ambitious to deeply explore issues of social inequality and social justice within the confines of a seven-week summer term. The conclusions drawn here were based primarily on retrospective data from previous service-learning experiences. Participating and observing in a critical service-learning course co-created with community partners would have been in stronger alignment with Mitchell’s (2008) vision of this pedagogical method.

The methods employed to inform my analysis were limited to my experiences and a small number of interview participants. While the four community members provided rich layers to the study and their narratives were considered valuable, their responses were not representative of all Black women’s experiences engaging with college students in inner-city spaces. The participants’ contributions to this project, however, were intended to illustrate the ways in which womanist pedagogy could be practiced within urban service-learning contexts. While the conclusions I drew were limited only to their lived experiences, their responses helped me further understand the significance of centering Black women’s voices in dominant service-learning discourse. As Collins (2000) attests, while the interlocking systems of oppression may be unique to Black women’s experience, the experience can be used as a unit of analysis to interrogate other systems and structures of inequality.
Drawing from my experiences to further examine the responses in Chapter 4 added another dimension to the study by providing deeper insight into my role as a faculty woman of color whose complex roles as educator, doctoral student, community activist, fledging farmhand, lesbian, and mother exposed internal and external conflicts related to identity and urban space. While interacting with community members, I had to face my own vulnerabilities and frustrations and challenge unchecked assumptions derived from my academic and geographic privilege. As is indicative of womanist epistemology (Collins, 2000), my situated experiences were also an integral part of the study and appropriate for critical analysis through the kaleidoscopic lens of gender, race, class and sexuality. I acknowledge, however, that the interpretations of my and the participants’ reflections were presented using my voice alone. Though every effort was made to clarify vague references made during the interviews and to engage in follow-up conversations to add context to what was previously said, I ultimately determined how their words appeared in this dissertation and the manner in which my experiences were juxtaposed to theirs. The study utilizes a theoretical framework based on Black women’s lived experience and is intended to honor us all.

Implications for Future Research

The findings in this study give direction as to where future research on the topic should take shape. I agree with Stoecker and Tryon (2009) that the community members’ unheard voices must be heard in service-learning practice and research in order to further dismantle dominant paradigms that continue to silence them. Presenting this possibility using a critical service-learning model within a womanist theoretical framework certainly is a move toward pedagogical approaches centered on social justice. This study features
the voices of Black women, but more of our voices need to be heard. Future studies must investigate further the ways in which Black women’s standpoint directly informs critical service-learning processes including course development, topic selection, community engagement, personal reflexivity, and course evaluation as tools for anti-oppression education. In addition, future research must focus more on urban sites such as Detroit as places of resistance as opposed to ones solely “at risk.” Both areas of inquiry have implications across multiple disciplines including communication, cultural studies, women’s and gender studies, African American studies, geography, and urban studies.

Further study also is needed to examine the potential negative effects on contingent faculty hiring practices and the un/intended consequence of a weakening engaged pedagogy. While I concur with Mitchell’s (2008) suggestion to create multiple-semester service-learning courses to allow participants to deepen their understanding of social issues and to work with community members over the long term, such a project would be unrealistic to an adjunct faculty member whose appointments are on a semester-only basis. In order to encourage part-time instructors to shift from a traditional course to a service-learning model, it may be more beneficial to regard both traditional and critical service-learning (which is more labor-intensive) as part of a broader social justice learning continuum as Strain (2006) indicates. For instructors who do not have long-term academic appointments, it may be possible to regard traditional service-learning as an entry point into community-engaged work with students developing a critical consciousness gradually and organically over time in other learning contexts.

Lastly, as global service-learning scholarship continues to gain momentum, more research will focus on the relationships between academic and international partners.
Given the dominant service-learning narratives associated with providing aid and support to “Othered” non-domestic communities, strong parallels could be made between the ways in which such narratives similarly portray their inner-city U.S. counterpart. In the interest of further leveraging indigenous knowledge, challenging academic imperialist enterprises that maintain power imbalances, and promoting community-centered pedagogical practices both at home and abroad, this dissertation will make a valuable contribution to the discussion.

Epilogue

In early autumn I participate in the annual festival celebrating the end of another growing season at People’s Farm. Seeing the place ablaze with bright African cloths, pumpkins, and mums is a brilliant contrast to my first day at the farm with Bea, a time when everything was covered in snow under a blanket of gray sky. It is bustling with activity as children squeal during hayrides nearby and reggae rhythms pound through speakers. I assign myself the role of “gopher,” grabbing and delivering whatever supplies are requested by organizers to keep the event running smoothly. I sit behind a few tables to provide relief for vendors in need of a break out of the sun. I drive to a nearby grocery store to purchase cases of water to distribute to thirsty festivalgoers free of charge. I post signs around the farm directing traffic. Though the heat is beginning to wear me down, I keep moving. It is the least I can do for not bringing the course into existence. Months after that disappointing talk in Suzanne’s department office, I am still struggling with the guilt of letting my adoptive community down. Will they still have me as one of their own?
My empty stomach diverts my attention to lunch. The only savory meal being sold is vegan chili nachos. Having spent the last of my cash on the water I distributed earlier, I ask the cashier—one of the farm’s elders—if I can write a check instead. She nods and calls over to a young Black man assembling the meals, “Make her a plate next—she’s a member in good standing.” We exchange smiles as she passes me the nachos and I hand her the check. A member in good standing stays with me as I walk back to my table to devour my hard-earned dish. Afterwards those words leave me more satisfied than the meal. They remain with me still.

Returning home to Ann Arbor later that day, I feel less like an outsider—not completely embraced by every farm member, but certainly far removed from the awkward lesbian academic who spoke through her initial fears of rejection. I begin to understand what homeplace is in my personal and pedagogical journey as it relates to service-learning practice. It is the process of nurturing, lifting up, and building solidarity with community in the midst of struggle. It is the honoring of spaces that have been devastated by the ravages of racial and economic oppression, respecting its history and acknowledging its present with visions for a sustainable future. It is Black, rich, and complex like good soil on sacred ground. It is, above all, the radical act of loving the folk and the self...regardless.

As my study comes to a close, I think about my experiences on the farm and the connections I made with the crew, volunteers, and one-time visitors who wandered in from nearby neighborhoods to other parts of the world. People come to Detroit to learn, and I am proud to be a student as well. While I do not know what the next lessons will be in regards to co-creating a service-learning course in a space that both I and community
members have found refuge or how my struggles within academia will bear fruit, I am reminded of what Kasi shared during our interview:

_One thing about Detroit: We are resilient. And the beauty is in that resilience because no matter the naysayers, we do not give up. We are determined, and I love that. Even in the face of all the adversity—and let’s not kid ourselves, we have a lot of adversity—we don’t give up._

And neither will I.
APPENDIX A: COMMUNITY MEMBER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Background Information:**

1. Let’s begin with a story about your childhood. Can I hear a little bit about your family history?

2. What was your childhood like? How would you describe your community during those early years?

3. What felt like “home” to you?

4. Was religion/spirituality part of your childhood experience? If so, in what ways?

5. What lessons were you taught about “community” as a child?
   a. What roles did Black women perform in your community?
   b. Probe→Who were your role models?

**Detroit and Community Activism:**

6. (If not born/raised in Detroit): When did you move to Detroit? Why?

7. What was Detroit like then? How is it different now?

8. What jobs did you have while living in Detroit?

9. What drew you into community activism?
   a. Probe→How did you begin [current organization]?
   b. Probe→What other organizations have you been an active member of?

10. While working in Detroit, what social issues are most significant to you?

11. Does your social identity influence your activism? If so, in what ways?

12. Does religion/spirituality influence your activism now? If so, how so?

13. What does “community” mean to you in Detroit? How does your activism create a sense of place for you?
   a. Probe→Describe an experience in which you saw this community in action.

14. How do you see Detroit? How do your views influence the work you are doing in the city?

15. Let’s talk a little about your organization. How did it get started? What is its mission?
Detroit and Service-Learning:
16. What moments were most significant to you when working with students?
   a. Probe→Any challenges? Surprises?
   b. Probe (if one of my former community partners)→Was our class typical? How or how not?

17. Do you address issues regarding power and privilege while working with students? If so, how so?

18. Do you try to challenge students’ views of Detroit? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

19. How else do you see yourself in relation to academic service-learning partners?

20. Do you see challenges in the ways service-learning is done in your community? If so, what are they?

21. In what ways to do feel included or excluded during the service-learning process (course planning, during course, course completion)?

22. How can faculty better prepare students (and themselves) for service-learning in your community?
   a. Probe→What materials do you suggest as part of the preparation?

23. What suggestions for improvement do you have to improve academic-community partnerships in Detroit?
   a. Probe→What can be done now to make these changes happen?
   b. Probe→What can you do to be a part of these changes?
APPENDIX B: Behavioral Research Informed Consent
Wayne State University

Title of Study: Urban Service-Learning Community Member Reflections Pertaining to Identity, Place and Purpose

Principal Investigator (PI): Vanessa L. Marr, Doctoral Candidate
Department of Communication
(313) 577-2943

Purpose

You are being asked to be in a research study of community members in an urban service-learning course because you directly participated in a project with an academic service-learning component with a college or university operating in the City of Detroit. This study is being conducted at various locations in Detroit, Michigan. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled through Wayne State University is 20. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

In this research study, participants will share their experiences as they relate to community gardening and community-based learning in Detroit. The study also will include your reflections on community activism and how your personal experiences influenced the ways in which you interact with service-learning college students in the city. If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview with the Principal Investigator to answer questions based on your community organizational experiences and service-learning experiences in Detroit.

Study Procedures

1. If consent is given, you will participate in a face-to-face interview with the Principal Investigator. The questions will pertain to your social identity, perceptions and direct experiences related to the service-learning collaboration, your ideas about community, and your ideas concerning larger urban social issues. If applicable, the questions may also be based on your experiences working directly with the Principal Investigator in a previous service-learning course and may include references to interactions between you and the Principal Investigator during the course. The interview will take place in a setting that is most convenient to you and has minimal distractions. Depending on your responses, the interview will take up to 90 minutes. The Principal Investigator will use a digital audio recorder and take additional notes during the interview. The recorded interview will be transcribed and you will be given a copy of your transcript to check for accuracy. Only a pseudonym, which you can choose or have one chosen for you by the Principal Investigator, will be used during the interview, note-taking, and transcription process. All information related to this interview will be stored in separate locked cabinets
in the Principal Investigator’s home. Upon completion of the study, all recorded information will be erased and related notes and transcriptions will be destroyed to further protect your identity.

2. As a participant of this research study, your identity will be protected at all times. If your responses are used, you can select a pseudonym in place of your actual name (or have one assigned to you) to maintain confidentiality. If during the interview you wish to mention a third party (such as a relative, co-worker, neighbor, etc.), please assign a pseudonym to them to further protect your identity and the identity of those mentioned.

**Benefits**

As a participant in this research study, there may be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

**Risks**

You may experience some mild anxiety while recalling information during your responses. There also may be a social risk of potential breach in confidentiality because the Principal Investigator will keep your coded information in a single location.

**Study Costs**

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

**Compensation**

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

**Confidentiality**

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Human Investigation Committee (HIC) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.
Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Vanessa L. Marr at the following phone number: (313) 577-2943. You also may contact Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway, project supervisor, at (618) 453-1886. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Human Investigation Committee can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

_______________________________________________   __________
Signature of participant                        Date

_______________________________________________   __________
Printed name of participant                     Time

_______________________________________________   __________
Signature of person obtaining consent           Date

_______________________________________________   __________
Printed name of person obtaining consent         Time
NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

To: Vanessa Marr
Communication
508 Manoogian Hall

From: Dr. Scott Millis
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: January 28, 2013

RE: IRB #: 127912B3E
Protocol Title: Urban Service-Learning Community Member Reflections Pertaining to Identity, Place and Purpose
Funding Source:
Protocol #: 1212011579
Expiration Date: January 28, 2014
Risk Level / Category: Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were APPROVED following Expedited Review Category ( #3 ) by the Chairperson/designee for the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 01/29/2013 through 01/28/2014. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Revised Protocol Summary Form (received in the IRB Office 1/23/13)
- Protocol (received in the IRB Office 12/14/12)
- Research Informed Consent (dated 1/17/13)
- Data collection tools: Community Member Interview Schedule

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Renewal Reminder" approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can never be reported or published as research data.

All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB BEFORE implementation.

Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (ARUE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (http://www.irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php).

NOTE:
1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the IRB Administration Office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at each use.

*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998
APPENDIX C: NOTES

1 To further illustrate an *endarkened feminist epistemology*, Wright (2003) compares the term to Rasta politics and the use of word games as a form of discursive resistance. Dillard’s use of “endarken” as opposed to “enlighten” is similar to the Rasta use of “overstanding,” a “refusal to be positioned ‘under’ that the word ‘understanding’ supposedly entails” (p. 211). Another example Wright (2003) uses is the word “dread,” which has opposing meanings. While its European roots denote fear and anxiety, the Rasta interpretation is applied to words such as “dreadlocks,” a cultural signifier that reflects the positive characteristics of Rasta identity. Such acts contribute to the liberation of Black subjugated knowledge by assigning new meanings to old words traditionally used to undermine non-dominant groups. For a more thorough explanation of the term, see Dillard (2008) and Ladson-Billings (2003).


3 As part of an effort to maintain the confidentiality of community participants, I obtained full institutional IRB approval prior to data collection.

4 Dillard (2008) gives a broader definition of “community” that transcends geographic boundaries, but her application of African cosmology aligns with how I am articulating a “rhizomatic womanist methodology” as one that is rooted in place but can also move beyond its confines to reflect non-Western ways of seeing and knowing. See Harding’s (1996) discussion of “borderlands epistemology” for examples.

5 Throughout this chapter, Ghanaian adinkra art is used to represent African symbolism—my adopted “mother tongue” for this project—as a source of conventional wisdom indicative of womanist epistemology. Sankofa (“return and go get it”) symbolizes one’s lessons learned from the past while moving towards the future. See MacDonald (2004) and Arthur (2001) for a detailed listing of adinkra symbols and definitions.


7 DeGenaro (2007) strongly focuses on the intersection of race and class along the Eight Mile divide, but only makes an ancillary reference to the site as being gendered as well. Though this observation extends beyond the scope of the study, it bears noting that the Detroit side of Eight Mile Road is often regarded as the “red-light” district populated by adult nightclubs. In such settings, Black women’s bodies are often regarded as silenced, eroticized commodities.

REFERENCES


Dworkin, M. (Director), & Young, M. (Director) (2012). We are not ghosts [DVD].


P. Baltodano, and R. D. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader*. 2nd ed. (pp. 27-51). New York: Routledge.

Goodall, H. L. (2000). Writing the new ethnography. Walnut Creek, MD: AltaMira.


*College Composition and Communication*. 55(2), 276-301


In T. Stewart & N. Webster (Eds.), *Exploring cultural dynamics & tensions within service-learning*, (pp. 281-297). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.


Verjee, B. (2012). Critical race feminism: A transformative vision for service-learning


William-White, L. (2011, June). Dare I write about oppression on sacred ground
Retrieved March 15, 2012, from


Williams, J. E. (2003). *African American religion and in the civil rights movement in
Arkansas.* Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Books. Print.

Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and

politics of representation in educational research. *Qualitative Studies in
http://depts.washington.edu/centerme/Wright.feminist%20epistemology.pdf
ABSTRACT

GROWING ‘HOMEPLACE’ IN CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING: AN URBAN WOMANIST PEDAGOGY

by

VANESSA L. MARR

May 2014

Advisor: Dr. Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway

Co-Advisor: Dr. Pradeep Sopory

Major: Communication

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

This dissertation explores the role of critical service-learning from the perspective of urban community members. Specifically, it examines the counternarratives produced by Black women community gardeners who engage in academic service-learning with postsecondary faculty. The study focuses on this particular group because of the women’s deep involvement with grassroots organizing that reflects their sense of self and other community members, as well as their personal and political relationships to Detroit, Michigan. Given the city’s economic disparities rooted in racial segregation, structural violence and gender oppression, Detroit is a site of critical learning within a postindustrial/postcolonial context. This intersectionalist approach to service-learning is likened to bell hooks’s concept of homeplace, a site of resistance created by Black women for the purposes of conducting anti-oppression work. Integrating community member interviews and the author’s autoethnographic account to dialogically co-construct meaning, the study employs the womanist epistemological tenet of multivocality through connections to place, community, and activist praxis. Presenting
Black female cultural expressions and life stories illustrated in the data, the study identifies holistic community-campus partnerships as those that emphasize environmental insight, cultural representation, reflexive relationships, and collective action. The dissertation has strong implications in service-learning research and practice, advancing an ethos of responsibility that provides a space for unheard voices to speak and for relationships among community members and academics to reflect a model based on solidarity as opposed to traditional paradigms centered on charity.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

I am currently the inaugural Program Coordinator at the Center for Engaged Academic Learning (CEAL) at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Before joining CEAL, I taught undergraduate courses in Women’s and Gender Studies at Eastern Michigan University and the Department of Communication at Wayne State University. I earned a BA in English from Saginaw Valley State University, an MLS in American Culture from the University of Michigan-Flint, and a PhD in Communication Studies with an emphasis on Critical Communication Pedagogy from Wayne State University. My research interests include decolonizing service-learning, community/indigenous epistemologies, critical urban geography, uses of autoethnography in faculty identity development, intersections of race/ethnicity and gender in grassroots food sovereignty movements, and Black feminisms in academic discourse. My activism includes women’s economic empowerment, queer transformative justice, labor rights for contingent academic workers, and “truth-telling” in restorative justice practice. As an academic activist, I strive to create a space in which both sets of interests grow together organically.