Statement of Purpose

My primary research area is race/gender inequalities. The interaction of the two constructs, race, and gender, shape the dimensions in which black women experience their daily lives. My focus is on black women's experiences beyond the traditional boundaries of race and gender discrimination. Specifically, I explore how black women negotiate societal beauty standards and norms that exclude and devalue their blackness, which then impacts their career opportunities, employment, marriageability, access to social class circles, and thus fosters race/gender inequalities. *In my dissertation I explore the social construction of beauty standards and norms and the impacts of mainstream (or "whitestream") beauty ideals on black women in the Detroit metropolitan region.*

In my dissertation I investigate how black women in the metro-Detroit region conceptualize and daily enact and/or resist whitestream beauty norms at the intersections of race, gender, and class. My work deepens understanding of the day-to-day impacts of beauty standards and beauty socialization on black women. Importantly, my work also provides new insights on this topic by exploring the impacts of *class status* on black women's beauty beliefs, rituals, and socialization. That is, my work fills a gap in the literature by elucidating how black women negotiate and rearticulate racialized beauty norms to achieve "beauty," however defined, and how this phenomenon varies across Detroit-area women who occupy two unique class statuses: working class and middle/upper middle class.

I also strategically explore black women's beauty socialization processes and how black women, in turn, 'beauty socialize' their own children. In doing so, I address another critical gap in beauty literature, which rarely has focused on the role of *familial socialization* on black women's conceptualizations and everyday negotiations of beauty. Prior research indicates a "race paradox" in socialization practices commonly found in US black families and communities. This paradox occurs when black families teach their children to celebrate blackness while simultaneously (and often unwittingly) providing strong messages about the inferiority of darker skin tones (Wilder & Cain 2011). Research also indicates that black mothers trying to teach their children protective strategies against the realities of racism often unintentionally discuss these realities in ways that feed negative attitudes and biases toward black hair and skin (Wilson et al. 2018, Lewis 1999). My research delves deeply into beauty socialization strategies utilized by Detroit-area black mothers to understand how familial socialization – for better or worse – influences black women's conceptualizations of beauty, enactments of beauty, and resistance to whitestream beauty norms.

Significance and Contribution to the Field

Although black women and beauty norms have been studied for decades, my research contributes to the literature in important ways. I contribute insights into how black women in metro-Detroit conceptualize and enact (through negotiation or rearticulation) whitestream and/or black-centric understandings of "beauty." That my research is based in the Detroit metropolitan region – a hub of black beauty and black activism since the mid-twentieth century – is significant. I explore this topic at a unique point in time, given the resurgence of black activism in the #BLM (Black Lives Matter) era. In addition, I explore black women's conceptualizations, negotiations, and rearticulations of beauty across a critical class divide. Given class differences in educational attainment, career goals, and earnings, it makes sense that working class women and middle-to-upper class women will have different beauty aesthetics and beauty routines, yet class is underexplored in the beauty literature. Finally, my research explores the significance and impacts of familial beauty socialization on adult women's beauty beliefs and practices – including how they socialize their own children.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To understand how black women across social class conceptualize, enact, and/ or resist whitestream societal beauty norms, my work is firmly situated in intersectionality theory. Intersectionality is an analytic tool used to understand society, human experiences, and complexity in the world (Collins & Bilge 2016). It acknowledges that events and conditions that shape individuals', groups', and societies' socioeconomic and political lives are not shaped by one factor at a time, but rather by many dynamic and diverse factors in mutually influencing ways. In this instance, using intersectionality theory and methods allows me to understand how beauty standards – along axes of race, social class, gender, and age – work together to uniquely influence the lives of black women.

My qualitative, inductive approach provides a unique grounding position and fosters a way for me to answer the how and what questions (Hesse-Biber 2017). I am nearly finished conducting the in-depth semi-structured interviews crucial for obtaining and understanding participants' narratives and perspectives (Hesse-Biber 2017). In addition, I am conducting an analysis of participants' pictures. At the conclusion of each interview, I ask participants to share a photograph of themselves that they believe represents them in the best or most beautiful way. Analyzing participants' pictures is a form of triangulation. The photographic data deepen my understanding of participants' conceptualizations and depictions of "beauty" and preferred ideas about the impacts of racialized beauty standards on their daily lives.

I conducted interviews with women (aged 18+) who identify as black and reside in metro-Detroit. Throughout data collection, I focused on 1) the meanings and impacts of idealized beauty on black women's daily lives, 2) how beauty is enacted/negotiated/resisted across

different class statuses, and 3) how familiar socialization impacts beauty aesthetics, practices, and implications. I use grounded theory, a form of analysis that begins with ideas grounded in the data and ends with the development of theory. Coding is central to grounded theory and involves extracting meaning from text and multimedia content (Hesse-Biber 2017). The major strength of grounded theory is its open-endedness and flexibility when analyzing data (Charmaz 1990). Both my data collection and analysis have proceeded simultaneously, allowing me to follow up and pursue leads on new ideas as they develop.

Coding and memoing are primary components of my analytic process. Memoing is a form of free writing about relationships discovered in data, e.g., exploring similar quotations of different participants (Hesse-Biber 2017). When it comes to coding, I first engage in a line-by-line coding to find initial or open "codes." Codes in the qualitative context as described by Charmaz (1990) are labels applied or attached to certain data. I then follow up with axial coding, which allows me to compare codes with the aim of finding axes that connect those codes together. After grouping lists of codes into categories, I continue to analyze transcripts from new interviews as they come in, then compare emergent ideas to existing codes and categories (Charmaz 1990). Grounded theory is cyclical, meaning, the process continues until theory is generated from data (Hesse-Biber 2017). I use qualitative data analysis software called Atlas.ti (http://www.atlasti.com). This program enables me to organize text, visual data files (pictures), analytic memos, and codes/coding schemes into a single project (Creswell 2013).

I am also coding and analyzing the photographs collected from respondents. I am using two different coding processes. The first process uses codes derived from interview data. For instance, during interviews some participants described "beautiful hair" as "natural hair." Thus, I'm looking for similar ideas concerning "natural" in participants' self-portraits and coding hairstyles accordingly. In the second process I use codes derived directly from photographic images. As I assign codes, I use this process to explore a few questions, including: What is occurring in this picture? How do the images relate? What are the common features seen in the pictures? What is the difference between the features highlighted in participants' photographs? How are they different – *and why?*

Project Overview and Chapter Breakdown

I will finish data collection this summer (2024). I have completed 35 interviews. My goal is to complete 15 more. Due to my iterative approach to data collection and analysis, I have been working through the analysis as I continue to conduct interviews. My full analysis should be completed by August, which leaves me most of AY 2024-2025 to finish writing and to defend my dissertation in Spring 2025. Also, I am currently writing a paper titled "The Michelle Obama Effect," which I intend to submit by June 2024 to the journal *Sociological Focus.* The paper highlights the role Michelle Obama played in the beauty socialization of young (18-36), college-educated black women. This subset of respondents singled out Michelle Obama as the

embodiment of holistic beauty, and talked about feeling *seen* for the first time in their lives when she became the First Lady of the United States of America. One of the primary contributions through this paper is my elucidation of how these young women resist whitestream beauty norms by revising what it means to be a "beautiful black woman." Based on my preliminary findings my dissertation will include the following chapters:

Chapter 1: *Introduction*

Chapter 2: *Literature Review:* I discuss the history of black aesthetics, the impact of the civil rights movement and black power on black beauty and fashion, and the impact of socially constructed (whitestream) beauty norms on women's wellbeing.

Chapter 3: *Research Methods*

Chapter 4: *What Is Beauty?* I discuss black women's understandings and enactments of beauty and how understandings/enactments vary across social class.

Chapter 5: *The Michelle Obama Effect:* I explore the impact of Michelle Obama on young, college-educated black women.

Chapter 6: *The Intricacies of Beauty Socialization*: I discuss the role familial beauty socialization, its influence on Detroit-area black women's negotiation and/or resistance to whitestream beauty norms, and how socialization impacts black beauty culture in Detroit.

Chapter 7: *Conclusion*

DISSERTATION TIMELINE:

Summer 2024: complete data collection and analysis.

Fall 2024: complete drafts of chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Winter 2025: complete drafts of chapters 2, 3 (by February); complete drafts of 1, 7 (March).

Relationship to Humanities

Though situated in sociology, my research deeply connects with scholarship in the humanities. My work interprets culture by exploring the impacts of beauty norms on black women's daily experiences and general well-being. How do metro-Detroit black women's experiences with beauty norms shape their beauty beliefs and rituals? Do black Detroiters negotiate or rearticulate beauty norms in their day-to-day lives? *How and why do black women in Detroit engage with beauty in these ways?* How does class location complicate black women's adherence and/or resistance to beauty norms? What aspects of class create distinctions in beauty aesthetics and beauty practices?

Should I be granted a Humanities Center Fellowship, I look forward to sharing my work-in-progress at regular seminars and receiving feedback from fellow scholars. I deeply respect interdisciplinary research and look forward to learning how to talk about my work to interdisciplinary audiences, as I can see myself teaching in a women's studies, black studies, or sociology department in the future. Most importantly, this fellowship will provide me with the funding I need to obtain my goals of finishing my PhD and securing a tenure-track job at a US university.