Introduction

The Call

I use myself as an example. I was dealing with the issues of being Black, a descendant of Black people that have been enslaved, being a person displaced from their country, dealing with incest of my dad, dealing with rape, with depression and suicide. How the hell are you supposed to get out from under? And you’re Black, too? And I think I had more variables than some Black women. For some people it’s easy to say maybe I deserved it, maybe I did wrong by fighting back, maybe I was too strong. . . . Or if you’re dealing with the issues, you’re also trying to raise kids, and the kids become the priority instead of you. You don’t even take a chance to heal because you’re too busy taking care of everybody else. And that’s what you’re supposed to do, somebody says. I think for Black women it’s harder. They deal with imaginary expectations as well as real expectations.

—Lola, age 42

Popular rhetoric often portrays Black women as being strong, independent, and resilient. Although these are seemingly positive qualities to possess, they also have the potential to stereotype Black women in ways that can restrict their seeking help or needed support. The motivational speaker Debrena Jackson Gandy describes this as the Strong Black Woman Syndrome. The syndrome is steeped in the historically powerful images of the Mammy or the Matriarch who “was the nurturer, ‘the omnipotent caregiver,’ the always-listening ear, the ‘everlasting arm.’ . . . She was the Rock of Gibraltar, the Strong Black Woman who constantly gave out love, attention, and affection but who didn’t ask for it, appear to
need it, or require it in return.”

This image of the Strong Black Woman is a misleading notion that permeates the lives of many present-day Black women. Indeed, many Black women have strength, resiliency, and other tenacious and laudable qualities (as do countless other women); however, to continue to accept this stereotype of Black women, without question, overlooks the real challenges of their life struggles and needs for assistance. This is particularly troubling when considering intimate partner abuse in the lives of Black women. Often, Black women enduring intimate partner abuse forgo their right to be free of endangerment and harm by internalizing this identity of the Strong Black Woman. Consequently, the welfare of even the most resilient woman can be compromised as a result of intimate partner abuse.

Although survey research and arrest records indicate that the number of battered Black women is relatively large, battered Black women as a group are often obscured and ignored because of their race, gender, class, and victim statuses. Black women who endure abuse by their intimate partners are often invisible to the general public (conceivably because of the racialized and gendered priorities of news media outlets) or are further victimized by institutions that are intended to assist battered women. When official entities have intervened, ostensibly on behalf of these women, they have frequently relied on biased beliefs and often caused more harm than good.

Intimate partner abuse against Black women has also been ignored or discounted within the communities from which these women originate. Blacks in the United States have many focal points in their struggle for equality, including inadequate access to suitable housing, health care, and education; underemployment and poverty; substance abuse and high rates of HIV/AIDS; and excessive police contact, criminal prosecution, and imprisonment—all of which tend to be the result of historical and contemporary race and class discrimination. However, violence against women is not often deemed a high priority within the Black community. Even though intimate partner abuse has been addressed by several Black feminist scholars and novelists (such as Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Y. Davis, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Beth Richie, and Alice Walker), Black leaders have seemingly ignored this epidemic. In discussing the lack of interest within the Black community, Marcia Smith argued, in a 1997 article in The Nation, that “Putting domestic violence on the front burner would allow the community to rally all the troops for the tough battles ahead. Failure to do so not only abandons the women who must live
with violence every day, but undermines families, communities, and political solidarity.9

Given that women of color do not always experience racism in the same ways that their male counterparts do and that the experience of sexism against women of color is not always the same as the experience of White women, prevailing theories and practices with regard to violence against women (as a homogeneous group) are limited.10 I argue that explicitly considering accounts of intimate partner abuse against Black women affords a more comprehensive view of all women’s experiences. Accordingly, in this book, my investigation augments the relatively small amount of research conducted solely on intimate partner abuse against Black women.11 A notable exception is Beth E. Richie’s Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women, a seminal work on violence against women. Her exploration of battered Black women’s paths to committing criminal acts as a result of their victimization provides a pioneering contribution to the existing research on intimate partner abuse. Battle Cries builds on Richie’s fine work, as the study described in this book considers a nonincarcerated and more diverse sample of battered Black women. Given the broader group of Black women in my study, my examination can expand on Richie’s work in terms of how culture and the social structure shape the experiences of and responses by Black women to intimate partner abuse and the effectiveness of the support networks in place to assist with this distressing phenomenon.

**Development of Feminist Advocacy Against Intimate Partner Abuse**

An increased awareness of the problem of intimate partner abuse against women has developed only during the past few decades. Until the 1970s, concern, advocacy, and protection for battered women among the general public and criminal justice officials were glaringly sparse.12 Historians had sporadically recorded attempts of various individuals to raise public concern for these victims. However, until the 1970s, these endeavors were largely unsuccessful. During this decade, there was an accelerating trend toward the criminalization of batterers and an increase in the assistance afforded battered women. Feminist organizations began to highlight intimate partner abuse against women as a social problem needing to be remedied,13 and books written by battered women and their advocates began to appear with fervor.14 In 1973, the United States saw one of its first shelters to assist wives battered by their alcoholic husbands at the
Rainbow Retreat in Phoenix, Arizona, and since this time, shelters have rapidly appeared across the country. In addition to establishing places to harbor battered women and their children away from their male batterers, police and court intervention agents began to address woman battering more seriously with the enactment and increased enforcement of laws and sanctions relating to intimate partner abuse. In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law the landmark Violence Against Women Act to combat violence against women by providing assistance to workers in the criminal justice system (for example, training for police officers and court workers), support for battered women's shelters and a national telephone “hotline,” and funding for research on violence against women. The Act was renewed by Congress in 2000 and provided financial support in excess of $3 billion for five years. The second reauthorization of the Act was passed by both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives and was signed into law by President George W. Bush in January 2006.

Along with the diligent labor of feminist activists, the battered women's movement was further assisted in its development and awareness efforts by the news media's attention to the movement. Through the mid-1970s, some popular magazines considered domestic violence to be an act of rioting and terrorism, but by the end of the decade, the term became equivalent with “wife abuse” and other forms of family-related interpersonal violence. Indeed, one research project showed that between 1987 and 1997, media representations of intimate partner abuse as a serious issue were instrumental in decreasing the public’s tolerance of “wife abuse.”

Although various definitions are offered to characterize intimate partner abuse, for the purposes of this book, I have used a broad definition that includes “physical assault, threats, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, harassment, and humiliation by current or former intimate partners.” This broad definition is used because women who have been victims of both physical and emotional abuse are often cited as stating that the emotional abuse is more damaging and lasting. Because battering is often accompanied by other forms of abuse, the physical abuse described by women in this book was not quantified. That is, a woman who had experienced a single, isolated physically abusive event was still eligible to share her story with me, as that single event may have been preceded or followed by other forms of maltreatment. As stated by the Black feminist scholar bell hooks, intimate partner abuse “is an important area for feminist research precisely because many cases of extreme physical abuse begin with an isolated incident of hitting.” Additionally, given that the women's narrations of their life histories
are the basis of this study and that obtaining these stories was necessary to observe how Black women respond to abuse on the basis of their lived experiences, my definition is not limited by time parameters.

Because of what we know about intimate partner abuse, gender, and the use of a feminist standpoint, throughout this book I mostly use gender-specific pronouns when referring to the victims and the perpetrators. Female pronouns are used in describing victims of intimate partner abuse, and male pronouns are used for the abusers. This is not to diminish the abuse that takes place against individuals in same-gender relationships or abuse against men by their female intimate partners. Indeed, many of the concepts delineated throughout this book are likely applicable to Black women in abusive lesbian relationships and to other victims of intimate partner abuse. However, as the study undertaken focused on Black women in abusive heterosexual relationships, the way in which victims and batterers are identified is gendered.

Even with increased attention to the issue, abuse among intimate partners as a social problem is still not receiving the level of attention it deserves from criminal justice agents and health professionals. For instance, there is fairly recent evidence showing that police officers still respond leniently to male batterers. That is, men who abuse their female intimate partners are arrested less often than other violent offenders. In addition, battered women’s shelters continue to suffer from poor financial support and the inability to house every woman and child who need and request sanctuary from their abusers. As indicated by a survey conducted by the Center for the Advancement of Women in 2001, a sizable number of women believe that intimate partner abuse warrants continued attention. In fact, the report shows that 92 percent of the women surveyed believed that intimate partner abuse and sexual assault should be the very top priority for the women’s movement. Reducing violence against women was trailed by the following priorities: receiving equal pay for equal work (90%), improving child care (85%), reducing drug and alcohol addiction among women (72%), and keeping abortion legal (41%). This finding underlines the belief that much more work is needed to improve the lives of battered women and to better address the unwarranted behavior of batterers.

It is unmistakable that with the identification of intimate partner abuse as a social problem more than three decades ago came an unprecedented amount of research and activism surrounding the plight of battered women. In both the research and the responses to intimate partner abuse,
however, cultural, racial, and ethnic distinctions among women victims of intimate partner abuse have not been afforded equal levels of consideration. Much of the research and many of the policies see all battered women as victims with similar life experiences, neglecting the fact that Black women and other women of color typically have life experiences distinct from those of White women.

The research in the 1970s was conducted with predominately White samples and failed to take into account how the surveys and findings might be problematic in reference to victims and offenders of color. Criticism has been directed at the research instruments used to determine the intricacies of intimate partner abuse because the measurements were not tested on women of color, nor did they take into account cultural differences among women who endure intimate partner abuse. As such, research on intimate partner abuse is not complete without attention to the cultural arenas in which Black women participate. Regrettably, more recent investigations continue to follow this precedent. Research designed to study battered White women may not adequately explain how Black women experience and respond to intimate partner abuse. Basing investigations on theories that do not defer to the unique experiences of Black women does them a disservice because they must confront daily both racism and sexism within U.S. society.

Collective members of *Incite! Women of Color Against Violence* argue that organizations established to assist women victims of physical and sexual abuse are now beholden to government funding and bureaucracy because of their move toward professionalization. This results in a focus on institutionalized responses to violence against women that often prompts the punishment or restriction of the rights of women victims, particularly women of color. For instance, there has been an increase in arrests of women victims of intimate partner abuse, and, as demonstrated by the stories of the women in my study, stereotypical images (such as that of the “angry Black woman”) reinforce this practice. This is supported by bell hooks, who concludes, “Black male violence against black females is the most acceptable form of acting out. Since the racist sexist white world sees black women as angry bitches who must be kept in check, it turns away from relational violence in black life.” Feminist criminologists have regularly advocated that, in addressing women’s victimization and offending in studying crime and the workings of the criminal justice system, it is not feasible to simply “add women and stir.” Because multicultural interventions and programming that are based on middle-class White women do not typically meet
the needs of women of color, a similar adage can be applied to address the admonitions of women activists of color in the antiviolence movement: We cannot simply “add women of color and stir.” To effectively attend to issues of violence against Black women and other women of color, we must heed the approach advanced by *Incite!* activists and scholars:

That is, what if we do not make any assumptions about what a domestic violence program should look like, but instead ask: What would it take to end violence against women of color? What would this movement look like? What if we do not presume that this movement would share any of the features we take for granted in the current domestic violence movement? . . . [W]hen we shift the center to women of color, the importance of addressing state violence becomes evident. This perspective then benefits not only women of color, but all peoples, because it is becoming increasingly clear that the criminal justice system is not effectively ending violence for anyone.

The theoretical framework that I use here is called “Black feminist criminology” and has roots in existing feminist ideology. Black feminist criminology expands on feminist criminology and is grounded firmly in Black feminist and critical race feminist theories. In conforming to these feminist theories, Black feminist criminology necessarily places the Black woman and her intersecting identities at the center of any analysis, as opposed to considering her identity as nonessential. Black feminist criminology specifically considers issues of crime, deviance, violence, and the workings of the criminal justice system in the lives of people of color. An explicit description of Black feminist criminology and the way in which it is a better framework for understanding how Black women experience intimate partner abuse is supplied in the following chapter.

**The Extent of Intimate Partner Abuse by Race and Gender**

Several sources document variation in the rate of intimate partner abuse by race. In general, as a group, it has been estimated that Blacks typically experience more intimate partner abuse than do other racial or ethnic groups. Shannan Catalano’s analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) revealed that women encountered partner violence at lower rates in 2004 than in 1993. According to the NCVS, 9.8 per 1,000 women were victims of intimate partner assaults in 1993, whereas 3.8 per
1,000 women experienced such assaults in 2004. While U.S. women in general have recently experienced lower rates of intimate partner abuse, women of color continued to experience some of the highest rates among all women victimized by their intimate partners. Both the NCVS and the National Violence Against Women Survey revealed that Native American women and Black women report the largest proportion of intimate partner abuse. From 1993 through 2004, the average annual rate of intimate partner violence that did not end in death (nonfatal) was 18.2 for every 1,000 Native American women and 8.2 per 1,000 Black women. The rate was 6.3 for White women and 1.5 for Asian women. Although my presentation in this book focuses on Black women and the call for more attention to intimate partner abuse against Black women, the large number of battered Native American women also warrants our serious attention.

In addition to race, there are several other so-called risk factors for being or becoming a victim of intimate partner abuse. These include earning low incomes, being divorced or separated, living in rental housing, and living in urban areas. However, Michael L. Benson and his co-authors criticized certain investigations, asserting that these studies did not consider that Blacks and Whites reside in different types of neighborhoods, which affects the levels of intimate partner abuse. Evan Stark and Anne Filtcraft report that unemployment, substance abuse, physical disabilities, unwanted pregnancies, AIDS, suicide, homicide, and the living conditions (including homelessness) of some Black women can be attributed to intimate partner abuse. Such findings indicate the importance of the need for intensive research on intimate partner abuse experienced by Black women because of multiple marginalization factors. Essentially, the findings suggest that the stress of being the object of disbelieving racial discrimination and residing in distressed neighborhoods negatively impacts Blacks by adding to other life stressors and causing strain and conflict within intimate relationships.

Toward Understanding and Confronting Intimate Partner Abuse Against Black Women

Considering the rates of intimate partner abuse against Black women and seen against the relatively large amount of intimate partner abuse research carried out on White women, little research has been conducted specifically on battered Black women. Studies that include Black women in their samples often do no more than state this occurrence, and, particularly
in statistical studies, minimal (if any) effort is made to address the experiences and concerns of Black women. Thus, the outcomes from the carefully planned and executed study detailed in this book provide a means of furthering the understanding of intimate partner abuse generally and the experiences of battered Black women specifically. Throughout this book, I address the major themes in the lives of battered Black women, the theoretical contribution of the current study, policy implications, and recommendations for ways we can respond to the issue so that we can continue to confront intimate partner abuse based on the accounts of all of the women affected by it.

In my study, the way of determining how Black women contend with intimate partner abuse is established from intensive interviews with 40 remarkable individuals who desired to share their stories of abuse, resistance, and triumph. I briefly describe the approach I employed to investigate heterosexual intimate partner abuse against Black women in Chapter 2. An extensive description of the research method and the women’s social backgrounds and demographics can be found in the Appendices.

The life histories gathered for this exploration, including the stories of the often perilous childhoods of many of the women conveyed in Chapter 4, provide a unique and significant window through which to view intimate partner abuse. My analysis establishes similarities and variations in the women’s experiences based on age, socioeconomic or wealth status, and education level of the women. While the women suffered from behaviors that are typically meted out by most batterers, regardless of race and ethnicity, in Chapter 5 I discuss the common abuses the women endured and their perceptions of their abusive male mates in order to provide an ample view into their lives.

Near the start of the process of gathering the women’s stories, a significant pattern emerged that was similar to the outlook depicted in Lola’s narrative at the opening of this chapter. Lola’s illustration of her existence as a Black woman in the United States eloquently describes the scope of this book: the acknowledgment of each woman’s multifaceted identity along with her individual experiences with intimate partner abuse. The conceptual model I developed from looking into the women’s lives, which I have called “dynamic resistance,” is evident throughout Lola’s passage and is discussed in Chapter 3, along with the women’s identification with the Strong Black Woman image. Dynamic resistance considers the numerous forms of domination and discrimination that confront battered Black women because of their abusive circumstances and their interwoven
identities due to race, gender, and other social, cultural, and individual circumstances. The women’s self-perception as Strong Black Women, and not as victims, is considered to account for their efforts to resist abuse and other life distress. Included in this resistance is the propensity for the women to verbally and physically retaliate against their abusers, an important finding that is the focus of Chapter 6.

My assessment also led to the identification of presumably beneficial social and policy implications, which are implied throughout the book and summarized in the concluding chapter. The effectiveness of the various resources used by the women in my study—including family, friends, religion, spirituality, and social and public services—is examined in Chapter 7. The outcome of this work introduces and draws attention to ways to improve the well-being of battered Black women by providing important information for these women and their family and friends, as well as assisting the workers and volunteers in community organizations, the professionals in mental and physical health fields, the police who respond to intimate partner abuse calls, and the judges and attorneys who process these cases.

Taken as a whole, four overarching conclusions are emphasized in Battle Cries. First, the women’s physical abuse by and resistance against their batterers was often referred by the women as battling (or similar terms). There was a substantial rejection of the victim label, and referring to the abuse in these terms provided the women with a form of agency. Even though there was some level of satisfaction in fighting back, the denunciation of their victimization along with the stereotypical portrayals of “true victims” of intimate partner abuse (for example, defenseless White women) reduced the assistance afforded the women. Consequently, the second conclusion is that the cries of battered Black women often go unheard. Third, the co-occurrence of abuse and disregard of the turmoil resulting from the abuse are a call for action to work toward alleviating the often silent suffering of battered Black women, in part by understanding the devalued position of Black women in U.S. society. These efforts are unquestionably a battle—a prolonged struggle that will take concerted and devoted efforts by various factions, including the Black, activist, academic, and legal communities. Last, the term “battle cry” is usually taken to mean a cry used to rally soldiers into battle, but it has also been used to incite individuals and groups into action for a cause. Accordingly, the accounts, concepts, and implications imparted in this book will serve to rally those who contest the unremitting and overlooked abuse against Black women into an active and advocating stance.