



2012

Image Slavery and Mass Media Pollution: Examining the Sociopolitical Context of Beauty and Self Image in the Lives of Black Women

Jennifer Richardson
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

 Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richardson, Jennifer, "Image Slavery and Mass Media Pollution: Examining the Sociopolitical Context of Beauty and Self Image in the Lives of Black Women" (2012). *Dissertations*. 313.
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/313

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
Copyright © 2011 Jennifer Richardson

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

IMAGE SLAVERY AND MASS MEDIA POLLUTION:
EXAMINING THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF BEAUTY AND
SELF IMAGE IN THE LIVES OF BLACK WOMEN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

JENNIFER LYNNE RICHARDSON

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2012

Copyright by Jennifer Lynne Richardson, 2012
All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people who made this dissertation possible. I am grateful to the women who participated in this study. They each taught me invaluable lessons about the richness, beauty, and healing power in the telling of our stories. I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Ayana Karanja, and the members of my committee, Dr. Beth Richie (UIC) and Dr. Talmadge Wright for their guidance and vested interest in the completion and success of this project. Dr. Karanja's nurturing guidance, her invaluable expertise on excavating and sharing the narratives of Black women, and her wisdom and support in finishing this program are all invaluable treasures I will take with me wherever I go throughout my life. Dr. Karanja, thank you for your constant support and positive energy.

I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues in the Scientific Careers Research and Development Group at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine Faculty Affairs. I owe you each a special thanks for rallying around me, offering words of encouragement, paving the way for me and being amazing examples of academic scholars and researchers, and being understanding and supportive coworkers and friends. I am especially thankful to Dr. Rick McGee. I am so grateful for the support you offered me in finishing this work. I could not have been blessed with a better work environment. Your dedication to the success of young academics has greatly impacted

and inspired my own work and career trajectory. I appreciate the coaching you provided to me as I finished this endeavor. You truly are a master coach!

Finally I would like to thank my family and friends for being my cheering section and loving me despite my frequent moodiness, exhaustion, and absence. To my girlfriends/ sisters/ mothers, you've collected every tear, you've shared in so many laughs, you have been my sounding boards and my diary. Thank you for your love and affirmation and for being examples of strong and truly beautiful women. I am particularly grateful for my father who attracted positivity and success into my life through words and prayer. You always dreamed big dreams for me, even when I could not. Thank you for helping me to believe. To my mother, I am honored to be your daughter. I will never forget the life lessons you imparted before you became ill. I hope that your legacy (a woman who was a generous giver; a gentle and considerate care taker of all who crossed her path; an amazing educator, storyteller, and lover of reading and the arts; a mother who unconditionally loved, supported, and bent over backwards for her children and other people's children) is reflected in the woman I am today. I hope that you are proud of me. And to my husband, your love, encouragement, late night conversations, and support, has made me blessed indeed. Thank you for pulling me through the storm when I could not see the way. Asante.

For those who came before me, family, friends, and ancestors. In the spirit of remembrance, I cast libation to the North, to the South, to the East and to the West, Ashe.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Into the Lives of Black Women	1
Statement of the Phenomenon	3
Significance of the Study	11
Limitations of the Study	18
Organization of the Dissertation	19
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	22
Troubled Pasts and Telling Futures—Historical Representations of African American Women	22
The Intersections of Identity, Difference, and Media	34
Contemporary Media Inequality and Racist Representations	46
African American Women are More Confident Than White Women?: The Debate Over How Media Impact African American Women	58
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN	
Just A ‘Regular’ Black Girl?: Searching for Answers—An Auto Ethnography	77
Research Questions and Methodological Stance	87
Description of Data, Data Collection Process, and Methodological Framework	90
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS	
Introduction	108
The M Word: A Site of Hegemony and Generational Variance	111
Family and Community: Reading Race, Media, and Beauty	121
Truth Telling: Avoiding Pain and Maintaining Resistance	145
Unfolding My Research Dilemmas: The Baby Boomers—Mary’s Story, A Vignette	156
Down the Rabbit Hole: In the midst of pain, how Black women talk about media, beauty, and family	160
CHAPTER FIVE: DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS PART TWO	
Introduction	170
From Kitchen Counters and Living Rooms to Counter Stories: Creating healing circles, the invitation to write, and reimagining our future selves	173
Healing Circle Part One	173
Healing Circle Part Two	179
Healing Circle Part Three	189
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS	193
Synthesis of the Findings	195

Challenging and Deepening the Paradigm	196
Future Research: Moving Ever Forward	199
APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND STUDY PARTICIPATION	201
APPENDIX B: JOURNAL WORKSHOP EXERCISE	203
APPENDIX C: ARTICLE USED FOR FIRST HEALING CIRCLE “TYLER PERRY’S NOT THE ONLY ONE STILL WRITING FOR COLORED GIRLS.”	214
REFERENCES	217
VITA	235

ABSTRACT

The ways in which African American women negotiate the intersections of popular media, dominant discourses of beauty, and identity are rarely explored. This work brings into focus how African American women consume, understand, and make meaning of mediated images and representations of African American women. In order to inform this particular research project, this study engages a constellation of literature and theoretical perspectives and explores historical representations of African American women and beauty messages they contain. Throughout this process I examine concepts of identity formation; discuss connections between sexuality and the politics of imagery; and investigate linkages between structural racism, popular media, and forms of cultural production. Through an interrogation of the complexities in how Black women make meaning of images of themselves, in relationship to mass media, I seek to excavate a set of realities known to many, but rarely articulated in academia. This study utilized empirical and qualitative methods that engage African American women, across four different generational groups, through in-depth interviews, a series of three participant-observer focus groups/ women's healing circles, and individual journaling workshops. The combination of empirical and qualitative methodology allowed me to excavate and document ideas, struggles, and attitudes of African American women pertaining to beauty, identity, and the politics of media. From a grounded theoretical approach, this study seeks to gain insight into old and new processes of 'looking' and attempts to

provide space for African Americans to counter the enslaving seduction of media images that negatively impact identity and self definition.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Into the Lives of Black Women

This study explores the ways in which African American women negotiate the intersections of popular mainstream corporate media, dominant discourses of beauty, and identity. This work brings focus into how mediated images of beauty impact the identities of African American women. Foundational to this inquiry are the following questions: (1) how do African American women reach their definition of beauty and understand their own beauty politics; (2) what do African American women think about how mediated images and representations impact their short and long term overall well-being; and (3) what do African American women think should/could be done in order to counter how they are represented and viewed in media? In its totality, the study seeks to interrogate the ways in which African American women consume, understand, and make meaning of media beauty images and representations of themselves.

In order to inform this particular research project, this study engages a constellation of literature and theoretical perspectives and explores historical representations of African American women and beauty messages they contain. Throughout this process I will examine concepts of identity formation; discuss connections between sexuality and the politics of imagery; and investigate linkages between structural racism, popular media, and forms of cultural production. Through an

interrogation of the complexities related to how Black women make meaning of images of themselves in relationship to mass media I seek to excavate a set of realities known to many, but rarely articulated in academia.

This study utilized empirical and qualitative methods that engage African American women, across four different generational groups, through in-depth interviews, a series of three participant- observer focus groups/ women's healing circles¹, and individual journaling workshops. The combination of empirical and qualitative methodology allowed me to excavate and document the ideas, struggles, and attitudes of African American women as they pertain to beauty, identity, and the politics of media. From a grounded theoretical approach, this study seeks to gain insight into old and new processes of *looking* and attempts to provide space for African Americans to counter the enslaving seduction of media images that negatively impact identity and self definition.

While critical analysis of media imagery exists, I argue that the nuanced and multi-dimensional voices of African American female audiences have not been adequately heard or articulated as they pertain to hegemonic mainstream corporate media images of beauty. I also argue that defining certain women as beautiful and others as not possessing beauty is a form of sociopolitical control that empowers some and disempowers others. bell hooks asserts:

I ask that we consider the perspective from which we look,
vigilantly asking ourselves who do we identify with, whose image

¹ The focus groups were formed in the tradition of Healing Circles, also called "Ring Shout." It was my goal to create a place for Black women to discuss their lives; to build a sense of community; to provide a sounding ground and witness space; and create a place where our truths mattered and where we could hear, understand, and honor the experiences of each other. This is discussed further in Chapter Three.

do we love. And if we, black people, have learned to cherish hateful images of ourselves, then what process of looking allows us to counter the seduction of images that threatens to dehumanize and colonize (1992, 6).

Taking hooks' statement into account, initially my work seeks to understand how a particular group of African American women understand and negotiate those images. As hooks frames it, I want to understand the perspectives from which this set of women "look" and what looking means for the women that I interview. This work seeks to discover what, if any, processes of "looking" allow African American women to counter media images and messages.

Statement of the Phenomenon

In a society where hegemonic, mainstream, popular media is widely consumed and extremely influential, we are bombarded with powerful images and messages that call our beings into question. Kellner is correct in stating that "radio, television, film and other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of "us" and "them"" (Kellner 2003, 9). As Americans become inundated with popular mass media (radio, television, film, print, internet, etc.), its power and influence continues to grow. Within this construct, mass media plays a significant role in shaping our ideas, lifestyles, and thought processes.

Through the scope of media, audiences receive messages about who they are and how they are defined or understood within the mainstream hegemonic culture. Gramsci (1972) argues that domination and hegemony are based on ideological control granted to

the elite with the consent of subclasses. In locating the work of McLuhan (1964), Hall (1990; 1997), Chomsky (1987), and hooks (1992), one can argue that one of the functions of popular media is to develop consent amongst its consumers. Consent is manufactured through the images, representations, and revelations about race, gender, politics, current news, beauty, sex, and a host of other categories. According to Black Nationalist, educator, and poet, Haki Madhubuti (1976), “Television is the most dangerous weapon of our time.” Chavez et al (1999) contend that mass media sends messages to its audience that can negatively affect the views of one’s racial or ethnic identity. “Individuals often must filter ethnic identity through negative treatment and media messages received from others because of their race and ethnicity. Such messages make it clear that people with minority status have a different ethnic make-up and one that is less than desirable within mainstream society” (1999, 39).

One popular message is the importance of the pursuit and promotion of beauty or attractiveness. Mainstream media has provided audiences with what could be called beauty criteria- a monolithic cultural standard or definition of beauty. What was once an unachievable fantasy has now become an achievable standard via plastic surgery, make up techniques, hair altering products and procedures, or computer imaging. This artificial look advertised in mainstream media has become the norm for American women. As Susan Bordo (1999, 283) points out, “It’s not because women are vain creatures who won’t be satisfied unless they look like goddesses. Most of them merely want to look normal in a culture where *normal* is being radically [re] defined...”

Bordo's recognition of the radical (re)definition of normality should be expanded beyond gender to include race. As *criteria* have been classified and defined within the institutional power of media by the hegemonic white culture, the accepted standard of beauty is characterized by white ascribed characteristics and features. For McCrackin, media sells "Ideal images of the future self...[and] ideal beauty..." (1993, 136-136). However, if we engage this view from a critical perspective, we can also ask "*whose possible future do these images speak to and whose does it negate?*" Certainly hegemonic media images of beauty speak negatively to and further complicate racial identity for minorities (Baldwin 1984; Helms 1990). And as Wright (1986) points out, the media has many functions in society and socialization serves as one of those functions.

An important part of African American women's historicity is to understand how bodies and images have been colonized, constructed, and violently owned. More space must be given to a discussion of the Black female/body as an historically objectified, disembodied "thing." Aime Cesaire (1955) uses the term "thingification" in his description of the colonial gaze upon the black body. The *Venus Hottentot* is probably the most widely known instance in which a Black female body was placed on display under the European gaze at her buttocks. The derogatory images and attitudes about African American women such as Mammy, Mule, Jezebel, Sapphire, the sexualized and owned Venus Hottentot etc. that historically prevailed are still present in modern day stereotypes and representations (Morton 1991; Hobson 2005; Staples 1973; Roberts 1999; Ammons 1995; Wallace 1999).

It is important to note that critical discussions about beauty traditionally take place within a framework of gender and sex. Many scholars (Brand 2000; Butler 1993; 1999; Wolf 1991; Friedan 1984; Steinem 1995), especially feminist scholars, have made important connections between the discourses around beauty and its impact on women and female identities. However very little academic work deals with beauty in a racialized context. At the same time, this study does not negate nor ignore the importance of and the ways in which African American women's gendered identities are formed and impacted.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of black women by white men as a weapon of political repression (Combahee River Collective in Moraga and Anzaldua 1981, 213).

Instead it aims to bring into focus how Black women's identities are complicated by race in relationship to systemic oppression. While the concept of racial identity will be explored further, this paper seeks to examine literature that explores the connection between racialized media messages of beauty and how those messages potentially impact, not only the identities' of African American women, but the humanity as well.

African American women understand and are in touch with the notion that there is a popular cultural agreement of what it means to be beautiful, or attractive (hooks 2003, Collins 1991; Craig 2002; Bennett and Dickerson 2001). Several works imply that many African American women experience extreme psychological and sociological pain in

response to media images of white beauty (Posavac, Posavac, and Posavac 1998; Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Bordo 1999; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Downing and Husbands 2005; Collins 2005; hooks 2003, 1992). For how do Black woman answer the call to beauty and perfection when that perfection is outside of the historical and physiological realm of what is meant in the hegemonic Western world by beauty? This study investigates literature that explores how mainstream media functions to affect and entangle racial identity; and explores how African American female consumers receive and interpret those media messages or how those messages affect identity and well-being.

Conversely, other studies (Bordo 1999; Mack 2001; Milkie 1999; Molloy and Herzberger 1998; Patel 2001; Rosenfeld 1999) conclude that African American women appear largely unaffected by mainstream notions of beauty, have positive self-images, and are comfortable and content with their beauty and attractiveness. Carby joins other Black feminists in explaining that traditionally, the history of Black women in America has been absent of their actual pain and humanity; it is a history where when made visible has “Constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prized objects of the Western world, have been endowed” (1999, 67). This paper recognizes the literature that takes the position that African American women are much more negatively impacted by media images and cultural standards of beauty than has been reported in previous and mainstream accounts.

Also much of the problem with the aforementioned research is that it is not culturally sensitive. Methodologically the research is self-reporting in survey or group form and does not allow for analysis of the nuances and intricacies of examining a

category as subjective as beauty. It is not believed that the African American female participants have consciously deceived interviewers. Instead, previous research (Milkie 1999; Molloy and Herzberger 1998; Patel and Gray 2001) in many instances did not take into consideration various cultural factors and rules that may account for the appearance of more positive self-images and self-esteem in African-American women, as they were simultaneously asked to report their contentment with their personal beauty in the face of media images. These cultural influences, that include factors such as notions of nationalism, racial pride, and coping mechanisms, are quite complex and under researched (see bell hooks, Joyce Ladner, Robert Staples, and Toni Cade Bambara).

It is not the intention here to dismiss self-reporting data altogether. Instead, it is to say that self-reporting data need to be culturally understood. My suggestion is not that we dismiss it but that we do not accept it solely in survey format and that when we do accept it we use cultural and historical understandings to fully probe and give meaning to the self reported data. Reflective in works on Afrocentric thought and issues of the Black community and the Black family (Staples 1975; Ladner 1971, 1973; Semmes 1995; Parmar et al 2004; Baldwin 1984), it is clear that understanding these sociohistorical and politicized factors is critical in doing research that reveals the reality of particular ethnic groups. However uncovering these issues can be a challenging task:

Many black folks refuse to look at our present condition because they do not want to see images that might compel them to militance. But militance is the alternative to madness. And many of us are entering the realm of the insane... black folks turn away from reality because the pain of awareness is so great. Yet it is only becoming more fully aware that we begin to see clearly (hooks 1992, 6).

It is also important to mention the unreliability of self-reporting data in that it does not capture the dynamics of the complex realities in which the participant is making decisions about beauty and identity. Instead of only asking people how they feel about media images of beauty, it is necessary to observe their behavior as it relates to media consumption and what women have to do in order to feel and look beautiful in terms of the white standard presented in media. If an African American woman feels she has to change her hair, eye color, body size or skin color to resemble that of the normalized or prototypical white American woman (Bordo 1999), such evidence needs to be captured in the data sets to be analyzed. If transforming one's self has become so natural to do, we miss that behavior for what the legal profession refers to as *prima facie* evidence--that is, evidence that is sufficient to be established as fact.

It is vital to enter the discussion on identity, by acknowledging the idea that African American women's beauty/racial identities are not fixed or necessarily unified (Gabriel 1998). Instead, they are diverse and are constantly in transition. In addition there is no single process by which individuals come to or understand identity formation. Identities can be fluid and are in constant formation. In fact Ladner (1971, 271) addressing the complicated monolith of studying black womanhood states, "The dynamics of institutional racism have been responsible for both the strengths and weaknesses of black womanhood." Despite many one-dimensional theoretical perspectives, African American women's identities are developed through various paths and are vulnerable in a society that historically did not have their best interest in mind. As Lorde (1984, 45-46) implores, "...If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will

be defined by others- for their use and to our detriment. The development of self-defined Black women, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities, is a vital component in the war for black liberation.”

As African-American women are saturated with media images and media becomes our communities, I must ask Ms. Lorde, in the face of the all-powerful Oz of media, how now do African American women achieve self-definition? As the work of many Black Feminists scholar/ activists (bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and many others) encourage, this paper, placed within an anti-racist context, not only looks at how African American women are defining themselves or being defined/negated in the face of hegemonic media forces, but the work also seeks to begin efforts towards exploring ways in which African American women can successfully diminish the power of media and truly develop their own, more positive self definition. The complexities of media imagery’s impact on Black womanhood deserves attention. In this sense, encapsulated in the works of scholars like hooks (1981; 1992; 1993), Collins (1998; 2005), DuBois (1903), Quashie (2003), Winn (2010), Camus (1937), we can theorize about the dialectical liminality and double consciousness of Black female identities.

What is tender, undeniable, fluid, like winter, memory, or hunger: this practice of pairing with an/other and oscillating between states of (dis)identification yields a liminal identity, a subjectivity that is material and corporeal but which also transcends the limits imposed by corporeality, visual culture, and colonization- a selfhood that challenges the normative constructions of “self.” This liminal subjectivity is not exactly an achieved state; instead it is a series of uncovering- like the ever outward concentric circles made by a pebble’s break of pond surface, circles that also progress ever inward (Quashie 2003, 76).

Significance of the Study

The ways in which media beauty messages negatively impact all women have been the topic of numerous disciplines, particularly feminist studies (Brand 2000; Butler 1993; 1999; Wolf 1991; Friedan 2001; Steinem 1995). Also, there are multiple studies exploring the sociological and psychological pain that racism has historically had on African American communities and individuals (Akbar 1984; Wright 1984; Cress Welsing 1991; Degruy Leary 2005; hooks 1981; 1992; 2000; 2003). However few studies have examined the impact of race and racism when looking at how concepts of beauty are defined, understood, and consumed. Here I argue that definitions of beauty are racialized and that that racialization dually impacts African American women as both women dealing with the glare of the media's call to be *perfect* and African Americans dealing with beauty criteria that *naturally* excludes them with racist implications.

This study is particularly significant when considering the historical context of dealing with issues of African American women's identity, self-worth/value, and well-being. Traditionally, as many African American feminists argue, Black women have had to struggle to tell their stories of resistance to race, gender, and class oppression on their lives. (Guy-Sheftall 1995; hooks 1981; 1990; 2000; Cade 1970; Marabel In Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001). This is important to understand when considering the current social and political well-being of African American women. It is clear that African American women have historically experienced tremendous disparities and severe social, economic, and personal realities when compared to white women. Even today, Black women

disproportionately suffer from health disparities, educational/ employment inequity, financial disparities, environmental racism, and a host of systemic challenges.

According to the Black Women's Health Imperative (2008), nearly 80% of African American women are overweight and 51% are obese. Obesity increases the risk of diabetes heart disease, stroke, gallbladder disease, arthritis and some cancers. 50% of African American women have a total cholesterol level that is too high. Almost 37% of African American women have high blood pressure (which is disproportionately higher than any other group) and develop high blood pressure earlier in life (Black Women's Health Imperative 2008). According to the American Cancer Society, despite a 10% lower incidence of breast cancer found in African American women (who go under diagnosed due to lack of screening), African American women experience a 37% higher death rate than white women. In fact, for most cancers, African Americans have the highest death rate and shortest survival of any racial and ethnic group in the US. (American Cancer Society, African American Cancer Facts and Figures for African Americans 2009-2010 http://www.cancer.org/downloads/STT/cffaa_2009-2010.pdf).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, AIDS is now the leading cause of death for African American women ages 25-34. African American women are over 21 times as likely to die from HIV/AIDS as non-Hispanic white women. (Womanshealth.gov <http://www.womenshealth.gov/minority/africanamerican/hiv.cfm>). Also according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, around 40% of African American men and women have some form of heart disease, compared to 30% of White men and 24% of

White women. African Americans are also 29% more likely to die from the disease than Whites (U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services 2007).

According to the 2007 Census Bureau report, the average African-American family median income was \$33,916 in comparison to \$54,920 for non-Hispanic White families. In 2007, the U.S. Census bureau reported that 24.5% of African-Americans in comparison to 8.2% of non-Hispanic Whites were living at the poverty level. In 2007, the unemployment rate for Blacks was twice that for non-Hispanic Whites (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). In January 2008, while the national unemployment rate was 4.9%, it was 7.3% for African American women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Employment Situation: January 2008). While African American women are more likely to be employed than African-American men, African-American women earn lower wages than African-American men and White women do. In 2007 White women earned a median \$663 per week compared to \$566 for African-American women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment and Earnings, January 2008).

According to Malveaux (2008), “One in four African-American people, and more than 40 percent of African-American children live in poverty. Many of these poor are working poor—women who earn little more than the minimum wage in service occupations, especially as home health workers, janitors and cleaners, and in other occupations. These women almost always lack sick leave, health care, and benefits that other workers take for granted. They struggle to make ends meet, often bridging the gap between living expenses and inadequate paychecks with credit cards and other forms of high-interest debt.” For Adams (1995), as dual minorities African American women are

more likely than white men and women to live in segregated areas, experience extreme poverty, live in poor housing, be exposed to violence inside and outside of the home, and experience health problems and social/ environmental stresses.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Health's African American Community Mental Health Fact Sheet, African Americans in the United States are less likely to receive accurate diagnoses than their Caucasian counterparts. Social circumstances often serve as an indicator for the likelihood of developing a mental illness. And African Americans are disproportionately more likely to experience social circumstances that increase their chances of developing a mental illness; Also According to NAMH, African Americans comprise of 40% of the homeless population and only 12% of the U.S. population. People experiencing homelessness are at a greater risk of developing a mental illness. Also, exposure to violence increases the risk of developing a mental illness and over 25% of African American children exposed to violence meet criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder;

According to the Bureau of Justice, African American women comprise 8% of the U.S. population but in 2005 accounted for 22% of the intimate partner homicide victims and 29% of all female victims of intimate partner homicide according to (*Bureau of Justice Statistics Homicide Trends in the U.S.: Trends in Intimate Homicides* Source: FBI, Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976-2005). The Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community University of Minnesota reports that African-American women experience intimate partner violence at rates 35% higher than their White counterparts and 2.5 times the rate of men and other races. And Black women

who are battered have more physical ailments, mental health issues, are less likely to practice safe sex, and are more likely to abuse substances during pregnancy than African American women without a history of abuse (Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the African American Community Fact Sheet).

The Bureau of Justice reported, in 2008, African American women disproportionately account for 32.6% of incarcerated women when they are less than 7% of the total U.S. population. In comparison to 62 per 100,000 white women, African American women are incarcerated at a rate of over 4 times as many at 149 per 100,000. That is 50,700 African American women are incarcerated in comparison to 29,100 white women (Glaze, Lauren. and Laura M. Maruschak. Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, August 2008; Sabol, William J., West, Heather C., and Cooper, Matthew 2008 Prisoners. Bureau of Justice Statistics).

When understanding many of these conditions in the context and as consequences of a people who emerged historically from a system of involuntary human bondage where legally and theologically they were considered to be less than human and were simultaneously treated like animals without souls (White 1999; Morton 1991; Levine 1977; Hobson 2005; Semmes 1992), we can begin to interrogate the impact of current hegemonic cultural and institutional structures such as media. After considering the diverse and vibrant ways that identities are formed, historical conditions that challenge the well-being of African American women, then we can begin to unpack the consequences of historical and present ways in which they are represented or underrepresented, valued or devalued, and understood or misunderstood.

From the dawn of the slave trade until today, US capitalism was both racist and deeply sexist. The super exploitation of Black women became a permanent feature in American social and economic life, because sisters were assaulted simultaneously as workers, as Blacks and as women. This triple oppression escapes Black males entirely. To understand the history of all Blacks within the Black majority, the “domestic Black periphery”, special emphasis is required in documenting the particular struggles, ideas, and attitudes of Black women. To do less would be to reinforce capitalist patriarchy’s ideological hegemony over the future struggles of all Black working people (Marabel In Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001, 172).

A major goal of this work is to make connections between literatures that will contribute to the existing body of theory and knowledge concerning how African American women’s identity and racial identity are entangled in and affected by media portrayals of race, and racialized beauty. It is critical when conducting a study examining these issues that the methodology employed focuses both on the text of mass media as well as its audience. As we seek to study media content and inequality in the media, the goal must be to discover and examine the attitudes and feelings that African American women have about media, identity, and beauty.

With the aforementioned in mind, the focus should be on unveiling a narrative that seeks to learn the meanings that African American women attach to these issues. Methodologically, a study that is culturally sensitive will not only take into account cultural concerns, but will investigate and evaluate what is said to researchers and the observations of researchers with regard to actions and behaviors of participants. In-depth interviews, journal workshops, and participant observation focus groups where together participants and researcher view and engage with media will excavate relevant issues in a way heretofore untested and unexamined. This methodology is also a contribution to a

literature of understanding and action in that it potentially offers Black women agency in the study and a lifelong tool of resistance.

Learning to love ourselves as Black women goes beyond a simplistic insistence that “Black is beautiful.” It goes beyond and deeper than the surface appreciation of Black beauty, although that is certainly a good beginning. But if the quest to reclaim ourselves and each other remains there, then we accept another superficial measurement of self, one superimposed upon the old one and almost as damaging, since it pauses at the superficial. Certainly it is no more empowering. And it is empowerment- our strengthening in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service of our work and future- that will be the result of this pursuit (Lorde 1984, 174)

This work joins other Black feminist scholars and activists in the pursuit of breaking from current media infrastructures; challenging the ways our reality is shaped and defined; and creating new paradigms and counter- hegemonic discourses towards the wholeness and self-recovery of African American women.

As Gandy points out, “African Americans who expressed a greater sense of sharing a “linked fate” with other Black people were more likely to express critical views towards the media” (2001, 602). A study is needed where researcher and participants come together to observe media and engage in an open dialogue. As Tobin (2000) suggests, the goal should be to study not only the groups’ interaction with each other but also their interaction and response to the media viewed. “What’s needed ... is a hybrid approach- a viewer response that includes an ethnographic attention to social and cultural context and the use of rigorous and imaginative interpretive strategies for making sense of the viewers’ responses” (2000, 6).

Limitations of the Study

Every research study has limitations and few meet all of their goals. One limitation of this work is the number of women interviewed for this study. I included 25 women, age 18-95. While I initially proposed to interview six women from four different generational groups, I was unable to find participants in the youngest age group and was only able to interview 3 women age 18-29. However, the goal of this study is not to produce generalizations of all African American women in each of the four generational groups. The data gathered from these participants cannot represent the responses or exact story of all Black women. However, I am providing a qualitatively rich, principled investigation of the experiences of the participants in this study. Further, I believe my analysis can play a significant role in understanding the nuanced and various ways African American and Africana women navigate media and definitions of beauty. Moreover, data collected from these 25 women will add to knowledge gained from similar works by other scholars (Roberts 1999; Butler 1999; Britton 2002; Brown 1993; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Coleman and Means 2002; Collins 2005; Commons and Wilson 2000; Craig 2002; Entman and Rojecki 2000; hooks 1992; 2003; Pough 2004; Wanzo 2009).

Second, this study is limited by the self-selection of the participants who learned of the project through convenient pathways and networks in the Chicago land area. Helms (1990) stated the self-selection in racial identity studies may result in research participants with more pronounced racial attitudes. Those who inquired about this investigation were aware that the study was investigating media impact on racial identity

and attitudes about beauty. Bias may have arisen from respondents with pronounced racial attitudes and participants who were interested in the study's topic.

A third limitation of this study is the researcher's reliance on self-reported data and interviews rather than monitoring actual decisions or daily behaviors of the participants. However the interviews, journals, and healing circles provided heightened interactions with participants so that an analysis of beauty performance and appearance was possible. Thus, what women discussed in interviews and groups about their perceptions and understandings pertaining to media and beauty were measured based on performance and answers to questions about media consumption and beauty behaviors.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a space for the participants to share their stories, and explore and imagine counter narratives. This analysis contributes to the existing literature pertaining to the Africana Diaspora and African-American women's issues.

Organization of the Dissertation

Engaging a constellation of disciplines, theories, and perspectives, Chapter Two explores literatures referencing historical ideologies of race, sex, class and racism as well as representations of African American women from modernity to the present. By examining the intersections of identity, sexuality, gender, race, class and media, I am interested in the ways in which the current literature addresses Althusserian, symbolic interactionist, behavioral, sociological, and Bahktinian perspectives on identity. Based on these literatures, I discuss the impact of media as a dominant cultural discourse and the impact of racism on identity formation and performance. Additionally, I have chosen

to incorporate media theories, whiteness studies, Black feminist theories, and critical race theory's explanations of contemporary popular media representations and their relationship to African American women and racial identity.

Lastly, a goal of the project is to attempt to interrupt and enlarge the debate within existing literature concerning media's impact on African American women and whether they are more confident than white women. In this interruption, in chapter two, I also posit that the binary of comparing the views of African American women to those of white women is futile in the investigation of how Black women see themselves and those like them in media.

Black feminist...are still demanding that the existence of racism must be acknowledged as a structuring feature of our relationships with white women. Both white feminist theory and practice have to recognize that white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women. This compromises any feminist theory and practice founded on the notion of simple equality (Carby 1999, 69).

Using white women as the normative standard does not allow us to delve into the complexities of the racial identity formation of African American women. Instead, the views, values, and understandings of Black women should be investigated as a separate and unique entity unto itself.

Chapter Three, including an auto-ethnography, describes the methods, sources of data, and instrument used in this study. This chapter also provides the theoretical basis for the chosen methodology used and modes of analysis of the data. Chapters Four and Five provide discussions regarding the emergent themes and analysis of the data collected. The discussion chapters offer a richness and breadth of case studies and

analysis of the stories collected in this research project. In line with Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) "Danger in a single story,"² I weave together the stories of African American women to stand together displaying the richness and variance of Black womanhood. Chapter Six summarizes the study, explores the implications of this research, and offers spaces for further inquiries and research regarding these issues.

² "I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar... Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity" (TEDGlobal 2009).

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

...Black women are inherently valuable... our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy... it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to black women (e.g., mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldogged), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough. (Combahee River Collective in Moraga and Anzaldua 1981)

Troubled Pasts and Telling Futures- Historical Representations of African

American Women

The history of racism and sexism for African American women in this country is a complicated and particularly painful one. Identifying historical readings of the African

American female body and African American beauty are essential in understanding contemporary critical perspectives regarding the representations of African American women in popular media. The lack of historical popular readings on this subject however point to the ways in which women of African descent are considered or ignored and formed or disfigured (Carby 1999; Morton 1991). While many scholars begin an analysis of African American women in the West with slavery, as “Judged by the evolving 19th century ideology of femininity, Black women were practically anomalies” (Davis 1981, 5), it is vital to first engage the literature regarding the historical question of race as well as notions of the *other* prior to contact with Europeans in the Western Hemisphere.

The question, what is race, has stuck to the consciousness and academic pursuit of humankind for centuries¹. The concept of race is entangled throughout history; distorted in ideology; reified in art and representations; and deceptively veiled in current practices and real structures of society. Many sociologists agree that race as a physical concept or *condition* dates back to western European expansion in the sixteenth through the nineteenth century when concepts of race were heavily influenced first by religion and then scientific theory and ideology (Graves 2003; Fredrickson 2002). Challenging the western European tradition, contemporary concepts of race revolve around the premise that race is a social construction and is not biologically *real* (Omi and Winant 1994).

¹ Carl Linnaeus, Georges Cuvier, Blumenbach and Buffon, John Hunter, Christoph Meiners, Arthur Schopenhauer, Charles White, Franz Ignaz Pruner

The conception of race as socially constructed expands to include an understanding of how society, social consciousness, historical trajectories, and political events all impact human perception of race, in any given geographic area (Higginbotham 1992; Cox 1970; DuBois 1939; 1994; 1996; Omi and Winant 1994; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Blauner 2001; Essed 1991; Rex 1969; Goldberg 1990). Additionally, the current intellectual comprehension of race is rooted in the scientific community's repeated failed attempts at locating race in factual evidence (Graves 2003; 2004; Zuberi 2000; Bhopal 2007; Banton 1998; Larson 1968). This however, has not always been the case and these paradigmatic shifts in the epistemology of race are central to the understanding of racism as a social system.

Racism, as a social system, begins with certain negative beliefs and prejudices towards a certain group (i.e. ethnicity, national group or phenotype). More than just thinking and feeling, racism speaks also to powers and behaviors that establish and maintain a racial hierarchy or order (Allport 1954; Cox 1970; Omi and Winant 1994; Miles and Brown 2003). These behaviors are often times vindicated by ideologies, theories, and "common sense" which become recognized as historical social consciousness and the "natural order". "Racism is not merely an attitude or set of beliefs; it also expresses itself in the practices, institutions, and structures that a sense of deep difference justifies or validates" (Fredrickson 2002, 10). Biological definitions of race, rooted in ideological fallacies, are racist and precede racism, prejudice, and discrimination. At worst, racism leads to violence and symbolic violence as well as genocide and the extermination of groups of people.

Historical and present examples of the impact or product of racism are too numerous to recount here, but major examples include: the near extermination of Native Americans by European settlers starting in the sixteenth century; the continued and current disenfranchisement and oppression of Native and Indigenous peoples in America (Smith 2005); the capture, enslavement, and barbaric treatment of nearly 20 million African peoples by European traders between the fifteenth and mid nineteenth centuries (Memmi 1965; Marable 1983; Miles and Brown 2003); the extermination of approximately 6 million Jews in Europe by German Nazis during World War II (Memmi 1965; Adorno and Horkheimer 1986); the institutional structures, policies, and laws that upheld and turned blind eyes to lynching, segregation, and other Jim Crow laws (Fredrickson 2002; Crenshaw 1991; 1995; Bell 2000; Ladner 1973; Staples 1975) ; the present day continued institutional structures that deny black and brown children equal access to quality education which has produced a school to prison pipeline where African American and Latinos disproportionately outnumber whites (Bracey 2003; Advancement Project 2005; Alexander 2010); the system of apartheid against all non white people in South Africa from 1948 to 1991 (Rodney 1973; Davidson 1992); and failed institutional policies that find people of color disproportionately living in impoverished conditions, homeless, unemployed, and dying at younger ages (Wright 2000, Wilson 1990, Massey and Denton 1998; Serneau 2001). From the colonization and theft of lands from the Americas to Africa and the genocide in Sudan, Rwanda, and Bosnia to 1.5 million Jewish children in Nazi camps, racism and racist beliefs result in the most heinous and insidiously disgusting crimes against humanity.

“It is the dominant view among scholars who have studied conceptions of difference in the ancient world that no concept truly equivalent to that of “race” can be detected in the thought of Greeks, Romans, and Early Christians” (Fredrickson 2002, 17). However, it cannot be said that there was no ethnic prejudice or belief system equal to racism in antiquity. It is crucial to understand exactly where the story of racism begins. As many sociologists acknowledge, theories of race and racism erupted during the Enlightenment with European scientists and biological understandings of race, many scholars point towards a much earlier beginning of racism.

However between the Fifteenth and Eighteenth Centuries with the advancement of European expansionism, capitalism, a shift from religious world views is clearly recognized. A worldview that all mankind can be saved and are all a part of God’s creation changed to a secular or scientific ideology that locates human beings as part of the animal kingdom and comes to question or deny the humanity of certain groups. Intellectual and scholarly conversations about scientific explorations of race began most prevalently and notably with Eighteenth Century scholars such as Carl Linneaus (Larson 1968), Johann Joachim Winckelmann (Archer 2000, Painter 2010), Petrus Camper (Thompson 2003; Painter 2010), and Charles White (Thompson 2003).

These men led, what is now understood as the ideological movement towards “racial science” that located human beings in the animal kingdom and disrupted notions of humanity and questioned whether all people are a part of the human race. Each focused on skull measurements and skeletal features as they categorized and classified races and determined that peoples of European decent were divinely and scientifically

superior and could be categorized by rank and order of superiority based on their scientific findings. Later Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (Painter 2010; Thompson 2003; Bhopal 2007), shifted the focus to skin color, partially based on geographic location in order to establish racial superiority. Blumenbach's hierarchy of race included five classifications of human beings by color: white, yellow, copper, tawny, and tawny-black to jet-black. Eventually geographic location lost significance as people considered *white* or *black* could be located anywhere from Africa to America (Graves 2004; Painter 2010; Thompson 2003).

In the nineteenth century, evolutionist theories of Charles Darwin and Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau provided further justification of white superiority and whiteness primarily Europeans, as the authority on civilization (Darwin 1998; Archer 2000; Thompson 2003; Painter 2010; Graves 2004). The ideology of "racial science" and evolutionist theory went even further by entering heredity and genetics into the discussion. This manifested in the Eugenics Science Movement which focused on selective breeding of humans to improve the human race (Roberts in Perea 1997; Dijck 1995; Currell and Cogdell 2006). Along with IQ testing (see Graves 2003; 2004; Fredrickson 2002; Allen 1994; D'Souza 1996; Smedley and Smedley 2005), "racial science," over the course of several centuries, operated to rationally explain and prove the superiority of the white race and justified racism, prejudice, and oppression. Implicit in the superiority of whites is the inferiority of blacks or the Negro race as each of the racial science scholars deemed blacks as the lowest in the evolutionary hierarchy (Painter 2010;

Archer 2000). With “scientific evidence” blacks were defined as primitive beings whose humanity was uncertain, constantly probed, and explicitly treated as questionable.

The adoration and superiority of whiteness also made implicit the idea that whiteness was beautiful and desirable. For Kant (1914), race is a significant factor in determining beauty and beauty norms, and according to Tate (2009), “beauty is contingent, dynamic, racialized and is involved in an ongoing aesthetic and political contestation between local and global norms. Then, by looking at the period of slavery in America, it is clear how “racial science” ideology operated to justify behavior, oppressive racial interactions, and normative ideas about African American women. In fact, on the auction block, the first *media* exposure for African people, slavery further constructed Black female identities.

Historically relegated to the auction block instead of the pedestal, the black female body has been constructed as profane rather than sacred, other rather than ideal. How does the African American woman handle her physical disenfranchisement? How does she negotiate the politics of the body? (Bennett and Dickerson 2001, 10-11)

Although seen as sexual, child bearers and pleasure fulfillers, during slavery, African American female slaves were also seen as beast- like, and exotic as they were masculinized through their physical, rigorous, demeaning, and painful labor. Constantly told that they were ugly, inferior, and beneath a common animal, the African American female body was defined by the dominant white culture during slavery (Morton 1991; Levine 1977; Hobson 2005; Watkins and David 1970). The emotional and psychological trauma of those sentiments were violently indoctrinated into the minds of African American slaves and free African Americans long after slavery had ended (Bennett and

Dickerson 2001; Poussaint and Alexander 2000; Akbar 1984; Wright 1984; Cress Welsing 1991; Degruy Leary 2005). African Americans became complicit in the rules of their social position through weapons of psychological and physical violence and oppression (Fanon 1967). This is the foundation in America of the domination of their bodies, popular ideas about their beauty and the meanings they carry.

As initially expressed in chapter one, while representations, imagery, and stereotypes of African Americans are rooted in the ideological foundations of European pre-contact “racial science” and the era of slavery, in popular discourse, Blacks in America are perpetually identified in their connection to slavery and their pseudo scientifically deemed primitive and inferior ancestors. As such, the derogatory images and beliefs such as Sapphire, the sexualized Venus Hottentot, Mammy, Mule, Jezebel, etc., that historically prevailed are still present in modern day stereotypes and representations (Morton 1991; Hobson 2005; Staples 1973; Roberts 1999; Ammons 1995; Wallace 1999). See Tyler Perry’s *Madea*, Martin Lawrence’s *Big Mama*, Halle Berry in *Monster’s Ball*, *The Color Purple*, *Sheila* in Tyler Perry’s *Why Did I Get Married*.

After Reconstruction and throughout the Age of Prosperity and the Progressive Era, African American women, while still largely invisible and ignored, were now at least considered as consumers (Bennett and Dickerson 2001; Craig 2002). From the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, according to Banta (1987), this was the era of the new American girl and woman. The *ideal* American beauty was a fair skinned woman, “Expected to be young, pretty, unmarried, white, Protestant” (Banta

1987, 32). In fact the definition of what it meant to be an “American beauty” did not leave room for being a Black women at all. While Black women’s beauty was dismissed, denied, and ignored, if Black women were seen as Black they were sexualized and exotic, otherwise they had to be depicted as non-raced or of ambiguous race (Martin 2002; Hobson 2005; Morton 1991; Guy-Sheftall 1990). “The black female body was frequently depicted as racially white... or at least as culturally white (embodying the values of whiteness); as such, it remained regulated and disciplined by the dominant culture” (Bennett and Dickerson 2001, xiii).

However, for Goldsmith, during this time, as Black consumers migrated to industrialized cities, “consumerism emerges as a mode of racial, class, and gender identity construction... as dress and adornment mark a liminal boundary between self and world, consumerism does not merely demonstrate the individual consumer’s attempt at identity construction; it also vividly depicts the forces that militate against such self-construction” (Goldsmith 2001, 68 in Bennett and Dickerson). It is within this consumerist relation that many African American women remained throughout the first half of the twentieth century with very few changes in the form of resistance to popular white prescriptions of ideal beauty.

While social consciousness and the identity of African American women shifted throughout history, the most significant changes in representations of African American women and the African American aesthetic seem to have taken place during what is recognized as the Civil Rights Era. One goal of the Women’s Liberation, Black Women’s Club, Civil Rights, and Black Power movements of the 1960’s and 70’s was to

establish an independent standard of inner and outer Black beauty (hooks 2003; Giddings 1984; Collier-Thomas 2001). Banks (2000), as others, points out that one relevant manifestation of this attempt was the movement from straight processed hair, both in men and women, to the natural hairstyle.

Here, African Americans were “happy to be nappy” because black had been redefined as beautiful. In revolutionary and harmonious voices, racial uplift, racial pride, black power and racial self-love were powerful revelations. “Militant antiracists political struggles placed the issues of self-esteem for black folks on the agenda” (hooks 2003, 2). Media, advertising, and product industries of course welcomed the new market of self-aware and “natural” African Americans. African Americans redefined African American beauty on African American’s terms. In refusing to assimilate to white standards, black power was formed. Here dark, natural, and full figured was considered ultimate and royal (Craig 2002; hooks 2003; Banks 2000). Resisting white beauty standards however, ultimately alienated African Americans from other white privileges that were also desired during this time as the main goal of the these movements was to achieve equal rights as human beings.

hooks (2003) in particular explains “The holistic self-development rooted in black pride was the foundation of the black women’s club movement” (2003, 3). The call for racial uplift was a spiritual and moralistic journey that called for African Americans to not only love themselves but to also go into the communities and rebuild them within those standards (Giddings 1984; Collier-Thomas 2001; Ransby 2003). The Black Women’s Club was largely responsible for promoting those ideas. However, hooks

explains that two major factors contributed to the destruction of activist racial uplift. hooks points out that there were many African American public figures who were not necessarily interested in nourishing the African American soul but instead interested in achieving basic civil rights, materialistic goods, and satisfying the public sphere. After major civil rights were gained legislatively and social and economic goals and opportunities were reached, the focus on black pride weakened and faded. “An organized ongoing program of racial uplift... never gained meaningful momentum” (2003, 4).

The second factor, hooks explains, involved the fading power of the African American female leadership that hooks credits as fostering this movement toward self-love and racial empowerment. With patriarchal African American male leaders, African American women involved in the Black Women’s Club Movement were pushed out of equal positioning. African American women lost organizing power and positioning. This was evidence of the fact that though African Americans had reached out for racial equality, there was still much work to be done in line with gender equality (Carby 1999; Collier-Thomas 2001; Marable 1996). This, hooks asserts, changed the tone of the Movement Era, stifling its progression and diminishing its power. “Ultimately, like their white counterparts, black folks in this nation gained greater economic privileges, civil rights... and yet they found that even with all these progressive changes, all was not well with their souls... many...were lacking in self-esteem” (2003, 6).

In the age of Reaganomics, mass media saturation and new media, capitalistic and marketing forces welcomed African Americans back into the white hegemonic consumerist culture with open arms (Austin 1994). And it was only a matter of time

before the appearance of anti-assimilation and resisting white standards became a coping mechanism in defense of the media's images of white beauty (hooks 2003; Collins 1991). Today it is poignant to consider whether conditions are strikingly similar to the consumerist conditions of the early 1900s. Even though African Americans established certain civil rights along with material and economic gains, there was still much to be desired. The cultural, economic and social gap between white Americans and African Americans is enormous; and through negative, exaggerated, biased and absent media images, racism and prejudice in the white hegemonic culture is further perpetuated.

While current scholarly ideas about race are not based in racist beliefs, hundreds of years of believing that race is a biological occurrence has left a negative impact on race relations and perspectives in contemporary society. Race is "coded as culture... the central feature of these processes is that the qualities of social groups are fixed, made natural, confined within a pseudo-biologically defined culturalism..." Racism is "a scavenger ideology, which gains power from its ability to pick out and utilize ideas and values from other sets of ideas and beliefs in specific socio-historical contexts..." (Solomos and Back quoted in Fredrickson 2002, 8).

Presently, race is a widely accepted way of distinguishing, describing, labeling, and understanding groups of people; and, most telling, scientific study is still attempting to make the case for biogenetic connections to and explanations of race and racial classification (Dijck 1995; Roberts in Perea 1997). For Miles and Brown (2002), racism is visible in distorted and false representations and relations between people; and is a part of the historic and hegemonic worldview. "In the United States racism is structured into

the rhythms of everyday life. It is lived, concrete, advantageous for whites, and painful for those who are not white” (Feagin 2001, 2). It is argued that racism affects every important aspect of every individual’s life. We must question the role of media in the shaping and presenting of social consciousness and understandings of beauty, race, and identity.

The Intersections of Identity, Difference and Media

The concept of identity is a complex and thorny phenomenon to frame and define as it has been discussed across various fields and within diverse discourses. In recognizing the multiplicity of determinants impinging upon how identities are formed, this document borrows from a constellation of theories by which to investigate the myriad of responses African American women have to media. In that, it is important to explore the various definitions and terminologies used as well as connect those ideas in a way that will better illuminate my goals for this paper. Identity and racial identity can be separate terms, with certain over-lapping and interlocking similarities. Generally speaking, identity is an awareness or ideal that each individual possess (whether a person is fully conscious of it or not) (Helms 1990).

For the purposes of this study it is important to filter through notions of identity formation in order to arrive at a sociological understanding that encompasses and heeds other fields’ explanations. It is also critical to acknowledge the necessity and place of grounded theory in terms of allowing African American women to determine their own definitions and understandings of identity through various paths and theoretical frameworks (Creswell 1998; Ladner 1973). Further, within the theoretical framework of

Bakhtin's (1994) heteroglossia, there is variance within lived experience and multiple levels of discourse in black life and in the shaping of black female identities; they are multidimensional. Instead African American and female identities vary culturally and are based on nuanced historical and political contexts. Similar to the work of Karanja (1999) in her dialogue with the text and life of novelist and anthropologist, Zora Neal Hurston, the complexities of Black womanhood deserve attention.

Backgrounds differ widely among Black women. For example, the culture of your youth was supportive and quite divergent from the culture of my youth, despite our common African ancestry and despite the fact that we have the same gender... yet the consequences, the related outcomes, and impacts on our lives are quite disparate... Mental decolonization is a lifelong project for me (Karanja 1999, 43).

That is to say, individuals will come to awareness or understanding of [racial and gender] identity through many different routes as well as come to many different insights about what this term means and how it should be used.

According to the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg 1965), self-esteem is measured in how satisfied an individual is with his or her whole self. Self-esteem is also defined as "The sense of belief or pride in oneself... self-esteem makes each of us feel significant" (Hales and Hales 1995, 782). When examining the connection between the individual and one's place in society, the concept of self-esteem is especially important. As Gabriel (1998) points out, the way that a person sees and understands him or herself is through both knowledge and self-perception, and as Owens et al (2001) explain, the self is made up of both identity and self-esteem.

For Owens et al (2001), self-esteem is a process of Festinger's social comparison (1954), Cooley's looking glass self (1902), and self-attribution or Mead's reflexive self (1934), and group identifications. Within the process of self and self-identity development, social behavior is primarily a product of how a person feels, and thinks about herself (2001). According to this position or framework, for example, the behavior of African American women aimed at transforming themselves to look *more white*, or the feeling of need to do so, as a response to hegemonic media depictions of beauty, is a product or consequence of how they feel about who they are or how they are treated and thought of in society.

Various disciplines and many theorists have explored the concept of self-identity and self-esteem. For the purposes of this paper, and in order to stay within a sociological framework, the concepts of self-esteem and self-identity will be discussed as concepts that are complimentary to each other, and interchangeable. Although these concepts can be thought of as conflicting or divergent across the disciplines of Psychology and Sociology, here the terms can be looked at from a more social psychological standpoint where self-concept/ self-identity/self-image are openly defined as the way one sees, defines, and feels about her *self*. However, even within the parameters of sociological thought, identity and self-definition or self-awareness are understood in various, but useful ways.

For Cooley (1902), instrumental in developing the notion that the self is formed through interaction with others, *our self* or identity can be understood through the *looking glass self*. Cooley believed that we see *our self* as we think others see us and as others

label us as a particular type of person, we begin to categorize ourselves in the same way. According to Cooley, it can be said that *the self* or one's identity is tied up in the powerful influence of society. Within this framework or understanding of identity, African American women develop *the self* by way of messages given to them by the dominant group about how they are seen in society. These messages can certainly come from many different sources (i.e. family members, the opposite sex, peer groups, authority figures, etc.), but they especially come from media. Much like hooks' (1992) concept of the *gaze*, the *looking glass self* is particularly applicable when addressing the impact of popular media beauty images on African American women because of the central emphasis given to their appearance, judgment of their appearance, and self-feeling (such as pride or hurt) based on how they are seen and then judged.

For Mead (1934), although he acknowledges a process similar to Cooley, one's self-concept should be considered in light of how one's actions influence society to respond to an individual or group and label individuals in particular ways. According to Mead, the self is reflexive as it is both subject and object within society; co-creating its identity with society. Mead's theory of *role taking* explains that before acting, social actors are conscious of and consider how others will respond to their actions or how they will be interpreted. Then actors choose a line of action anticipating the social consequences. For example, according to this theory, if African American women are transforming themselves and seeking to look more white as a result, then this behavior is done with purpose and for a predicted and even desired outcome. In this sense African American women, as actors, play a role in influencing society to react to them in a

particular way. This is how their *self*, as Cooley sees it, is then formed. For Mead, to be socialized into a society is to appreciate how various lines of behavior will draw different responses from others in their various roles.

This literature bridges concepts of media and identity as it can be argued that mass media is powerfully affecting the socialization process and identity formation. For many media theorists, media provides a mode of symbolic representation that serves as extensions of one's own mind and consciousness about the world, situated within the context of history, and self-definition (Innis in Czitrom, 1982; McLuhan, 1964; Hall, 1990; 1997). For Stuart Hall (1997) then, identity and culture are produced and given meaning through the actual process of mediated representations. That is, once anything is represented in media, certain meanings or understandings about what is represented are automatically attached to those representations. According to Hall, and in line with Gramsci's (1972) theories of power and domination, various meaning and understandings of those representations depend on who produced and has power to define or give meaning to those images and representations. As McLuhan (1964) understood and Thompson (1995) explains, as people once drew their self-concept/ identity from a more local context- face-to-face with family, friends, and peers, today in our globalized media driven society, people more and more become interwoven and defined by "mediated symbolic forms".

It is important to look at media representations of race and its affect on identity through the scope of theoretical analysis. While this is certainly not the only route in engaging and being critical of media, and while there are various theories and

perspectives to consider, as Ferguson (1998) argues, the role of the ideological in understanding how representations evolve and function is crucial to any analysis of media. Central to the arguments made in this paper is the theory and understanding of Gramsci's (1972) hegemony. This theory guides the examination of how media operates to perpetuate white supremacist ideologies and negatively impacts the racial identities of the *other*.

For Gramsci (1972), hegemony is discussed as the economic, social, or cultural domination of one group over other groups of people. Hegemony operates through the seemingly everyday routine structures of society and common sense or popular values. Media certainly functions as one of these everyday structures where consumers unwittingly but willingly conscribe to the hegemonic or popular view of the dominant group. In line with Gramsci, for Chomsky (1987), consent is engineered as an illusion of consent where consumers are non-assuming and digest the media messages uncontested and unquestioned. The idea is put into popular discourse that everyone should agree or does agree but in reality consent is *manufactured* and media, represented by the dominant group, controls representation and perception. Here justifications are made for maintaining control if there is unquestioned consent to the message and the message is then reinforced in the everyday routine (1987).

According to Althusser (1972), individuals' identities are constructed by institutions or structures (i.e. media) and as "subjects" are created by the text. Through the process of *Interpellation*, the text of media's messages of beauty calls out to the subject and if the subject recognizes that the text is addressing or speaking to him or her,

the viewer/consumer/subject totally accepts the texts' messages and unconsciously and without resistance adopts and integrates those messages into their identity and self-understanding. Althusser's theory of *Interpellation* is useful in exploring the various means by which identity can be formed and it is crucial to keep the theoretical debate open within this investigation. However the greatest risk of solely adopting this theory as a framework or focus of this paper is the false notion that African American women are passive puppets without agency and critical consciousness. I agree that media's attempt at manufacturing consent provides a consistent hegemonic message about who is racially beautiful and who is not.

However the process by which African American women view the ways in which their identity is impacted by media is the very point this paper seeks to investigate. Coming to identity solely through the process of *Interpellation* could also be problematic as it argues causality, is deterministic in structure, and does not allow for the complexities associated with how African American women with varying levels of agency and social capital might consume media. For example some African American women, while still consuming media, may feel that media images are not representative of their issues or concerns; others, while still consuming media, may feel as if media makes an attempt to address their concerns, but falls short of providing accurate portrayals of their lives and understandings; lastly, some, while still consuming media may accept media images and representation of their identities as accurate.

With the media's power to manipulate and make meaning of images and identities, people cannot help but collect messages about who they are and how they feel

about themselves through media forces. And, “By exposing the socio-psychological implications and mechanisms of television, often operating under the guise of fake realism, not only may the shows be improved, but, more important possibly, the public at large may be sensitized to the nefarious effect of some of these mechanisms” (Adorno 213, 1954). In the framework then of Goffman (1959), we can see how individuals can learn their expected roles through media, and perform those roles with purpose and some degree of consciousness and even agency.

However when looking at identity formation and media impact, it is crucial that we ask of each of these theories, perspectives and models whether or not conscious agency, opportunity of knowledge, and power of choice are implicit? With what power, consciousness, or opportunity are African American women using, engaging in, coming to, informing, cultivating, choosing or rejecting mediated images of their identity? But we must also ask, what role does race play in self-identity, especially when compounded by gender, class and sexuality?

Society and identity cannot be understood without a critical analysis of the reifying cycle of race as it has both constructed and deformed humanity and society; and as humanity and society have both constructed and deconstructed theories of race. Race is a complex term and exists and plays out in complicated and intricate ways. The concept of race is a deeply embedded one throughout human history, distorted in ideology, and deceptively veiled in current practices and real structures of society and media can be explored as one of the most powerful structures (Baldwin, 1985; Fanon, 1967; 1963; Gramsci, 1972; Goldberg, 1993; 1990; Foucault, 2003; 1980; Powell and

Wiley, 2006). The argument that race is not *real* but stems from historicized sociopolitical relations and constructions is vital to this discussion. As with any racial category, racial identity as represented in “whiteness” and “blackness” is a social construction in that it has been invented, lived, analyzed, modified, reified, and discarded (Allport, 1954; Feagin, 2001; Omi and Winant, 1994; Miles and Brown, 2003; Fredrickson 2002; Graves, 2003, 2004).

The concept of race as a social construction may be expanded to include an understanding of how society, social consciousness, group identities, historical trajectories, and political events all impact the human perspective in any given geographic area (Higginbotham, 1992; Cox, 1970; DuBois, 1939, 1994, 1996; Omi and Winant, 1994; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Blauner, 2001; Essed, 1991; Rex, 1969; Goldberg, 1990). For African Americans racial identity then can be, simply put, defined by or in response to the hegemonic and dominant culture. According to Singer (1973), racial identity is very much tied up in social and cultural events, movements, and structures of power. For African Americans in this country, blackness is not an unchanging, fixed, biological category impervious to its cultural, economic, political, psychological, or even situational contexts.

Blackness is in fact tied to historical contexts and generational trajectories and for African Americans, race interacts with class, gender, and a range of other race-related and cultural dynamics (Jewell 1985; Carby 1999; Hill Collins 1991; 2005). “Structurally, being black in American society means occupying a racially defined status; associated with this status are roles in family, community, and society. One psychological

consequence of being black is black group identity, the intensity of which should vary with the nature of role experiences” (Demo and Hughes 1990, 365). Experiences of race and racial identity are in no way uniform and this paper is sensitive to diverse experiences and various definitions, values, and understandings of individuals’ racial identities. It is important to remember that “Our identity as a member of a group defined primarily by race or ethnicity is just one component of an extremely complex identity structure” (Gandy 2001, 600). This paper focuses on how overall identity, the intertwined duality of racialized and gendered identity, are impacted and entangled especially in the presence of hegemonic media. However, this study is interested in the multiple systems of difference and oppression that impact the lives of Black women in America.

Race is an ambiguous, constantly changing concept that has little, if anything, to do with scientific descriptions. “The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed, and reformed” (Keating 1995, 906). “Thus, racial groups are social creations and racial identities reflect a process of both affiliation and external ascription” (Doane 2003, 9). The connection between media and racial identity is complicated as the mass mediated mainstream culture projects cultural hegemony. “...The endless routines of media flows put daily flesh on ethnic identification of oneself and one’s visualized community as with others” (Downing and Husbands 2005, 25). As the media socializes, informs, and reaffirms values of the dominant hegemonic culture, this is imposed on and informs racial identity of African

Americans (Gandy 2001). It can be argued then that not only is identity racialized in its constructions and media representations, but we can also see that media operates to construct and define race as well.

As such, to what extent is it important to explore how class, sexuality, age, ability, religion, and familial dynamics also impact identity? This question is important and certainly comes to light as discussed by participants in this study. As difference (racial, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, social economic status) is the basis for subjugation and exploitation in order to acquire land, money, political and economic power, this study recognizes that it is critical to note how class complicates and is synergistic with race, especially for Black people in America.

While being black has been the most powerful social attribution in my life, it is only one of a number of governing narratives or presiding fictions by which I am constantly reconfiguring myself in the world. Gender is another, along with ecology, pacifism, my particular brand of colloquial English, and Roxbury, Massachusetts. The complexity of role identification, the politics of sexuality, the inflections of professionalized discourse- all describe and impose boundary in my life, even as they confound one another in unfolding spirals of confrontation, deflection, and dream (Williams 1991, 256).

Collins (1993; 1989) as well as other scholars (Ore 2006; Anderson and Collins 2000; Roberts 1999; Richie 1996), argue that all oppressions work simultaneously impacting the lives of all oppressed peoples. “We need new visions of what oppression is, new categories of analysis that are inclusive of race, class and gender as distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression” (Collins in Ore 2006, 641). While Collins argues that race, gender and class are interconnected in order to structure inequality and “removing any one piece from our analysis diminishes our understanding the true

nature... of domination and subordination...”, she also acknowledges that race, class, and gender “place ...African American women and other groups in distinct institutional niches with varying degrees of penalty and privilege” (644).

Bringing the focus back to the African American women in this study and the emphasis on race and gender, hooks (1981) argues that specifically for Black women, regardless of class, the oppressions and inequalities experienced due to race and gender discrimination are consistent. Negative attitudes about and symbolic imagery of Black women “transcend class boundaries” (hooks 1981, 59). Ultimately however, this study takes a stance that both hooks and Collins would agree upon: identity is not an “either/or” but is a “both/and” concept. As Black women, in America, situated within various class backgrounds, each individual, with her own historical life narrative and context, can attest to the ways in which various identities, rooted in class, race, age, and gender, come to the forefront or emerge in visibility and meaning.

It is essential to explore concepts of African American women’s self-identity in the context of an interconnected racial, class and gender identity, as well as the power of the media to define or impact identities. Giddens (1991) points out that as individuals attempt to realize the product of their selves, they reproduce the social structure. For African American women, the question then becomes what power do they have to reproduce structure? Thus class, amongst other variables, can emerge as an explanation of variations of power within race and gender as categories of analysis. While media is a cultural structure, it is also a political and an economic institution that functions well in a capitalist society serving the purposes of the dominant culture.

It is within this structure that African American women learn white beauty standards as normative and that ultimately provide discrepancies between a positive identity definition and the definitions that the media impresses upon them. For DuBois (1994), Black people's consciousness are imprisoned within the hegemonic culture. DuBois then argued that in response to this imprisonment, people might take one of three approaches:

A state of rebellions and revenge; a state of double consciousness, in which one tries to adopt the consciousness of the ruling people; and merged consciousness in which one successfully mixes one's cultural history and one's present situation to achieve self realization. Double consciousness is a result of trying to recontextualize oneself, to lose one's own history, and culture without any opportunity for complete entry and privilege in that culture. It is in a sense, cultural limbo (Bobo and Curren 2001, 107).

Here we must ask some DuBoisian questions in terms of African American women's interaction with media and its entanglement with identity.

Do African American women assimilate and reproduce this structure, powerless to fully resist? Do they find some hybridity, a compromise of sorts between mainstream white America and their African American *selves*? Do they resist and revolt against popular culture? Whatever path they come upon, African American women develop and find their individual identities, at least in part, by way of their interaction with and reaction to the mainstream media, popular culture, and structures of power imposed upon them. Those structures however require adequate inquiry into and in depth evaluation of their function as consequences of media/identity interactions. While cultural studies, media studies, and critical media studies all provide important theoretical debates on the

topic of media, the connection between race, identity, and media in a non- white supremacist discourse and context has not been entirely addressed or defined.

Contemporary Media Inequality and Racist Representations

In our mass media driven society it is difficult to deny or contest the impact and influence of media. “With their power to frame, define, and neglect aspects of the social world, the mass media are a principle social and cultural institution” (Milkie 1999, 2). Research (Gray 1995; Milkie 1999; Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 1998; Entman and Rojecki 2000) suggests that media’s affect on people may be indirect. Then again, in his introduction to Morley (1986), Hall argues, “Television viewing, the choices which shape it and the many social uses to which we put it, now turn out to be an irrevocably active and social processes (1986, 8). Whether or not audiences are actively or passively engaged or tied to the media experience, the case still stands, all who consume media are affected by it on some level.

Morley (1986), in a reflexive *Meadian* sense, argues that the media experience is an interaction between not only media or television and its viewer or audience, but is also shaped and defined by the relationships amongst viewers watching together as well. For Morley, the social and collective nature of media intake must be dealt with as it helps us understand how individuals make sense of media (1986). The advertising machine of media is also vital to investigate as it is understood that media thrives on the existence of vulnerabilities of its audience, intense competition amongst its audiences, and the media’s ability to manipulate its audience for profit (Schudson 1984; Norris 1990).

On the one hand, the media enlarge people’s sense of their own and the world’s possibilities; on the other hand, the media lead

people to constantly compare themselves to others or to images of others... But as well, it left people in flux, in uncertainty, gull of anxiety about social standing and meaning, vulnerable to the turns of fashion more than playful with them... (Schudson 1984, 155).

Because media is virtually everywhere in American society, it is almost impossible to avoid or resist the images it portrays. In a NeoMarxian conceptualization, media is a vehicle of ideology whereby the audience is subjected to the images (Tobin 2000). According to Coltrane and Messineo, media plays a central role in constructing reality while selling the “American Dream” to audiences. “Media images provide a diffuse confirmation of one’s world view, promote acceptance of current social arrangements, and reassures people that things are the way they ought to be” (2000, 2). If the goal of popular media is to sell and invoke reality (Goffman 1979; Entman and Rojecki 2000), then what messages of *reality* are coming through to audiences and are those messages and images accurate and unproblematic?

The messages corporate mass media send about race are of major concern to many who study the affects of media on the consumer population. Stuart Hall (1997), understanding that media representations work in complex ways that are always connected to the ways in which power operates within society, has a powerful critique on politics of the media. Like Hall, critically interrogating media images and representations, media scholars have found that despite recent media trends to show more “diversity,” commercial television still certainly does more to cultivate and promote prejudice than to discourage it. “...The mediation of racism via mass media of all kinds is not the only source of its devastating impact, but it also operates in a molecular and penetrative fashion throughout the capillaries and pores of today’s world...” (Downing

and Husbands 2005, 25). “In the United States racism is structured into the rhythms of everyday life. It is lived, concrete, advantageous for whites, and painful for those who are not white” (Feagin, 2; 2001). It is argued that racism affects every important aspect of every individual’s life and media plays a central role in this process. It is crucial then to understand the power and the grasp of media influence especially as it pertains to race.

According to Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998), television of the 1990s was full of prejudice against African Americans and according to others (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Johnson 1991; Gandy 2001; Jipguep and Sanders-Phillips 2003) not much has changed. Today, about ten percent of human appearances on television are made by African Americans. Although that number has dramatically increased since televisions beginnings, many (Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 1998; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Coleman 2002; Dennis and Pease 1997) argue that diversity and increase of minorities on television have not made the promotion of racial equality on television any more tangible. These scholars report that instead because many people believe that the media fairly depicts reality, prejudices based in stereotypes, exaggerations, generalizations, and misconceptions flourish (Jhally and Lewis, 1992). And as Daniels argues, “Themes of race, class, gender, and sexuality that appear in extremist white supremacist discourse resonate effectively in mainstream politics, advertising, academia, and popular culture” (1997, 7).

Here a discussion of African American presence in media is incomplete without mention of the role of hip hop as both a form of diversity and counter culture of insubordination as well as a form of reifying white supremacy and negative impact on

African American women (Kitwana 2002; Rose 1994; Dyson 2004; Keyes 2004; Pough 2004; Morgan 1999). As Rose (1994) points out, the power and force of hip hop/rap culture is real and can be manipulated and controlled for the purposes of or to the detriment of hegemonic culture and media depending on its content and how it is used. "... Rap remains at the forefront of cultural and political skirmishes and retains its close ties to the poorest and least represented members of the black community" (1994, 183). While the position of hip hop in media threatens to be an insubordinate force against the hegemonic culture and its popularity and power could serve as a vehicle for uplift and change in African American communities as it pertains to positive racial identities, instead its negative impact cannot be ignored.

Further, some argue that African American women's pain and negative [racial] identity can also be related to mainstream corporate hip-hop videos. "I can't watch rap videos anymore. They make me feel bad about myself... the girls in them are always skinny, White, Asian or Latino- anything but Black. Or if a dancer is Black then she's extremely light-skinned" (Morgan 2002, 1). This young lady's sentiment is not rare within the African American community. As Morgan found, hip-hop videos, with their focus on sexualizing women are making African American females "less than the sum of their parts" (2002, 1). Additionally we should look into the complexities of the hip hop genre, skin tone/ race and Black women's *place* or positionality within the realm of hip hop. From here we can ask if most of the women in hip-hop videos are light-skinned, is this a statement about black male desire?

According to Britton (2000), African American women are feeling the anti-empowering effects of seeing African American male rappers desiring other than African American beauty. Many rappers are announcing, through their video displays, that their definition of beauty meets mainly white standards. While many criticize Kitwana (2002) for narrowly defining hip hop, he blames hip-hop for causing much damage to black youth by perpetuating negative stereotypes and providing poor role models. To Kitwana's defense, it is important to be critical of mainstream hip hop's negative impact, especially on women. Additionally, African American women are pained when they see other African American female rappers, or the lack thereof, like Lil' Kim, looking like Madonna and announcing that her power as an African American woman lies between her legs (Britton 2000; Sterling 2000). With this we can also ask when are darker-skinned women shown in hip-hop video, and is their *function* different from lighter-skinned women? See Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, Bahamadia, Eve, Missy Elliott. We should understand that while hip hop is complex in its cultural readings with both positive and negative contributions, we must acknowledge its potential as a vehicle for white supremacy, reifying the colonial project, and cultural hegemony.

In addition to current media politics it is necessary to understand historical changes and contexts. Described as subtle racism, media images that exaggerated cultural differences and inaccurately depicted African Americans have been inescapable since media's inception (Coltrane and Messineo 2000). Coltrane and Messineo point out that since its beginnings, the media depicted African Americans as inferior and subservient. Although African American characters like Aunt Jemima have changed,

studies show that many current images are no more realistic (Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Coleman 2002; Dennis and Pease 1997; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Jhally and Lewis, 1992). “In a media environment in which the primary audience is not expected to be Black, portrayals of African American characters need not be sympathetic” (Gandy 2001, 602). As Baldwin (1990) encourages, we should ask how the Aunt Jemima’s and Uncle Tom’s even came about, where they went, why, and as Manring (1998) asks, who cares?

Through subtle and indirect prejudice, outgroups’ disadvantages are attributed to their exaggerated differences. While not necessarily attributing negative emotions to the outgroup, instead media withholds negative emotion and gives a positive evaluation and emotion to the ingroup (Coltrane and Messineo 2000). Entman and Rojecki discovered that overwhelmingly negative portrayals of African Americans currently permeate American television. They also find that in addition to traditional characterizations, there are new forms of more subtle racial differentiation that are still biased (2000). And many times these historical and current forms of racist media are not interpreted as such by audiences. At least not immediately as “...The media not only established perspective, they also limit and create the possible alternatives to the future... regardless of how correct or incorrect the interpretations have been, they are acceptable and accepted ones for most people” (Borden 1973, 424).

While arguments of diversity, even amongst many African Americans, abound, studies reveal that even with shows like *The Cosby Show*, or more recently *My Wife and Kids*- depicting a strong, successful black family- or the *Oprah Show*, or any film/ show

by Tyler Perry, realistic issues of racism and discrimination are barely, if ever, brought up as if those issues do not exist and as if those representations capture reality or the complexity of Black life and are unproblematic (Ferguson 1998; Wallace 1990; Larson 2006; Jhally and Lewis, 1992). Therefore, Gray (1995) and Coltrane and Messineo (2000) illustrate that even in situations where African Americans are present and are not being negatively or falsely represented, the lack of those representations really mimicking reality and social hierarchies is not present.

hooks discusses this lack of or resistance to this issue, "...The new way race is being talked about [is to now negate]... words like oppression, exploitation and domination" (1990, 51-52). For Gandy, it cannot be assumed that African American consumers do not notice and are not negatively impacted by harmful or absent representations that clearly are not made with them in mind as primary audience. Why then do racist representations and media politics exist? And how is it that a large part of the story of media's treatment of race is the contestation and denial of the very existence of racism and the exaggeration of media diversity and racial sensitivity? For many, especially in the new era of *Obama-mania*, existing in a supposed *post racial* society (whereby ceasing the conversation about race will make racism go away) exacerbates the inability to define and confront issues of media inequality and racial discrimination (Wise, 2009; Metzler , 2008; McWhorter 2008; 2006).

In looking at current media, Entman and Rojecki (2000) have consistently found nuanced patterns of characterization and activities suggesting that while African Americans are certainly more present in the mass media than in the past, current

portrayals of African Americans leave much to be desired. This, they say, is due to the stark differences in representation between African Americans and white Americans (hooks 1992; Hall 1997). Entman and Rojecki (2000) found several differences that demonstrated subtle prejudice and discrimination. They found that African American women were shown using more vulgarity, being more physically violent, and were seen more often to be involved with criminal activity than white American women. Also, Entman and Rojecki (2000) found that African American women were seen fewer times in positions of importance and power or talking about important issues, on the news for instance, than white American women.

They find that the cultural, economic and social gap between white Americans and African Americans is enormous. According to Entman and Rojecki (2000) and Dennis and Pease (1997) this is because most of white America learns African-American life through the media, particularly television. In an industry that is headed and run mainly by whites and where the audience that is to be satisfied is also particularly white (Coleman, 2002), Coltrane and Messineo (2000) point out that one explanation of the media's treatment of race and of African Americans is that their behavior is necessary in order to keep their white audience. This also explains why other white standards and cultural beliefs prevail and are upheld. One standard in particular largely, and many times painfully, affects women.

White beauty standards prevail because advertisers assume that white consumers will not buy a product if it is associated with non-whites, and industry publications indicate that advertisers have been reluctant to increase the number of non-white characters in their ads because they fear a potential loss of offended white customers (Coltrane and Messineo 2000, 6).

As a result, in the structural force of the media systemic of the hegemonic culture, African American women barely exist. When they are seen it is often with straight long hair, light skin and other white features (Brown 1993).

It is within this maneuver or marketing strategy, either intentionally or not, that African American female beauty is discounted, less revered, and reduced in the white media (Coltrane and Messineo 2000). Here it has become obvious that African American consumers have essentially been disregarded and that white American culture and beauty standards, regardless of their negative impact on the treatment and the self-esteem of African Americans, are what the industry believes white American consumers want. The media industry does not want to lose its white audience.

Collins (1991) charges that through the racially skewed beauty standard, brought forth by the media, and the relentless stereotyping of African American women, society has conspired to restrain African American women from realizing their potential. With such negative, exaggerated, biased and absent images, racism and prejudice in the white hegemonic culture is perpetuated. Essentializing race and ethnic differences, “All forms of television perpetuate images of white hegemonic culture” (Coltrane and Messineo 2000, 18). Here it is relevant to enter into this discussion the discourse or study of whiteness and its reflections on inequality within certain institutions of power and dominance.

Whiteness studies is a part of an interdisciplinary project that brings together insights from fields as diverse as legal studies, history, cultural studies, anthropology, education, speech communication, and sociology. Scholars from all these disciplines

have built upon the work of W.E.B. Dubois, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, and have placed the construction of “whiteness” on the table to be investigated and probed. “What is unique about whiteness studies is that it reverses the traditional focus of research on race relations by concentrating attention upon the socially constructed nature of white identity and the impact of whiteness upon intergroup relations” (Doane 2003, 3).

However whiteness studies also speak to relations in regard to the *other* as well.

In this sense, the whiteness studies paradigm makes problematic the identity and practices of the dominant group rather than focusing all its attention on the *problem* of minority groups. Instead of an assumption that the media operates out of a color-blind and non racist capacity, whiteness studies forces scholars to evaluate the media’s unintentional or essentialized structural racism. For Shome (2000), whiteness studies present the idea that whites learn about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage. However they are not taught to see the other side as-white privilege, which is socially maintained and constructed through various interlocking and tangled systems of communication (i.e. mass media).

This research rightly recognizes that whiteness, as an institutionalized and systemic problem, is maintained and produced not by overt rhetorics of whiteness, but rather, by its ‘everydayness,’ by the everyday, unquestioned racialized social relations that have acquired a seeming normativity and through that normativity function to make invisible the ways in which whites participate in, and derive protection and benefits from, a system whose rules and organizational relations work to their advantage (Shome 2000, 336).

Here it can be argued that mass media is this system or at least can serve in a socializing function as this system.

By focusing upon the often hidden aspects of ideology of color-blindness, which silences discussion of persistent structural and systemic inequality (as seen in media and media messages about racialized beauty), and white privilege, whiteness studies forces us to confront issues of race while making white dominance problematic (Doane 2003). Ignoring the potential diagnosing of the *problem* from a whiteness viewpoint simply allocates a one-dimensional perspective on race relations, a sociology that by its neglect of the identity of the dominant white group has treated majority-minority relations as if it were necessary to understand only one actor (usually the other) (Doane 2003). As issues persistent in whiteness studies concerning systematic inequality are dissected and examined, solutions to rework or abolish systems of inequality are being discussed.

For example one solution is to start a discussion about making whiteness visible. Just as feminist studies have analyzed the distortions that result from taking men's experience as the unacknowledged norm against which women are judged and seen, whiteness scholars assert that *white* has been the unexamined norm, implicitly standing for all that is presumed to be right and normal. Whiteness is the location from which others are defined and judged, since it is white people who hold the power to do so. Minorities, in this case, are constructed in opposition to the normal or white. By erasing its presence, whiteness operates as the unacknowledged standard or norm against which all minorities are measured (Doane 2003; Frankenberg 1993, 1997).

Multiple findings pour out about African American women and the media's negative affects on their racial identity and unfortunately whiteness studies have not typically spoken to this sociological issue specifically. Possibly, future research can

bridge that gap. Posavac, Posavac, and Posavac (1998), Coltrane and Messineo (2000), Bordo (1999), and Entman and Rojecki (2000), among others, have found that the media has negative affects on the way that women, especially African American women, feel about their body images and level of attractiveness, as well as negatively establishes racial identities.

Why then are there still reports, by both African Americans and scholars, that African American women are unaffected by media portrayals of white American beauty? bell hooks (2003) offers an insightful explanation. In regard to the argument that hegemonic depictions of beauty in mass media do not negatively affect [racial] identity, hooks explains that in this way popular media does not have to become responsible for any of the affects of negative identities that African American might experience. hooks goes on to explain that if African American women experiencing lowered self-esteem due to media images is disregarded then the media does not even have to pay attention to them as consumers because they are not being affected. “Once you publicly pronounce that a people are culturally gone...then you rid yourself of the issue of accountability” (2003, ix). This also speaks to the issues of color blindness and invisibility that whiteness studies attempt to make problematic and dissect as well as the transcendence of race and the “post-racial” era, some argue, we have entered.

African American Women Are More Confident Than White Women?: The Debate Over How Media Impact African American Women

Current literature suggests that African American women have more positive self-concepts and self-images than white American women (Mack 2001; Milkie 1999; Molloy

and Herzberger 1998; Patel and Gray 2001; Hebel and Heatherton 1998). In this current literature, several explanatory themes can be found that describe African American women as having higher self and body images, as well as positive identities, than white American women. These explanations, given by scholars, social and cultural commentators, as well as African American women, are situated within contexts of family support, knowing what African American men want, and the lack of eating and health disorders amongst African American women. One popular argument is that African American women receive support for their body types and their beauty images from their families and the African American community (Mack 2001; Britton 2002). Here within the safety and support of the black family and the black community, racial pride, self-confidence, and self-esteem brew and overflow. Tracy Mack (2001) explains, after interviewing several African American women in the Chicago area, that African American women are not threatened or belittled by white American notions and definitions of beauty because of community acceptance and support of their body and beauty images. Similarly, Wilson (2001) suggests that African American women, as opposed to white American women, are more firmly supported and accepted by their families growing up. As Wilson argues, "...Most black families typically don't chastise overweight members or tell them to change themselves" (quoted in Mack 2001, 8:1). In addition, Wilson explains that African American women know what members of the opposite sex desire (2001).

Many maintain that not only are African American women more in touch with what African American men think about them, they also do not necessarily put too much

importance on what men think about them (Mack 2001; Molloy and Herzberger 1998; Patel and Gray 2001; Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, and Wu 1995). By administering surveys measuring self-esteem, body image, body-esteem, and gender roles, Molloy and Herzberger (1998) found that “Since African American women believe that African American males prefer larger women, they have less need to lose weight and therefore, feel more attractive” (Molloy and Herzberger 1998, 2). The idea that African American men appreciate and prefer a fuller or heavier woman and therefore prefer and enjoy African American women right where they are, is a popular rationale. Molloy and Herzberger (1998) also found that African American women felt this way about African American men’s perceptions based on positive remarks that African American men typically made to African American women. Commons and Wilson (2000) discovered through administering a fat prejudice scale to both African American and white men, that African American men report a higher tolerance for fat in women than white men and have an intolerance for thin or skinny women.

Another explanation as to why African American women have more positive self-images in the face of beauty issues than white American women involves the presence, or lack thereof, of eating disorders (Molloy and Herzberger 1998). The literature contends that African American women are extremely less likely to be affected by eating disorders than white American women (Nielsen 2000; Chandler, Abood, Lee, Cleveland, and Daly 1994; LoBuono 2001). Therefore, African American women are seen as having more positive body, weight and self-images (Milkie 1999; Molloy and Herzberger 1998; Patel and Gray 2001; Chandler, Abood, Lee, Cleveland, and Daly 1994). According to

Striegel-Moore et al (2003) an eating disorder like anorexia-nervosa is highly uncommon amongst African American women.

A common and arguably derogatory explanation involves the perception of gender role orientation. Molloy and Herzberger (1998) have found, by using *The Bem Sex Role Inventory* (BSRI) and other devices, that African American women have more masculine tendencies and traits. They explain that behaving in *masculine* ways may protect women from the societal pressures to meet mainstream beauty standards.

Therefore they found that African American women are tougher, more assertive, and more confident about who they are, what they look like and who they can be (1998).

This rationale is also explained in the stereotypes of “the matriarch” and “Sapphire,” symbols of aggressive, emasculating, and asexual African American women (Moynihan 1965; Ammons 1995; Wallace 1999; Jewell 1993; hooks 1981; Yarbrough and Bennett 2000).

Additionally it is argued that African American women do not feel in touch with mainstream media. Generally the case is made that African American women feel that media images of white beauty do not impact them or that they are able to ignore them. Certain studies (Mack 2001; Milkie 1999; Molloy and Herzberger 1998) reveal that media images of beauty do not affect African American women or adolescents negatively. Here the literature reports that African American women and adolescents believe that mainstream or “white” media does not apply to them. These studies and reports indicate that African American women do not partake in mainstream media (as white American women do) or mainstream images of white American beauty, and do not

believe that those images pertain to them. Accordingly, this explains how African American women can escape the potential for negative effects of media.

Any variance within African American women's positive identity and self-image is usually attributed to socioeconomic status. For example, African American women of a higher socioeconomic status and who are more immersed in mainstream white culture tend to have lower self-images than African American women of a lower socioeconomic status. However there is much contention and disagreement on this issue even amongst researchers that agree that African American women have more positive self-identities than white American women (Mack 2001; Milkie 1999; Molloy and Herzberger 1998).

Overall, these studies show that African American women are comfortable with their beauty and media representations of beauty for various reasons. Molloy and Herzberger explain that when "African American women identify more with their own racial group than with the dominant culture and to the extent that they interact mostly with other African Americans, they may be *protected* from white norms..." (1998, 2). Mack explains that media images of white American beauty do not apply to African American women and therefore does not affect them. One African American woman expressed this sentiment by saying, "If you are in a country that negated your beauty from the beginning, you have to establish a different standard of beauty" (quoted in Mack 2001, 8:1).

In fact, Milkie (1999) after interviewing 60 teenage females (11 of whom were African American) found that the African American female adolescents interviewed did not accept media projected images because they felt that it did not apply to them. Milkie

argues that African American girls possess more power than the media possesses over them and therefore had higher self- images. However, Milkie does suggest that though the girls interviewed had very little dissatisfaction with their appearance and felt largely disconnected with media images they consumed, it does not mean they were not affected. “This is not to say that black females are unaffected by externally defined everyday beauty images. The controlling and oppressive image of fair- skinned, long-haired “white beauty” creates pain for black women who cannot attain this” (1999, 11).

Here Milkie’s study demonstrates that research on the impact of beauty definitions on African American women’s self- image and identity is certainly complex and possibly contradictory. Molloy and Herzberger also demonstrate the amalgamated explanations of African American women’s responses to beauty and media as they admit that when African American women do identify or partake in “the dominant white culture, they may be more vulnerable to body image distortions and eating disorders” (1998, 3). Nevertheless, proponents of the position that African American women have more positive self-images than white women base this belief on the explanations and arguments previously discussed.

These explanations and arguments have also been mirrored within African American communities from African American women, explaining their self and beauty understandings and responses to media white definitions of beauty. As Tracy Mack (2001, 8:1) points out, “Countless studies [show that] African American women are much more comfortable with their self-images than women of other races...” Mack reports that some studies show that African American women are three times more likely than white

women to rate themselves as a perfect “10,” and that they “valued their own opinion about themselves and were less concerned about what their mates thought” (2001, 8:1).

To add to the explanations, there are multiple self reports and narratives that come from African American women themselves. One unique account of why African American women have more positive self-images than white women, despite the admittance of ethnic transformation from Afro centric to Euro centric looks, comes from Ingrid Banks. Banks (2000) who explains, after in- depth interviews of fifty African American women, that African American women straightening their hair, does not necessarily equate with racial self-hate or low self-esteem. Banks believes that there can be no understanding of hair, or other beauty rituals for that matter, in African American culture without a thorough appreciation of the culture lived by those presenting the beauty behaviors. This understanding, according to Banks, must include a review of African American history focusing on cultural issues of race, beauty, racial pride, etc.

Banks questions psychologists and therapists who have claimed that transforming the hair away from its natural state is a form of conscious or subconscious racial self-hatred. Banks explains that the racial self- hatred argument is just too simple and that researchers must take other things into account, for example- what type of products a person was raised on and never questioned, current trends, or the functionality of a person’s hair when considering work, children, family and just not having time to take care of it. Although she admits that African American hair is measured against white American beauty standards, Banks explains that many African American women believe

that meeting those standards or striving after them does not equate to racial self-hatred or low self-esteem.

Other explanations or narratives come directly from the African American community in the form of encouragement for heavier and more natural African American women. These notions of support come from counter or Black media forces such as Essence, Jet and Ebony magazines. Here examples of full figured celebrities like Queen Latifah and Mo'Nique are given praise for their beauty and bravery as women who love their bodies and feel beautiful just as they are. Strengthening the magazines position, they report, "Statistics show that over 50% of women in the U.S. wear size 14 or larger. And large-size fashion manufacturers have increased from under 100 to over 1,000 in the past 15 years" (Jet 2000, 1).

Many African American women discuss their full size, kinky hair, or dark skin (Jet 2000; Britton 2002; Dickerson 2004). They admit that of course in a society that tells them that they are too fat, too dark, and that their hair is too short and too coarse, there once was tremendous pain. They explain their struggle to learn how to love their body and themselves and their journey towards accepting themselves just as they are. Now as successful adults, many say that they love the skin that they're in. "Who says you have to be pencil thin to be considered attractive or successful?"(quoted in Jet 2000, 1) "I get more work when I'm heavier than when I'm skinnier" (quoted Jet 2000, 2). "My skin has personality...who needs jewelry when your body is living art? I've figured out that beauty is not a skin tone. It's not a hair type. It's you" (quoted in Jet 2000, 3).

Studies also state that African American women have different ideas about beauty than white American women (Mack 2001; Milkie 1999; Molloy and Herzberger 1998; Patel and Gray 2001). “Research has found that African American females are less concerned with weight, dieting, or being thin” (Molloy and Herzberger 1998, 1). Molloy and Herzberger (1998) found that 64 percent of the African American women interviewed reported that they would prefer to be a “little overweight” as opposed to a “little underweight” (Molloy and Herzberger 1998, 2). One African American woman reported that, “Regardless of my clothes size, I’ll always think that I’m beautiful. Beauty is an entire package, the hair, the clothes, the nails... and how you feel about yourself” (Mack 2001, 8:1). Of course, as Goffman (1954) would challenge, this could be seen merely as the performance of doing beauty.

Milkie’s (1999) study bridges the two different beliefs about media’s reported effects on African American women. The less popular counter arguments suggest that African American women, in fact, do not have more positive identities or self-concepts in the face of media promotion of white American beauty images.² One explanation, for example, can be understood when considering that one way that African American women reduce the “pain” (that Milkie referred to) is by making their hair and bodies look as much like white American women’s hair and bodies as possible (hooks 1992; 1996; Collins 2005; Semmes 1992; Morton 1991; Bennett and Dickerson 2001). By undergoing a transformation process, that is highly noticeable in any media outlet, via

² Since 2010 there has been a noticeable increase in critical and more complicated perspectives on the negative impact of media on African American women in popular media. See *Good Hair*, the *My Black is Beautiful Tour*, the *Black Girls Rock Awards*, and the Tyler Perry/ Spike Lee debates.

plastic surgery, hair straightening dying, and eye and skin lightening, the “pain,” for many African American women, is reduced. Despite the popular argument made by some researchers that Black women are not negatively affected by media images, my work seeks to interrogate the complexities that often go unnoticed in the aforementioned research.

There are several factors that have been considered when explaining how African American women experience negative effects due to media definitions and portrayals of white American beauty standards (i.e. thin bodies, long, usually blonde or light colored hair, light skin and eyes, and other white ascribed facial traits). These negative effects have been described as including pain, negative identity, low self-esteem, and racial self-hate. Could much of the pain that African American women experience due to being “too fat”, “too dark” and “too nappy headed” come not only from white media images and the white dominant culture, but also from within the African American community? And what if, based on current media figures’ behaviors and African American audience participation in media, African American women *are* in tune with dominant white culture and with the media’s white definition of beauty (see any number of *reality* television shows and the large following of Black audiences).

With this, we must ask, whether the source of Black female pain, around issues of beauty, located in collective Black consciousness? If so, how can African American women feel satisfied with ourselves? This is the conundrum in which the Black woman finds herself- loving/not loving herself. The combination of our own self-image coupled with normative white media space impact how Black women see themselves (Collins

1998; hooks 2000; 2003; Entman and Rojecki 2000). Because of this reality there is a struggle for Black women to create positive self-identity within the barrage of negative media images and the potential of internalized self-doubt.

Susan Bordo (1999), in her cultural analysis of sexuality and attraction in media interrogates the concept of fantasy versus reality: what men see and desire versus what they settle for. Bordo establishes that classical conditioning has taught us that it is impossible to not be influenced by media images for both males and females. Here she argues that if men see skinny and white as what is desirable in American society, then what stops them from desiring that. Bordo argues that if, like African American women, African American men are influenced by media, how can they not be affected (1999)? Also, after administering the *Body Type Preference Survey* to both African American and white men, Rosenfeld, Stewart, and Stinnett (1999) found that there are no significant differences between what African American men and white American men want when it comes to body type.

Bordo also contests the idea that African American men prefer larger or heavier women “with more meat on their bones”. She says that though African American men may report this, it merely means that they are intolerant of skin and bones, but are also intolerant of fat as well (1999). Patel and Gray (2001) found that although African American men accepted more fat on the women that they were attracted to than white American men, African American men still desired their women to be thinner than they currently were. According to Patel and Gray (2001), after administering *The Contour Drawing Scale* to 68 African American females and 34 African American males, African

American women also desired to be thinner, however their African American male counterparts desired them to be even thinner than they themselves wanted to be or thought that they needed to be. Patel and Gray (2001) conclude that their results indicate that African American women may not be in touch with what African American men really desire.

Other issues that have been considered when determining whether or not African American women are negatively affected by media representations of white American beauty are eating and psychological disorders. When it comes to eating disorders as a painful reaction to popular standards of beauty or perfection, African American women display their pain in culturally different ways than white American women (Poussaint and Alexander 2000; Nielsen 2000). It is believed that this pain not only comes from media images of white beauty and the absence of African American beauty, but also various social forces including families and peer groups who are also influenced by media images and definitions (Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Coleman 2002; Dennis and Pease 1997; hooks 2003;).

First it is important to point out that historically eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia are diseases that occur more frequently in white American females than in African American females (Nielsen 2000; Chandler, Aboood, Lee, Cleveland, and Daly 1994; LoBuono 2001). For example, Dolan (1991), Gray, Ford, and Kelley (1987), and Root (1990) all report that research has documented a racial difference in the frequency of eating disorders, with white women showing a greater incidence than African American women. They go on to establish that in contrast to white women, few African

American women seem to have eating disorders (Dolan, 1991; Root, 1990). Researchers (i.e. Milkie 1999; Molloy and Herzberger 1998) that African American women have more positive self-concepts than white American women explains that the prevalence of eating disorders in white American women is a manifestation of their dissatisfaction with their body and self-images. The eating disorders reportedly present in primarily white women involve such symptoms as distorted body images, distorted body realities, and severe body dissatisfaction (LoBuono 2001; Nielsen 2000).

Polivy and Herman (2002) find that although the symptoms are highly noted and mainly agreed upon, the causes of these disorders are not. It has been reported that anorexia and bulimia may have little to do with true body dissatisfaction based on media images and pressure to achieve those images and more to do with young women wanting to feel in control of their out of control lives. Other explanations or causes of eating disorders center around family dynamics and genetics (Polivy and Herman 2002; McCaffree 2001; Tyler 2003). Therefore the lack of prevalence of eating disorders in African American women may not necessarily equate to evidence of higher self-esteem or more positive self-image than white women who do suffer from such disorders.

Although African American women do not demonstrate high occurrences of eating disorders, they do experience psychological and physiological traumas that Poussaint and Alexander (2000) describe in their analysis and overview of suicide and mental health crisis among African Americans. Poussaint and Alexander (2000) assess that African Americans are feeling the effects of racism in deadly ways- from hypertension, heart disease and other stress related diseases to drug abuse, alcohol abuse

and other high-risk behaviors and responses. If African American women are negatively impacted by racism and other social forces, we must ponder how African American women are affected by the media's racialized definition of beauty and negation and omission of African American beauty. According to Poussaint and Alexander (2000), after centuries of experiencing racist thinking, indoctrination, and socialization, enormous damage has been done to African Americans' emotional and mental state. According to many media socializes and reflects society in racist and discriminatory ways (hooks 2003; Collins 1991; Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 1998; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Coleman 2002; Dennis and Pease 1997).

Additionally, as eating disorders are currently redefined to include high risk behaviors and unhealthy eating behaviors, such as overeating resulting in obesity, African American women fall into the newly defined categories of eating disorders. With reports estimating that over 50% of African American women are obese, the question must be raised regarding obesity as an eating disorder, a response to stress and to certain social forces (Tyler 2003). Furthermore, "Eating disorders among diverse racial ethnic groups... are severely underreported because studies typically do not include ethnically diverse populations" (Fitzgibbon and Stolley 2000, 1). Fitzgibbon and Stolley (2000) also note that *Essence Magazine* recently reported troubling survey results about African American women and eating disorders. The survey:

Indicated that African American women appear to have at least equal levels of abnormal eating attitudes and behaviors as white women. Studies indicate that blacks who identify with mainstream culture exhibit more eating problems, including dieting and fear of fat (Fitzgibbon and Stolley 2000, 2).

Another explanation as to why African American women are believed to have more positive identities and self-concepts despite media images is that they experienced a strong cohesion and support from family members and community members. Wilson posits, “Most black families typically don’t chastise overweight members or tell them to change themselves” (Mack 2001, 8:1). This support and acceptance, as reported by Mack (2001), has the power to cloak African American women in protection against the elements that could attempt to invalidate their beauty. Furthermore, Black families may not always recognize obesity or over eating as a symptom of something deeper or connected to an apparent problem.

While this may contribute to some African American women’s ability to stay immune to media forces and popular ideas about their beauty, we still must question why other African American women report that not only is there pain, but that many times this pain comes from other African American family members and peer groups (hooks 2003; Morgan 2002; Britton 2002; Britton 2000; Dickerson 2004)? Akissi Britton describes her experiences of feeling chastised in the African American community as other African American children yelled “Black girl, Blackie, Darky and African Booty- scratcher” at her (2002, 1). Britton explains that even as a child she was taught that light skin was prized. “And the sad thing was that the outside world that hated my dark skin wasn’t filled with racist white people. It was populated entirely with black faces” (Britton 2002, 1). As Collins’ work (1989; 1993) situates internalized oppression this is a point to be wrestled with, because being called “black, Blackie, Darky, etc., seems to be related to an adoption of white hegemony and institutions. For Black women, like Britton, this

understanding then is blame for what one is; proliferation of white images of beauty in media speaks to that which most black women lack—that is whiteness.

After studying 239 African Americans, Mark Hill (2002) found that amongst African American people, light skin is preferred and dark skin is viewed unfavorably. The Clark Doll Experiment of 1939 and the 2005 follow up in Kiri Davis' *A Girl Like Me*, also reveal how African Americans preference lighter or white skin (Clark and Clark 1950; Davis 2005). Although there have been few studies that analyze and interpret light skin/ dark skin politics, the question of racial self- hate and dissatisfaction should be further explored (hooks 2003; Hunter 2005; Collier-Thomas 1994). This self- hate and caste system of skin colors is internalized in childhood and confirmed and reaffirmed by the media's images and definitions of beauty (Proshansky and Newton 1968; hooks 2003; Hill 2002; Britton 2002; Russell et al 1992).

Many maintain that despite the argument that African American women are unaffected by media images, in reality many need to be constantly armored in order to protect themselves from white media forces that constantly work to invalidate their beauty, self-image, and identity as African American women (hooks 1992; 1993; 1996; 2003; Britton 2000; Collins 1991; 2005; Cade 1970;). While media images of beauty and portrayals of women are evident and widely discussed, according to hooks (2003) and Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003), many times stories of Black pain caused by the community are often times only found in the shameful whispers within the African American community, and not necessarily within of academic journals. Exploring the

issue of families and communities as a source of potential pain for Black women in the face of media is vital.

In response to the argument that African American women are immune to white media beauty standards due to their ability to form their own beauty standards, a group of people would have to be extremely self assured and resistant to group pressure to be able to “establish a different [their own] standard of beauty” in the midst of the larger culture as Mack suggests (2001, 8:1). However, it is important to note that such an attempt to establish an independent standard of beauty occurred during the Civil Rights Movement of the 60’s and 70’s (Banks 2000). Banks (2000) explains that one relevant manifestation of this attempt was the movement from straight processed hair, both in men and women, to the natural hairstyle of wearing one’s “natural” hair. However, the natural did not last as a popular style and many African American women went back to pressing and relaxing their hair.

Furthermore, the “Black is Beautiful” social concept arose during the Civil Rights period, so a very good case can be made for an effort to re-define the elements of beauty within the African American Community during that period of time. If wearing a natural spoke to self love and acceptance or defining alternative Black beauty, then what did going back to straightened hair say about Black ideas of beauty? What do African American women have to *do* in order to feel and look beautiful? Is there a normalcy in the idea that Black woman change their hair, eye color, body size or skin color to resemble that of white women in order to perform beauty and or fulfill an American

female identity or phenotype? (Bordo 1999; 1993; Cole and Guy Sheftall 2003; Wanzo 2009)

It is imperative that we recognize and observe the beauty paradigm shift that has taken place in recent decades. Numerous media outlets, from magazines to billboards, show us that Afros have disappeared and African Americans have lost the “self-made standard of beauty” achieved briefly during the 60’s and 70’s. We need only look at female celebrities of color and observe their beauty performance. As African Americans are constantly immersed in the larger culture their standards of beauty have not popularly survived the powerful socializing forces of popular culture and hegemonic media (hooks 2003; Bennett and Dickerson 2001; Coltrane and Messineo 2000).

It is also important to respond to the popular argument that African American women are not as in touch with mainstream media as white American women or that African American women feel that the white media does not apply to them and therefore they are not really affected. Bordo (1999), as do many feminist scholars, calls attention to the cultural duality that minorities face (Carby 1999; hooks 2000; Ladner 1971; Marabel In Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001; Combahee River Collective 1981; Collins 1991). Bordo (1999, 284) contends that, “It is true that there are ethnic traditions... that have held the... voluptuous female body in greater regard. But each of us [minorities] also lives within a dominant culture that often recoils from these ‘alternative’ ideals.” Bordo argues that it is impossible for minority women not to be affected and influenced by the media.

It is a clear case; media has a certain socializing power and impact over all who consume it. Cleaver (1968) explains that even as a socially conscious and progressive African American man, the media tremendously impacted him: “All our lives we’ve had the white woman dangled before our eyes like a carrot on a stick before a donkey: look but don’t touch... [I have been] indoctrinated with the white race’s standard of beauty...” (71). The idea that the majority of African American women, as members of society, are out of touch with or unaffected by mainstream culture and media must be interrupted. This interruption begins with listening to the narratives of African American women and then interpreting and acknowledging the ways in which beauty is performed and behaved, as well as taking account of various social processes and social forces at work in the public and private lives of African American women (e.g. media, community, family, religious practice, education, class, sexual or violent trauma/offenses).

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

What's needed ... is a hybrid approach— a viewer response that includes an ethnographic attention to social and cultural context and the use of rigorous and imaginative interpretive strategies for making sense of the viewers' responses. (Joseph Tobin 2000)

Just A “Regular” Black Girl?: Searching for Answers— An Auto Ethnography

By the time I was 16 years old, I was intimately aware of the concept of beauty and the favor that went along with possessing it. Light skinned, I was often called and referred to as “high yellow,” or “red-boned.” Sometimes, this was to be taken as a compliment. At other times, it was my cue to run or avoid the girls who were hostile about the value and attention given to my different, too light skin tone. In many Black communities, historically and presently, skin color, shade, tone, or complexion, carries complex and powerful meaning. Many studies expose, consistent with whiteness as a normative discourse, how lighter skin amongst African Americans can be privileged and preferred (Hunter 2002; Hill 2002). Relaxed sandy brown, shoulder length, “good hair,” 5’3 105 pounds, straight up and down, small chested, but “well proportioned,” I understood that I was both found “beautiful/ fine/ pretty” *and* was thought of as a “stuck up, goody two shoes, wanna be white girl.” I existed in a bipolar twilight zone where I was both hated and loved; wanted and rejected; beautiful and favored by some, but scorned and ridiculed by others.

For me, growing up, media was the constant back drop, the soundtrack that faded into the normalized everyday background. Media was like the sky, it was always there; some days you paid more attention to it than others, but it just *was*. As a child and adolescent, my parents did not allow us access to very much television. However my family definitely watched movies, the news, and certain children and “family friendly” television shows: *Full House*, *Alf*, *The Golden Girls*, *The A-Team*, and a variety of shows whose characters were predominantly white and middle class. The media of my youth is a bundle of memories that blur together to form a picture of the world and a reality that very few Black people actually lived or experienced: a very white, suburban, middle class existence.

However there were events that do stand out; occasional glimpses of Black people in film and on television. I don’t recall a critical lens or particular opinions on these images of Black people in media. My parents and family members never discussed or named these differences; we just watched. I now know that those images stood out to me because they were not average, everyday, *normal* occurrences, so I paid attention. Watching *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, *The Color Purple*, the Black characters on *Sesame Street*, the random few and far between Black news reporters, or the emerging presence of Black people in music videos, were not the staple or constant of my media experience. Those were only rare moments that stood out as different or abnormal from the mediated whiteness that felt more normal to me. I wonder what impact seeing images that looked like me but that did not feel normal had on my psyche as a young Black girl. To borrow from Takaki (1993), what happens when [media] leave out people of color?

What happens when [media] represents and portrays humanity and you don't see yourself there? "Such an experience can be disorienting— 'a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing'" (16, 1993).

The first definitions of beauty that seemed to permeate just outside the all encompassing, unquestioned, omnipresent glow of media, came from my peers; by boys and by girls who hated me because of my looks (or at least that is what I was told by others) or who "liked" me because I was "pretty." I was in a constant state of heightened awareness of my surroundings, of my appearance, and whether I'd be around those who contested my looks or those who lauded them. Then in school, white teachers called me their "favorite Black girl who isn't like the others." This left me again between my peers and my teachers, positioned against the "other less favorite Black girls." Beauty was a dangerous and powerful sword. If held the wrong way, in the wrong space, it could get you cut, but wielded correctly or used in other scenarios could protect you from assaults that *others* might have to endure. At a young age, not fully understanding the broader context of *skin capital* or how this operated, the power and capital that my "looks" afforded me was already clear.

My family also confirmed the lesson of beauty. However, before a certain age, I don't recall frequently being told I was pretty or beautiful at home. Beauty was not a concept that was explicitly discussed with either positive or negative connotations by my parents or siblings. We were taught instead about character and being good people. As a Black middle/ working class suburban family, the rules of respectability and behavior "acceptable" to whites was made clear by both immediate and extended family in both

implicit and explicit ways. Character, in this instance, was within the realm of the cult of respectability in the sense that what was deemed “appropriate” behavior was moving through a world in which white people’s rules and beliefs were the normative standard.

All that took place regarding appearance, outside of my home, amongst my peers, up to a certain age, seemed trivial. Gender roles however were made clear at home. I remember comments and reminders like, “little girls do this... and don’t do that...[fill in the blanks]”. It was also made clear in my household that the things women/girls did to their hair, faces (with makeup), and the clothes women wore, were closely monitored and discussed. But as a child, the concept of beauty was ambiguous. For example, I knew that women shouldn’t cut their hair and therefore long hair was a prized attribute; there were specific rules concerning how much and what type of makeup and nail polish one could wear and at certain ages and for certain events. This however was never connected to being or not being beautiful; these were connected to being a “respectable” girl or “young lady” and growing up in my parents’ household.

However, when I turned 14, I realized for the first time that my family, in addition to the rest of my social world, did indeed have some ideas about beauty... mine in particular. At a family reunion, an event I had not attended with my immediate family in several years, a group of aunts and cousins gathered around my sister, my mother, and me. They ooohed and aaahhed over how “beautiful” I’d become and made comments like, “We weren’t sure there for a while but you turned out to be a beautiful swan.” Other family members chimed in with adages about recovering from my “ugly duckling phase” and joked about my nick name, *Lucy Goosey*, because as a child I had “big round eyes, a

big nose, long gangly limbs, and was extremely clumsy and awkward”; a combination of a goose and the character Lucy, from *I Love Lucy*. Then they all rejoiced about how I had overcome my “ugly/ awkward” phase and really turned into a “beautiful young lady.” This remains an ongoing topic of conversation amongst family members.

I remember initially feeling like I was being punched in the stomach and given the Miss America sash all at the same time. In my family, this new recognition of beauty went hand and hand with the reminder of how “ugly” I used to be as well as the warnings about how quickly my beauty would surely fade. “Enjoy it while you’re young!” This *thing* that previously seemed so unimportant and hardly ever discussed suddenly came into full focus. *Beauty* was outed as this highly valued set of criteria that my very being would now be measured by. It was like being seen for the first time by people who I’d known all my life and realizing that prior to that, I was invisible to them. Or at least it was like being let in on the secret that they’d been keeping about what they *really* thought of me all those years prior. There was both betrayal and acceptance; joy and sadness in my new found confused beauty queendom. Nonetheless, I understood then that they were all in on it— media, peers, family—this comprehension and playing out of the rules of “beauty.” If my family thought this all along, what about others? What about media?

As “cute” as I would come to think I was (based on the laundry list of physical characteristics that I saw represented in media and that my peers, teachers, and family members outlined and reinforced as criteria), and as much as I was complimented on my appearance by others, I was also acutely aware that certain peers were much more attentive to my “beauty” than others. Growing up in a mostly Black community, but

attending a predominantly white high school and college, I had a very diverse group of friends and ran in various circles. Romantically speaking, most Black boys in my peer groups hardly ever seemed interested in me. Many of my Black female friends laughed at my size zero self trying to fit into their size 6 and 8 clothes. Being, “skinny” and less “shapely” than my friends, I developed a “little sister” complex amongst my group of Black girlfriends. This had significant impact on my sense of transitioning from a little girl to a woman. Even today many of my Black peers make comments revealing beliefs about the connection to having curves, wider hips, and larger breasts with “being grown” or “womanly”.

However amongst my white girlfriends I was admired and complimented regularly on how “pretty” they thought I was. While Black boys would agree that I was “pretty”, or make positive comments about my looks, they never seemed interested beyond that. White boys however were drawn to me and frequently flirted with me and asked me out. As a teenager, this was something I just accepted. I figured that I was just too skinny and too light skinned for the Black boys I knew. To investigate it further or to question why this was happening, at that point in my life, seemed like traversing dangerous terrain; not to mention this was a question that existed just outside the realm of my own critical consciousness at the time. However, the desires of both the Black and white peers of my youth certainly played into the construct of media stereotypes of Black women. Whether I was regarded as not “womanly” enough according to Black boys or exotically sexualized or “special” by white boys, the ways in which media positioned me

as a young Black girl/ woman, began to seep into the way I thought and felt about myself.

As I matured, I did however gain a clearer understanding of my formation around the conflicts and contradictions of what was encapsulated in “beauty”. By the end of my senior year in undergrad, after observing the dynamics between Black men and women on a predominantly white campus, I became intrigued with images and representations (realistic or not) of Black women as “strong”, sexual (or sexualized), confident, and unshakable. As I watched the few Black men on campus constantly bringing white women into their dorm rooms or eating with them in the café, while the Black women grouped together, always single and full of negative stories about their encounters with the men on campus, I became extremely confounded.

Later, when I picked up Scott Sterling’s Article on Lil’ Kim, *What Fresh Hell is This?* (2000), I returned to the contradiction; the dual gut shot and beauty queen crowning all over again. Without any deep knowledge of Lil Kim, her ascent in the music industry, or the inner workings of the hip hop crew she rolled with, I thought, how can Lil’ Kim feel like “just a regular black girl” and have all that she seemed to have? I wondered, how is it that she appears to be famous, rich, exude confidence, and men seem to find her sexy, yet she lacks self-esteem and “doesn’t feel good enough?” However, her obvious efforts to appear white— her blue eyes, multiple plastic surgeries, and blonde hair, did not escape me or my understanding of white normative standards of beauty. Finally when a white man I’d been dating told me that I would look more like Beyonce if my hair were “nicer”, it became even clearer what Lil’ Kim was going through. In order to be

more than or better than “just a regular” Black girl, one had to be as close to white as possible.

Dialing back to the beginning of my graduate program, with weave down my back, still a size 2, skinny up and down, and pursued regularly by white men, I was left perplexed by this thing called beauty; what media representations of Black women really meant to and for other Black women; the roles that race and media played in this tangled and confusing mess; and the power and access gained or denied based on one’s possession of beauty. The combination of my experiences, the experiences of other Black women around me, the seemingly increasing (though extremely uncomfortable and problematic) presence of African American women in media, and Lil’ Kim: the queen representation of the “strong” Black woman who seems to have it all yet hates herself, sent me out on a mission to interrogate how Black women see themselves amongst the myriad of views, values, and opinions that challenge or affirm who they understand themselves to be. This was the beginning of the investigation of my own critical awareness of self and identity regarding race, media, and beauty; this is where a sense of pain in response to, skepticism about, and irreverence toward media representations became a part of my daily consciousness.

While I now recognize and understand that we are often socialized by our peers, communities, and families regarding beauty, media operates in many times covert and subliminal ways as it impacts identity. For some, media is a part of the landscape of everyday life; it is a part of the living room furniture and the kitchen table. For others, their critical awareness of media as Adorno’s “guise of fake realism” is more heightened.

For many, media functions as an escape from the realities of their existence or just a form of entertainment; freedom from boredom or the mundane. For me, media became a member of the family, an influential voice, a so-called “friend”, someone to be with in boredom, loneliness, pain, and even celebration. I was not immediately aware of the nefarious effects media on my self-image and identity. For many media becomes a welcomed enemy, masking its potentially harmful identity as it produces meaning about what and who is deemed normal and good.

This does not mean that media consumers are passive puppets or an always unconscious duped viewer. We know the story is much more complicated than that. However for me, media’s pervasive presence penetrated my being; sometimes I was aware of its problematic messages but often times, I watched and consumed with very little critique, analysis, or resistance. As a woman who often times *benefited* from being included within the terms of mediated white standards of *beauty*, perhaps, in younger days, I felt that there was no need for a critical investigation of media. Further, growing up as a suburban, light skinned Black woman in a moderately conservative household, and primarily white schools, I was disconnected from any real knowledge or legitimated sense of Afrocentric historical connections. However, as I began to pay closer attention to my social surroundings, male/female interactions, the treatment of my African American and other classmates of color, I began to question how media impacted the way people think about themselves and others.

Looking back at this journey, I realize now that in order for me to fully understand these questions and the magnitude of such an inquiry, I had to start with

myself and my own understandings of and experiences with *beauty*. Several years into this work, while it may sound cliché, I have learned so much about myself as a woman of color; much more than this dissertation would allow me the space to share. However, I will say, that now with natural, shorter hair, and wearing a fuller size 6/8, I have gone through a spiritual, emotional, intellectual, political, and physical metamorphosis. In the rendering of my “beauty experience” thus far, it is important however to additionally make clear that in my transformation the dynamics of my position and standpoint as a Black woman (in this hegemonic society) has changed as well. Coming to an identity and understanding of self that is counter- hegemonic has come with an ongoing process of healing, *self* recovery and discovery on one hand and a heightened awareness of a loss of power, desirability, and *beauty queendom* on the other hand. *A lot* has changed in my life.

This work has helped me to understand that I live in a society inundated with images of beauty in popular media that do not operate for my benefit or well-being. Having come into and celebrating my own oppositional gaze and oppositional knowledge, within a Gramscian standpoint, I now better understand mediated images and definitions of beauty as a form of political, hegemonic, and ideological control; A forum I was once suspicious of but mainly offered consent to. As Patricia Hill Collins (1991) suggests, I was seduced by media yet unaware of its impact on my identity and sense of self.

My own personal lesson is in knowing that I must constantly and actively work to decolonize my own ideas of beauty and to reclaim and restore this thing called *beauty* to

what my ancestors originally intended it to be: an internal healing power; a genuine confidence and strength that rests not in physical appearance or on how much we can endure, but on our character and actions. I have learned that who I am, my true *beauty*, begins with what I do, how I think about and communicate about what I do, what that means within the contexts of power, and how my actions impact my community. To the women who joined me in this study, of each generation, and to the women who came before us and who will come after us, I give thanks and call us to action with the words of June Jordan (1980), “And who will join this standing up... we are the ones we have been waiting for.”

Research Questions and Methodological Stance

As a researcher I am interested in learning how African American women negotiate the intersections of popular media, dominant discourses of beauty, and identity. This study was formed with the intention of contributing to scholarly and interdisciplinary conversations about African American women, popular culture and media, and identity studies. Further, the purpose of this investigation is to engage in answering questions central to the well-being and healthy self-images and identity of African American women of all ages.

1. How do African American women reach their definition of beauty and understand their own beauty politics? Do African American women understand or experience beauty as cultural/social capital and to what end is that negotiated in their personal and public spheres?

2. How do other social structures/forces, peer or family groups impact African American women's perceptions of beauty and of media?
3. What media portrayals of beauty are African American women paying attention to and how do African American women see themselves represented in media?
4. And what spaces provide a counter narrative to mainstream media representations of beauty and African American women? What do African American women think should/could be done in order to counter how we are represented and viewed in media?

Because social structure and identity, co-evolving and each shaping the other, simultaneously impact behavior, this study aims to critically understand the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their perceived social reality. These research questions cover a broad range of issues that will allow this study to document and accurately interpret African American women's reactions to and interpretations of mediated images of beauty. Through the use of qualitative methods, rich and textured responses to these questions emerged.

In line with *Feminist Standpoint Theory*, this project is concerned with the development of *oppositional consciousness* to mainstream representations and understandings as well as valuing the experiences of and empowering the oppressed (Collins 1991; hooks 1990; 2000). Richie (1996), in her project investigating incarcerated women in a major urban city, argues that an alternative view of the lives of Black women is critical in countering mainstream narratives that convolute the intricacies of their lives. Speaking specifically to this point, she argues,

It reflects my interests in offering an alternative view of the women's lives in order to shift the dominant social science paradigms and in encouraging a more respectful and humane public policy response to the problems of crime, violence against women, poverty, racism and gender discrimination (1996, 16).

Additionally, participants in this study are situated as critical social agents who offer key insights into understanding and exploring the complex social phenomena within their own lives (Jenkins 2009)

Practicing authentic listening in the feminist tradition, I hold sacred the relationship between myself and the storytellers while understanding each woman as fully capable of articulating her own story once invited. They did not need me or my help to understand their own circumstances. I make this point to be clear that I did not enter this project with the intention of "saving" Black women from media or themselves. Instead, I came to this project with the intention of illuminating and understanding the multi-dimensional stories of the women interviewed and involved in this project based in uncovering and investigating issues of media, beauty and identity.

Including the voices and experiences of women who are so often marginalized and isolated required me to be self-reflexive throughout the research, analysis, and writing processes (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The participants' stories also included parts of myself that are shared, mutually known and commonly experienced hence exploring inter-subjectivity is an important part of this research. Such personal connections to the lives and narratives of the participants in this study could bring to bear more authentic and culturally sensitive data sets. Through interviews accessing life narratives; a series of focus group/ healing circles which explored counter narratives and

developing community; and journaling exercises that engaged the participants in a reflective process, I engaged participants to explore some significant aspect of their lives and their identities with the intention of reimagining their future selves and possible transformations.

Description of Data, Data Collection Process, and Methodological Framework

Over the past several months participants were selected by convenience sampling. Initially through emails and word of mouth, most of the participants contacted me to enquire about the study. I invited each of the women to participate in an in-depth 90 minute interview; a three part series of participant observation media viewing groups/ focus groups, which came to be called Women's Healing Circles; and a five day journaling exercise. The women were invited to take part in all or any of the parts of this study. A core group of women participated in all or most of the components (the interview, all three healing circles, and the journal workshop) of the study.

As people born at about the same time grow up sharing an historical period that shapes their views (Ortega y Gasset 1933), participants consisted of African American women from four cross-generational groups (Millenials: born after 1980; Generation X: born 1966 – 1980; Baby Boomers: born 1945 – 1965; and Pre-Boomers: born before 1945). I relied on Mannheim's work on generational cohorts to understand the impact of generational experiences on groups of people (1952). This study will allow us to better access how people within the same generation might see the world in different or unique ways from those of other generational groups. Exploring the differences and similarities

between the ways in which Black women interpret and engage media and ideas of beauty at different stages in life is pertinent in understanding these issues.

Of the participants, several were related to one another. As an individual's family is an important part of identity development and establishing social and cultural norms and rules, exploring familial and generational units could further provide depth to the data (Parmer et al 2004). Discovering familial narratives¹ and generational understandings, progressions, or changes in thought and experiences regarding media, race, and beauty, I especially looked for some of the women to refer me to their daughters, mothers, aunts, grandmothers. Many happily did and their relatives contacted me to participate in the study. Some women plainly said no and explained that their relative (typically their mother) would not be interested in this sort of thing. When I pressed for clarity or asked a little more about (usually) the mother, the daughter explained that her mother just did not talk about things like this. As I will discuss further in chapter four, typically these women (mothers uninterested in the study) were in the 45-65 year old or Baby Boomers generational group.

Interview Participants: The twenty-five women interviewed represent a diverse range of ages, social economic backgrounds, complexions, and were all from a Midwest urban area. Appendix A is a chart of the demographic information of the women who participated in the entire study. The youngest participant was an 18 year-old recent high school graduate and the oldest was a 94year old Great Great Grandmother.

¹ In the finding chapters, I do not make clear which women are related to one another for confidentiality and anonymity reasons. Discussing how participant A is related to participant B may expose the participants in ways I did not plan for.

In order to get the word out about this study, I sent emails to several associates who were administrators of high school/college organization, and professional listserves; I visited with or called members of two different large predominantly African American churches; and I spoke to the owners of two hair salons (that primarily service Black clients). During each of these conversations I explained the study to those interested in hearing about it and left my contact information for anyone who might be interested in participating.

Within one week, I received over 40 emails and telephone calls from women interested in learning more about the study. The women initially interested in the study varied in age but very few responders were in the 18-29 year old age group. I made plans to follow up with the women and schedule times to meet and discuss the project further or do an interview, almost half of those women cancelled or became extremely busy and unavailable. Of the women who were no longer able to participate, the majority were in the Baby Boomer group. As I scheduled interviews, I realized that each of my groups was filling up except for the 18- 29 year old Millennials and 45-65 year old Baby Boomer group.

For each person that called for more information or who I scheduled an interview with, I asked them to refer their friends, co-workers, church members, and especially their family members. I also explained the full study to each of the women as I scheduled the interviews and again at the actual interview. By the time the first interview took place, I also began to plan for the first focus group/ healing circle and invited each of the

women interviewed to attend. I also invited women to join the healing circles or partake in the journal workshop even if they were unable to participate in the interviews.

Interviews: The interviews, on average, lasted 90 minutes. The longest interview lasted over 2.5 hours and the shortest interview lasted about 40 minutes. The interviews consisted of open ended questions and usually began by collecting demographic information as well as discussing the participants' childhood, family background, people who influenced them in any way growing up, and the type of neighborhoods they lived in throughout their lives. Then participants talked about definitions and early lessons pertaining to beauty, popular media, and their personal thoughts about their own beauty, beauty practices/ behaviors, and identity.

Using the *life story* interview approach (McAdams, 2008; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006) or the oral narrative research tradition (Vaz 1997; Peterson and Langellier 1997), the women interviewed talked in depth about various stages of their lives, discussing their connection to race, racial identity, familial/ community ties, social experiences, and media over time. This approach goes beyond the idea that identity is made up of only values, traits, and motives, and invites participants to make sense of their lives at particular life moments. McAdams's (2006; 2008) asserts that people provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self. The idea that identity is a life story resonated with participants who discussed their evolving narratives. The interview approach allowed them to reconstruct the past, and perceive the present around issues of identity, family, media, and beauty.

Toward the end of the interview, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire. One side of the questionnaire asked each woman to describe and answer questions about her physical characteristics and description (e.g. height, weight, hair color). This questionnaire was provided because I was interested in learning how women would discuss and describe their beauty/ body/ physical characteristics and practices/ behaviors. Using a questionnaire instead of solely discussing this in the interview seemed to provide a safer more comfortable venue for the participants to discuss potentially sensitive topics.. The other side of the questionnaire consisted of questions that would also be relevant to the focus groups and pertained to specific media images, celebrity, genres, etc. Asking for this information beforehand allowed me to bring in various media (video clips, magazine articles, and pictures) that the women deemed influential or important to them.

Each interview took place in a private or a semi private setting of the participant's choosing. These one-on-one interviews took place in participants' kitchens, living rooms, offices, in empty coffee shops, and a quiet and uncrowded library. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded by recurring theme.

Journal Workshop: For participants who did not take part in the interviews but were interested in the journal component, I sent the exercise via email and asked that they send it back to me as soon as it was complete (See Appendix B). For participants who scheduled interviews, they received a packet consisting of journal guiding questions and space to write. The questions asked them to track their daily media intake over the course of five days. The journal also consisted of questions that prompted them to further

explore and write about memories and life histories around issues pertaining to beauty and their relationship to media.

I also emailed the journals to interview participants just in case they wanted to write and send them electronically. I told the women to take all the time they needed but to please get the journals back to me by the end of March. This gave most participants 6-8 weeks to complete their journal. I sent reminder emails every three weeks encouraging participants to write and to finish the exercise. Out of the 30 that I asked, only 9 women agreed to participate in the journal exercise. Each of those women participated in interviews as well and only 5 of the 9 actually submitted the journals. All of the 9 say that they have completed the journals, found them useful and interesting, and the remaining four journals say they plan to give them to me.

Using the journal exercises was inspired by Progoff's Intensive Journal workshops (1992). The initial intention was to use journals as a source of data collection as well as a way to invite participants to use a process for reflecting on and deepening the meaning of their lives. This data collection methodology was intended to be used as a tool that women could use to join me in the investigation and critical analysis of media as well as understand their own connections to media representations and beauty. With such a low participation/ response rate, I believe that it might have been a poor decision to use this tool as a way to collect additional data. Instead, this should have simply been offered as an invitation to engage the topics further and for their own uses. Due to the low response rate, I decided not to analyze the data collected from the journals. However, in follow up emails and phone calls to the 9 women who all said they used the journals, all shared

thoughts around the usefulness of the journals and the overall study. I will discuss this further in chapter four.

Participant/Observation Women's Healing Circle/ Focus Groups: There were three focus group/ healing circles over the course of four months. The aim of having three groups, instead of just one group, was to build on each of the other groups and to build a community of women that would be involved together in the investigation of the issues of media, beauty, and identity within their own lives and the lives of others. Bringing the group together three times allowed for a space where participants saw primarily familiar and some new faces each time; and the led to the creation or development of a safe space where truth could be told and healing attempted. In the tradition of the Healing Circle, also called a "Ring Shout", it was my goal to create a place to discuss our lives; a sounding ground and witness space; a place where our truths mattered and where we could hear, understand, and honor the experiences of each other.

The Healing Circle and Ring Shout pre-dates slavery of Africans in America but is most discussed in literature regarding early African slaves in America. Early African slaves came together as a community to share stories of their daily lives, to appeal to The Creator, and to pay homage to their ancestors through music and dance (Floyd 2002; Diouf 1998; Stuckey 1987). In the midst of irrational racial violence and oppression, many times meeting in the woods, slaves came together as a way of dealing with the trauma of slavery. Through music, rhythms, shouting, talking, the ring shout was a place to share values, experiences and their understandings of the world as they called upon the wisdom of the past for instruction and guidance. Also the words sung and spoken during

the ring shout often spoke of escape from the travails of slavery and carried over into the coded spirituals sung throughout their daily work. (Maultsby 1990; Diouf 1998; Stuckey 1987). A means of emotional and physical release, this practice, popular well into the 20th century, became most present during religious worship and has transformed, many would argue, into various forms of Black music (McClary and Walser 1994; Floyd 2002).

The first, in the series of focus groups, was described to invited participants as a group of Black women that would view Tyler Perry's interpretation of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* together and then have a discussion after the film over drinks. The emailed invitation was sent to an extensive list of women and then forwarded to the various networks of each of these women. All of the women invited to be interviewed also received an invitation to be a part of the focus groups. In the email, I explained that in "fulfillment of my dissertation I want to start a series of gatherings amongst Black women to discuss issues of media, beauty, representation of Black women and identity." Over 35 women responded to the email. Most women said they'd like to attend both the viewing and discussion. Several women said they'd seen the movie but would like to join the discussion. And only two other women said they did not plan on viewing the movie at all due to their dislike of Tyler Perry but wanted to hear what other women had to say about their experience.

Due to scheduling conflicts, etc., only 10 women came together to discuss the movie (9 watched it together and 8 out of that 9 then joined in the discussion; 2 other women came only for the discussion). The 11th woman was actually a bi-racial woman that would phenotypically be considered white who was not included in my invitation

and was brought by another participant. She did not stay for the discussion but explained after the movie that “she wanted to go home and cry under the covers.” Eight of us all met in the lobby, all dressed up for this special event; like a field trip of some sort. It was quite a spectacle that we, as Black women, rarely see- hundreds of Black women, dressed with purpose and performance, walking excitedly into the theater, expecting some sort of cathartic, entertaining, familiar, validating, wondrous experience.

The theater was filled (sold out) with women of every age, mainly Black women, but some white women came with groups of other Black women. The majority of women though, appeared to be age 30-55. The women in my group were Yeyo, Elaine, Kelly, Jada, Monica, Sofia, Barbra, Diamond, Mya, and Minnie; ranging from 47 years old to 25. The women in my group all sat together. Behind us sat another medium sized group of women who also seemed to come together. The theater buzzed with excitement and chatter, but once the movie began, it was silent. There was laughter, gasping, and sighs, but I will never forget the woman sitting directly behind me sobbing hysterically and uncontrollably after one particularly disturbing scene. Her girlfriend sitting next to her consoled and held her rocking and shaking friend, “It’s okay, it’s okay. It’s just a movie. It’s over now, it’s okay!”

To say this experience was intense and emotional is an understatement. As the organizer and initiator of the group, I initially intended to facilitate the discussion. I prepared a set of questions and brought an article that would be useful in sparking conversation (see Appendix C). By the time we made it from the theater to the café for drinks, I certainly became a participant and media audience member in this raw and

complex experience. I thanked everyone for coming and set the context by reading the article, “*Tyler Perry’s Not The Only One Still Writing ‘For Colored Girls’*” by Jamilah King (2010). From there, all I could do was take a back seat and let the discussion organically unfold and evolve.

The conversation lasted for over two hours. The women seemed to move together in and out of stages of shock, numbness, sadness, laughter and consolation, celebration, and critical awareness and media critique. The fact that *For Colored Girls* was an extremely different Tyler Perry film, absent of his typical stereotypical one dimensional characters, was huge for the women who viewed this film and joined in the discussion. At the end of the discussion, I invited the women to continue this discussion and covered the topics that would come about in a second and third group meeting. This discussion was recorded and transcribed; and ethnographic field notes were taken. The data was coded and analyzed making way for emergent themes, summative discourse, and thick description.

The second focus group was called Black Butterflies: A Women’s Healing Circle. Again an email and Evite were sent to a now growing network of African American women age 18 years old and older:

As you all might know, the upcoming event is in fulfillment of my dissertation. Please consider assisting me in achieving that goal. If you have ever moved forward in life because of the help of others this would be a great time to pay it forward. Please use this date to help create history and make a difference in the lives of Black women. Please arrive promptly as the program will begin at 2pm. I'm looking forward to seeing you! There will be refreshments and a space to vent, dissect, & dialogue about media, beauty, and changing, rebirthing, & healing the landscape of our stories! Peace,
Jennifer

I received 37 emails of interest/ inquiries and 23 RSVPs. The second focus group/ healing circle took place on a very cold and snowy day in January 2011 and was generously hosted at a local nonprofit organization's conference room. The room was large and allowed for a large projector and screen; and space for the 19 participants in attendance to sit in a large u-shape half circle and then break into three small groups that later gathered at the corners of the room.

This focus group included a sketch performance by a group called Honey Pot Performances. They did a 20 minute piece from their play called *The Ladies Ring Shout* (Johnson, Holman, McNeal 2010). The Ladies Ring Shout is a performance that uses a combination of spoken word, dance, monologue, and original soundtrack to explore portrayals of women of color in popular culture and shares their personal stories of resistance, and their emotional and intellectual investigation of their own Black feminisms. Afterwards participants got a chance to ask questions of the performers and give feedback. Viewing this allowed me to engage in participant observation once again as I took ethnographic notes of participants reactions to the performance.

Following the feedback, I then presented a ten minute powerpoint/ video presentation that offered popular notions of beauty and representations of Black women in media. I prefaced the presentation by asking participants to pay close attention to the imagery; especially the transformations in the faces of some of the women. The presentation called into question the differences between how white women and women of color are represented. I asked participants to, "watch this presentation keeping in mind

the questions: what does Hollywood/ media say is beautiful and what do women have to do in order to be deemed beautiful?”

Much of the presentation came from popular media referenced during the one on one interviews. For example, I provided pictures of women that the women interviewed described as most beautiful. I also provided images of popular celebrities that various media presented as the most beautiful women (i.e. in Hollywood). I combined those images with the ways various online and print media described the different female celebrities. For example, Julia Roberts described in AskMen.com’s 2010 list as a “pretty woman” with a “complex character” and “flowing hair”; or Tyra Banks as having “pure animal magnetism” and “confidence” that makes way for her “I-could-destroy-you aura that could translate nicely to the bedroom.”

After exploring the different ways women of color are accepted or deemed beautiful, I then posited what the few who have “made it,” had to do in order to get there. Presenting pictures of African American celebrities at the beginning of their careers and then current images, participants were able to see that many women of color submitted to the white aesthetic via cosmetic surgery. Lastly, participants were shown clips and images from several popular films. These clips and images explored the various stereotypical and limited ways Black women are commonly represented. Images included Halle Berry as the “sexualized victim saved by a white man” in *Monsters Ball*; Ice Cube’s girlfriend as the “ghetto ho” in *Friday*; *Sheila* as the “angry, big mouthed, emasculating, but funny caricature” from *Why Did I Get Married*; and Monique’s Award Nominated and Winning performance of the “evil, sick, welfare queen” in *Precious*.

The presentation ended dealing with issues around Black women and hair. Also a prominent theme that was discussed during one on one interviews, I included images and representations of African American women and their hair in the presentation. I included various magazine covers and ended the presentation with a clip from Chris Rock's *Good Hair*. "Would you like to buy some Black hair? ...So this is not good hair?" "No, this hair is no good." "But its Black hair. From Black people." "Yeah, but Black people don't wear that anymore." "So my nappy hair is not worth anything?" Again participants asked questions and provided feedback.

The last hour of this group was spent in workshops. There were three poster board stations at 3 different ends of the room. I initially asked that the women self select which group they'd like to go to: "What is Beautiful?"; "Dear Media, I hate you/ I love"; and "Build Your Own Healing Circle/ Can Healing Circles Be Beneficial for Black Women?" Eventually I assigned women into each group trying to make each group as diverse as possible (based on what I knew about the women from one on one interviews; age; and education/ social-political conscious). 6-7 women were in each small group. The women spent about 30 minutes in their groups discussing their topic, taking notes, and hearing from each participant. I asked each group to prepare a brief report back to the entire group.

I offered these two presentations and then asked women to engage in these workshops as a way to begin to invite women into the counter-storytelling process (Delgado and Stefanic 2001). During several interviews I began to notice several women, especially from the two oldest generational groups, who seemed to be

impervious to the idea that a study like this was necessary. Surprisingly, some women even explained that they did not notice any negative or problematic media images of Black women.

I don't know what is wrong with you younger generations. I really don't. I mean don't get me wrong, I love my granddaughter. But I just don't understand the way you all dress and the way you act and treat your men. I guess I don't understand why there are so many sad stories in the news. But there's a lot of positive things happening too. I think we should just focus on that. And focus on your families and taking care of your children and your husbands. And stop trying to do everything. Let men be men... you know that's the problems that I see. But I don't understand why that is happening. It's like... no one wants to listen..." (Interview with Yvonne, Mid 70's).

While I will discuss this comment and others like it further in chapter four, I offer this quote here to illustrate the need for not only a space for different generational groups to dialogue, but also a space where women could enter the discussion from their own unique experiences and backgrounds as well as a space of common bond and understanding.

Delgado and Stefancic define *counter-storytelling* as a method of explaining individual and collective experiences that "aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (2001, 144). For women like Yvonne, this approach proved useful in making more salient the experiences of many Black women; women who are often disconnected from each other as well as marginalized, and as a result our stories are muted, ignored, and misconstrued. Exploring the counter narrative or using the counter storytelling approach also provided a vehicle for women to challenge dominant stories and question the "normativity" of those stories. By presenting the artistic and personal stories of *The Ladies Ring Shout* and then the

presentation on media representations and images that many Black women encounter and identify with on a daily basis, participants were able to engage a space for the counter-narrative to be explored. The women deepened their understanding of self and each other as they grappled together with issues around media, identity, beauty, trauma, and healing.

At the end of this three hour long healing circle, I asked the women if they were interested in meeting again and what they thought we should do if we did meet again. I also explained that as a part of my research, I would like to meet at least one more time to discuss the issues of media representations and what they thought about what could be or needed to be done, if anything, to respond to or counter media representations of Black women. This was extremely useful in gauging the women's interest in the project and offering them agency and partnership choosing the direction of the research. Many of the women stayed afterwards to talk and exchange contact information with each other.

The third and final focus group, in the series of women's healing circles, was called The Women's Healing Circle: Unfolding Dilemmas and Creating Counter Spaces. I invited women who participated in the first two groups as well as several women from an African American women's book club. Again emails and an Evite were sent to 30 women.

Dear Ladies, I am writing to those of you who specifically participated in the first two Women's Healing Circles. I would like to invite you to part 3 of the series. As discussed in the last session: this final group will take place in a more intimate setting; we will discuss the issue of media literacy— what it is and what it means for Black women in 2011; we will discuss designing your own healing circle and workshops and what each of us can do to heal in our own journey by sharing our narratives and keeping the tradition of the healing circle. Also, attached you will see a copy of my dissertation proposal. I welcome you to review it if you have

time/ if you are interested. Your feedback, input, and questions are welcomed. Again, this is in fulfillment of my dissertation for my PhD. Your participation is not mandatory, but is EXTREMELY appreciated! Peace, Jennifer

As stated in the email, the goal of this focus group was to offer transparency in my research, and explore the value in healing circles and media literacy. In the previous group, many participants expressed their interest in my work and research. Sharing my proposal was also an attempt to solidify trust and break down any barriers due to power balance.

While I heard back from 26 of the women invited, stating they would like to participate or negotiating schedules, only 8 women attended the final meeting. Based on various correspondences with the participants, I believe this low attendance was due to scheduling conflicts and not a representation of the women's interest and engagement. Many women followed up with me and other participants to find out what was discussed. Some even asked for notes and if they could listen to the recordings. All of the 26 women who responded to the invitation to the last group were invested in the healing circles as many women have inquired about next meeting dates and continuing the group since our last meeting.

The last meeting took place at the beginning of April 2011 at the home of one of the participants. It was a much more intimate setting than the previous two meetings. The 8 women (Kelly, Jada, Monica, Sofia, Shug, Anne, Onna, and Diamond) in attendance had attended one or both of the previous groups and most also were interviewed. For this final group, I participated by facilitating the discussion with four questions/points and asked that the women discussed each point as a group. I also asked

the women to engage in a reflection activity, taking time to write notes about any questions, comments, or topics they felt should be discussed in settings such as the Woman's Healing Circle. This group lasted 2.5 hours and by the end moved into a casual social atmosphere. I turned the audio recorders off and the woman stayed and socialized for another hour.

The abundance and depth that emerged from the interviews and focus groups was collected and analyzed using an interpretive research and ethnographic approach. This study allowed me the ability to go beyond theoretical exploration of texts into the everyday lived experiences and interpretations of the participants. These methodological tools allowed me to look at the complex ways the women interacted with each other, represented and reflected on self, and engaged media and understandings of beauty and identity; thus expanding the sociological and interdisciplinary conversation regarding African American women, beauty, identity, and media representations. The participants in this study made clear the multidimensional and complex ways in which women identify with media; see media as a sight for resistance or acceptance; and communicate about and understand beauty and media representations of Black women.

My data chapters were formed through a grounded approach focusing on the consistent themes present in interviews and focus groups and include empirical data collected from an ethnographic perspective. The goal of this work is not to generalize about specific populations in a positivistic sense. Instead, with the data collected from this study, the goal is to interpret how participants, or the studied actors of a social setting, construct and make meaning of their world (Glesne, 1999) and to provide thick

descriptions and in-depth explorations of a central social phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

This work provides data and analysis which offers detailed description and identification of concepts grounded in the collected data. Furthermore, this work puts emphasis on the complexities and varied realities that arise from the data above overarching trends or generalizations.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly (nightmare of a) dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of my kinky mass that momma wouldn't let me straighten. My big beautiful baby blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about "my daddy must have been a Chinaman" because my eyes were so small and squinty. Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke a common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pig's tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult. (Maya Angelou 1969)

Introduction

Revisiting the discussion in chapter two, Bakhtin's (1994) heteroglossia is an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the lives of Black women and the shaping of identity. Several themes emerged in complex and multidimensional ways: (1) All the women participating in this study recognize mainstream popular culture and media, at least historically, as arbiters of what it means to be beautiful or physically attractive. Most of the participants also believe that messages concerning beauty, whether from media or other societal forces could cause harm, pain or negative impact on the identity and self-image of Black women. The ways in which the participants in this

study respond to and interpret those messages is a site of much variance. (2) Independent of class, and family of origin, generational gaps became clear in terms of the lack of understanding of women in other generational cohorts; the ways each cohort identifies with media; and the ways that women from different cohorts express self and identity in the face of media messages. The majority of participants in the first two generational cohorts (Millennials and Generation X), and some women in the Baby Boomers and Pre-Boomers groups have similar understandings of media representations of African American women, concepts of mainstream beauty standards, and impact on psychosocial well-being. The majority of women in the two oldest generational cohorts (the Baby Boomers and Pre-Boomers) have homogeneous understandings of media and beauty that were quite different than those of the other two generational groups. (3) The ways in which both the younger generational cohorts and the older generational groups talked about or struggled to talk about family, beauty, media, and identity speak to the way oppression and pain become internalized and difficult to talk about, unpack, and digest. (4) Familial transmission of ideas and values associated with beauty standards as well as family of origin and racial make up of peers highly impact how participants interpret and respond to media concepts and representations.

In this chapter, I offer an ethnographic synthesis and interpretive analysis of the data collected throughout the study. Here I argue that identity is a central concept to consider in this research as the focus is on understanding the various ways in which Black women make meaning and engage media interpretations of beauty and its relationship to participants in this study. African Americans have a history characterized

by oppression and discrimination, which has contributed to a “raced” identity.

Theoretical and empirical work in psychology, sociology, and social psychology has demonstrated links between racial identity and psychosocial adaptation or overall well-being (Banks & Banks, 1993; Cross, 1991; DuBois, 1973; Sellers, Chavous, & Cook, 1998; Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998; Steele, 1997, 1999).

Although research in this area is still emerging, the question can be raised as to whether a person’s prominent Black racial identity or positive group affiliation impacts how they interpret, respond to, and experience various social systems. While there may be great variance in these data, I argue that in cases where African American women grew up within family dynamics and within neighborhoods that celebrated an Afrocentric aesthetic and were exposed to a variety of others who looked like them, those women, regardless of class, interpret and engage media and beauty standards in very different ways than women who grew up in families that adopted Eurocentric standards of beauty and were isolated from other African American community, peers or family members.

Signorielli (1985; 1989) found that media, full of stereotypical, traditional, and hegemonic images of males and females, works to socialize audiences about gender roles. Based on data collected in this study and evidence of media’s influence on how race, gender, and beauty are portrayed, understood, and played out in our day to day lives, I argue that media consumption may be related to more racist and sexist attitudes of many Americans. The ways in which Black women theorize about and understand how media propagate racist attitudes as well as their own understandings of self are affirmed in these findings. These data suggest that internalized oppression and the colonial project are still

very much impacting the lives of African American women. As media presents one dimensional politically positioned and spectacted versions of Black life, very little room is left for a complex or more deeply framed account.

I also argue that African American women who have been historically disenfranchised, colonized, objectified and their identity violently constructed (as discussed in chapters one and two), must be about the business of healing, self-recovery and wholeness. Merging the findings of this study with the work of hooks (2005), de Gruy-Leary (2005), Collins (1998), and Ani (2000) I weave together a definition and description of a kind of healing that few African American women may know or engage. This *healing* is one that includes (1) the decolonization of the mind, leading to “breaking with the ways our reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture and asserting our understanding of that reality, of our own experiences” (hooks 2005, xxxii); (2) finding and maintaining spaces of joy and affirmation—or reclaiming the *living room* spaces and safe places in our lives; (3) less concern with affluence and materialism (Collins 1998; hooks 1981; 2003); (4) emphasis and focus on self-determination and the reclamation of Black spaces, knowledge, community, and lineage; and (5) following and critical awareness of a political path of resistance towards self- recovery and wholeness.

The M Word: A Site of Hegemony and Generational Variance

Learning the meaning of the text, or the ways in which participants understand and interpret media is an integral part of this study. As discussed in chapters one and two, while many scholars agree that media messages, full of stereotypes, negative imagery, and white hegemonic messages are obvious to some viewers, others argue that

African American female audiences are immune to or untroubled by such understandings. This data illustrates the complexities in how media contributes to the construction of self and the ways in which media affect the representation of African American womanhood.

Every interview was different as some women started their stories with their earliest memories and needed very little prompting or questions. Other interviews were much more guided and questions from the interview schedule were closely followed. During each interview, I reminded the participants of the focus of the study: my interest in learning about their understandings of media, beauty, and identity. I asked them to tell me about their lives; their earliest memories of their families, media impressions and lessons around beauty. Whether the participant was very talkative or needed prompting, amongst other key questions, I asked all participant these three questions: “how does media define beauty; how does media portray Black women; and is beauty or being beautiful something that is an option or concern for Black people?”

Amongst numerous dialogues pertaining to their own politics and identity around beauty; media consumption; and their own media/ beauty stories or engagement, every woman shared her story. Most participants (Alexandra, Yolanda, Onna, May, Yeyo, Justice, Emily, Kelly, Jada, Monica, Sofia, Shug, Cicely, Anne, Elaine) were forthcoming, baring all, extremely talkative, and excited to engage the topics; some (Sha’Ron, Rashanda, Farrah, Jaclyn, Mary, Barbra, Clare, Yvonne, Judith, Lucy) were more reserved in their answers, sometimes reticent and reluctant to talk openly about certain topics and giving short, hard answers. A few (Farrah, Mary, Yvonne, Lucy, Sha’Ron) were very direct in telling me that the questions I asked were not what they

thought the study would be and that, in all, the study did not seem that interesting or important to them, although they agreed to participate anyway. Regardless of the tone of each interview, each woman was able to attest to media's impact on her life, the way African American women are represented and thought about, and her ideas about beauty.

In her late 80s, widowed, tall, thin, medium brown skin, with roller set salt and pepper hair and a full face of make-up, Lucy commented on beauty messages in media but also explained that growing up, her family taught her first lessons on beauty.

"Women should take care of themselves and be presentable. It shows that you have respect for yourself. As long as you do that, you can look nice too. On the soaps and Oprah... the women on television, they take care of themselves." Jamaican native, Judith, in her late 70s, widowed, dark brown skin, full figured, had similar impressions of media, beauty and family. "I always tell my girls, dress up, put some make-up on and do your hair. You are pretty too. And it's nice to see Black women in media... Halle Berry... and what's the woman on channel 5? ... Black women... I just think it is nice to see us doing well." Baby Boomers, Farrah: mid 40s, Jaclyn: mid 50s, and Barbra: late 50s; and Pre- Boomers Onna: early 70s, Cicely: early 90s, Clare: early 70s, Yvonne: mid 70s, Judith: late 70s, and Lucy: late 80s all seemed to have more positive interpretations about current media portrayals of Black women. Generally, this group of women felt there was tremendous diversity in current media; an overall image of Black people doing well for themselves; and thought there was little wrong with the beauty images or images of African American women currently portrayed.

However couched within the lack of problems they had with current media, were the complexities of how each woman grappled with media and ideas around beauty.

“Back in earlier times, with things like *Green Pastures*, and Western movies, and certain magazines... or the Reeds and the Kennedys...” Cicely, in her early 90s, medium brown skin, with thin jet black short pressed hair, laughs as she remembers. “They never gave Blacks a chance at being beautiful.” She breaks into song, gently clapping her frail hands, “Brown skin woman gets my diamond ring. Jet Black woman don’t call my name. If you brown you stick around, if you yellow you mellow...” Cicely laughs and then deeply sighs. Born and raised in the Deep South, Cicely migrated to Chicago as a young woman in 1937. The celebratory nature of her singing fades into a more serious expression and tone, “At that time, we weren’t counted... we had to go through a lot.” I ask her, “Do African American women have positive self-image and identity?” “They had to, they went through so much... a lot more than white women... back then, we had to be strong and being strong made us feel good... good that we could take it. But now... things are different... people are different, times have changed, we have a Black president!” She smiles, takes a moment to think and nods her head in agreement with her thought, “Media is better. I see a lot of Black women very successful and winning awards and having their own shows and such. To see that... it makes me feel better now and freer.”

While Cicely believes that current mainstream media portrays more positive images of African American women, her comments also speak to the dichotomous and enigmatic nature of race, media and beauty. I ask her if beauty is for Black women and

if media, even though she recognizes it as changing over time, plays a role in telling us about ourselves. Her response illuminates both her understanding of the impact of discrimination and oppression and the complexities of existing dually aware of one's Blackness and "Americanized" self. In the same breath she says, "When you are treated with such inhumanity, any freedom feels better. But yes, anyone can be pretty. You just need a pretty face... well I always thought Black people were beautiful to me... as long as they do their hair and don't look like pickaninnies... But knowing who you are... that doesn't come only from media. It comes from within you and what you learn growing up. And you always want to be better."

Audre Lorde once wrote, "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" (1984, 123). To more fully understand Cicely, and the others who had similar perspectives on media and beauty, it is important to understand the historical contexts and the current realities from which these women speak. African American women from the Pre-Boomer and Baby Boomer generational cohorts come from eras where there was little representation of themselves in popular media. What little media they had access to did present extremely racist and negative imagery of Black people and expressed dominant attitudes about the roles of African Americans in society. Participants from these generational groups' worldview and life experiences potentially shift their lens in terms of viewing current stages of media in contrast to the drastic societal and media changes they've lived through. For Cicely, Lucy, Judith, and others,

today media provides adequate representation of Blackness. As Cicely explained, “any freedom is better.”

However, the question remains as to whether that *adequate* representation is truly being reflective of Black life. Have women in these two older generational cohorts possessed an oppositional gaze or one that acquiesces to change over time? The dialectical contradiction in Cicely’s statements also speaks to the ways in which African American women in these generational cohorts experienced hardship, discrimination, and pain in the everyday lived experience. To be historically ignored or invisible in media and “thingafied” or worthless in society created conditions that while painful, caused many women to “be strong” and carry on or move forward in spite of circumstances.

The majority of women from the two younger generational cohorts have more negative or critical impressions of current mainstream media, its representations of Black women and mainstream mediated images and definitions of beauty. Sofia, in her late 30s, dark brown skin, full figured, dressed casually, is married, and has long dread locks, explains, “The way that mainstream American media and popular culture define, represent, talk about, think about me as a Black woman... today in the 21st century... well, let’s just be clear... they aren’t painting a pretty picture... cuz *that* pretty really isn’t even for us now is it?” For Sofia, and the majority of women interviewed from the Generation X and Millennial generational cohorts (Emily, Kelly, Jada, Monica, Shug, Anne, Elaine, and Yolanda), media is painfully obvious in its mainstream hegemonic agenda.

“Growing up I dreamt about becoming Barbie.” Kelly is in her mid 20s, has dark brown skin, is curvaceous but thin, is married, and has short dread locks. While she was not born in America, she explains that she spent most of her life here and sometimes feels more “Americanized” than anything else. She identifies herself as a Black woman. She talks about her “Americanization” process and how that included deciding whether or not she wanted to associate her dark mahogany colored skin with “Blackness” or Black Americans. “As if I had a choice,” she laughs. Kelly reflects, “when I was little... oh yes, light skin, even back [in my home country], we figured it out... being half cast immediately increases your currency. Right along with Barbie and all the other white and light skinned people we’d see on television and on billboards... magazines we weren’t supposed to be looking at,” she laughs, “we knew they deserve special treatment.” Kelly, like Monica, Sofia, Shug, Anne, and Elaine, feels that media negatively affected the way she thought about Black people, herself and her own beauty.

As I got older, especially after I got here [a southern state]... as a teenager, I really grappled with identity. Media really is based on... like... subscribing to certain ideas that did not come from within myself. But I didn’t recognize that then... my insecurities were exposed and raw for a long time... but I’m not sure how aware I was about that even then... I knew I was frustrated... but it wasn’t until much later... really only within the last several years that I’ve become more aware of my thought process... you know, beauty and all that and how media and other stuff just really affects me. It can really mess you up (Kelly).

While each had troubling critiques of media, which spoke to its hurtful and alienating nature, the women in these two younger generational cohorts varied in terms of their media consumption. Many described their relationship with media as a “love/hate” affair or “an abusive relationship.” Emily, in her early 20s, medium brown complexion,

and shoulder length relaxed hair, shuffled in her seat and thought for a few seconds, “I know that the more I watch television or even sit and flip through magazines, the more I... well I don’t want to say hate... the more I become dissatisfied with myself. And it’s not like I see some white actress or model and think automatically, oh why can’t I look more like that... it’s not like that at all cuz half the time I don’t think they are all that pretty,” Emily laughs nervously. “I just get... upset I guess. I see what is out there and what other people see and I think... well, I just don’t see myself or anyone I know really reflected in media.”

Light skinned, with medium shoulder length hair, Elaine, early 30s discusses Tyler Perry’s impact on representations of African American people. “People say you either love it or you hate it. For me... I don’t know... it’s like I’m rolling my eyes and shaking my head thinking that is so stereotypical and wrong. But then two seconds later I’m cracking up [laughing]. It is a love hate relationship, watching a train wreck, and looking for glimpses of yourself all rolled into one.” As many (hooks 1981; 1992; 2005; Collins 1998; 2005; Hall 1990; Jhally and Lewis 1992; Entman and Rojecki 2000) argue, and the participants of this study recognize, media bombards Black women with daily negative images. Often times, participants explained conflict and a sense of feeling torn when faced with the allure and entertainment of media yet its often times offensive nature.

“I called my girlfriend the other day and I was like, ‘I cannot believe this mess!’ Have you seen the show *The Talk*? It’s like *The View*. Oh my gosh, well basically there is a token dark skinned Black woman on there and of course she is the only one talking

real crazy about how she's gonna fight someone and the whole taking off her earrings routine..." Exacerbated, Jada, in her mid 30s, shakes her head. "That's why I don't even like to watch television. I try my hardest to keep it to [public television]... but I get sucked in to whose wearing what and all the reality TV shows these days," Jada dramatically rolls her eyes and shakes her head, then looks at me with a smile and laughingly says, "They are the pits! But we sure are right there tuned in every Thursday... or whatever day it comes on... to Basketball Wives and the lot...uhgg! "

Women in the two younger generational cohorts also primarily seemed to agree that they grew up in a culture that valued and understood beauty consisting of physical and external qualities. As hooks assert, "We have a younger generation of Black people who have been much more educated by the pedagogy of hedonistic consumerism... so that we haven't been able to engage in a public discourse about Black self-esteem that goes beyond the 1960s push to "love your skin color, to love your natural hair"" (2005, xix). For these participants, lessons about beauty, coming from media and community were internalized and produced; playing out in their own behavior and sense of self.

As May, who is widowed, in her mid-90s, fair skinned, and has long salt and pepper hair, understood it (and Cicely would agree), "That's [media] not for us! As a lot of things aren't for us. And we... Black folks are busy trying to keep up with the Joneses... but not everything is truly for everybody." For May, media and mediated images of beauty represent things that are not for Black women. Instead, she believes that there are other routes to positive self-image for African Americans and that by and large Black women have positive self-esteem and sense of self.

Well, I think it's because of the fact that we have never been able to measure up to that of the other side... In other words, we... To tell the truth, if I... if we dig into things, we go further to learn more than they do. Why? Because it takes more knowledge for us to get into a place than it does for the white folks. They don't have to know too much to get in. But we do. We do. And then that boosts our self-esteem... knowing more about stuff. So you're gonna try harder. You're gonna put more into it cuz you feel that you have to... You have to. And then we feel good about ourselves. You know? Then where some don't feel so good about themselves... that's the ones that don't have the parents that have any self-esteem or good sense. Those are the ones who think all that mess [referring to media] is for them. You know, what you call that baby after baby after baby after welfare after welfare. Those are the people that don't have... well, they don't have much. But you take the ones who has been to school and who has been around and want to be somebody, they try harder. They feel better about who they are... so it doesn't matter what they say on television or what's in your hair. What the hell does hair have to do with them being on TV anyway? It really should be about what's in your head... (May).

While May's points might first appear to be prejudicial, she speaks to a deeper reality of what is commonly known as the glass ceiling. Her comments hold true to the old adage of having to work twice as hard to be considered equal or on par with members of the dominant society. For May, African American people can be immune to hegemonic media images of beauty and negative representations of Blacks yet still fall victim to discrimination.

Still, May's comments illuminate the depth of how race, class, and media impact African American people. "...There is an interlocking system of domination that impinges on our lives in life threatening ways, and we will not be able to address our lives and our mental and physical health adequately if we can not address the interlocking systems" (hooks 2005, xiii). Overall, most participants understood media as a site of

hegemonic messages. However those messages' impact on the lives of the women interviewed make clear that media is a polysemic site. How individuals integrated that understanding into their daily lives varied. But generally all understood media as a mechanism or entertainment vehicle that was made by and for white audiences.

Family and Community: Reading Race, Media, and Beauty

More significant than class, age and familial dynamics seemed to explain participants' understandings pertaining to media and beauty. According to this data, families impact how participants see and understand other Black women and themselves. For all participants, familial transmission of ideas and values associated with beauty standards impacts how they interpret and respond to media and understand beauty. Some explained that the discussion or lack of discussion concerning race and racism in their families affected the development of ideas around beauty and beliefs about media. There were a variety of themes present in participants' familial experiences. For some participants, family members: (1) encouraged awareness and discussions about race and racism growing up; (2) promoted attitudes of colorblindness or did not discuss race at all; (3) indirectly or directly adopted or credited value to white aesthetics and discussed beauty as external attributes; (4) valued beauty as an internal element that could only be displayed through a person's character and behaviors; (5) never discussed beauty and never commented on their children's appearance.

All of the participants have narratives that were shared. Some women told their stories and spoke in detail and at length. They offered their inner thoughts about sensitive topics or things they identified as hard to discuss. Sometimes they told me that

these were issues or topics they'd considered and reflected upon in the past. Others said the topics of media and beauty were things they never talked about, but maybe thought about. Patricia Hill Collins contends that "... historically oppressed groups also produce social theories. Not only do the forms assumed by these theories— poetry, music, essays and the like— diverge from academic theory, but the purpose of such theory also seems distinctly different" (1998, xiii). Telling ones' story can represent acts of resistance, cathartic self-reflection, or ways to escape or survive injustice. Describing their developed and evolving life stories, each participant, to some degree, theorized with me about their identity formation, the development of their sense of self, and their understandings pertaining to beauty and media.

For Jada, mid 30s, her understanding of beauty is simple and clear. Raised in a household with a very "militant" African American father, Jada has numerous stories about her father's insights and ideas about beauty and Black women. "How could I believe anything but what my father was constantly talking about? It was like the nightly dinner conversation. There was a point when I started thinking, hmmm, maybe I need to be a little darker so I can be even more fine." Jada laughs, but her tone is serious and calm. Jada, a self-proclaimed "daddy's girl," explains that growing up her family encouraged dialogue and asking questions. The topics of conversations included race, politics, confidence, beauty and self love. "On top of my daddy always telling us [she and her sister] how beautiful we are and always reminding us of coming from a lineage of African queens, I also had my mother, all her sisters, and my grandmothers on both sides that were confident and beautiful."

Jada knew that she came from generations of women who also were confident and valued. Jada talks at length about how beauty was discussed as a simultaneous internal and external possession. But for Jada, (stated above) single, with a short *Halle Berry* hair cut, dark brown skin, and self described “thick” figure, just being Black made her automatically externally beautiful.

I remember when I would come home and be upset about the other girls talking about my nose being wide and my daddy would actually scold me, like, ‘You better not believe what they are saying! No, thick nose, thick lips, and thick hips... That’s the symbol of a Black woman. So be proud of that. You are Black.’ You know, I mean, he would just reinforce that. I mean, but the people that were saying it, they were Black too. My nose was just thicker than theirs. So it’s not even like that was coming from White people (Jada).

Between her father’s diligence, open discussions of issues regarding race and racism, the various models of Black female beauty within her family, and the numerous boys that Jada explains always liked her, Jada theorizes, “Media images or what other people said, never stood a chance. Like how some people learn the alphabet when they are little, I learned to love myself, to resist anything that made me doubt my own beauty...” Jada’s calm and confident demeanor do not come off as cocky or false as she continues, “As an adult, it really makes me take pause when I see other women who don’t think they are beautiful or who are trying to get plastic surgery and all that mess...” She shakes her head in disappointment, but then perks up and smiles, “Like I’m all for maximizing your own beauty by getting your hair done and getting jazzy if you want to, but I feel beautiful from the moment I wake up in the morning, whether my hair is relaxed or in dread locks, short or long...”

Jada grew up in a middle/working class primarily African American neighborhood. Until high school, the schools she attended also consisted of mainly Black students. When I ask her if she has non- Black friends now or if she had any growing up and if her father played a role in the racial make up of her group of friends, Jada explains that she does not now nor ever did growing up really have any close non- Black friends. “My father made it clear that we better not come home with no white boys that is for sure. But that was never a real threat in his mind. He already knew that was never my preference.” She laughs and goes on,

I think what that really is for me is low access to non-Black... I mean I grew up in a predominantly black community, and my elementary school was predominantly Black. When I went to high school [a prestigious and extremely diverse school], it was really diverse but I just gravitated towards the black people, probably just because that was my comfort zone, that's where I... I've been. That's what I've been exposed to. And I think, in general, at [high school] the class... The group of people that I hung out with pretty much... All the Black people kinda hung out together. And then I went to an HBCU... so my first real interactions with white people did not happen until my first job at [large corporation] (Jada).

Jada's first socioeconomic and geographical location along with her father's positions on race, created situations for her where she was eventually able to choose to surround herself with mainly Black people. Even in high school when she was exposed to white classmates, Jada says, “All my images are of Black people. Like the White folks didn't even exist? Yeah... pretty much, unless they were kind of the Gothic White people that would just make themselves stand out by wearing a bunch of black...dressing kind of culturally different than what I was used to. So I might remember a couple of them... but yeah, most of my images are of Black people.”

I never had a really memorable experience with white people until my professional career. I mean, when I started working at [large corporation], I immediately felt that I was the minority. Whereas before, I knew my history and I knew that we were considered the minority race but I personally never felt the minority until I started working at Ford. And I realized, like, ‘Oh, there aren’t a lot of Black girls. There aren’t a lot of Black boys.’ But I just felt like I was different because I looked different. Even then, I didn’t feel like the people treated me differently or anyone, like, said something that made me feel like, ‘Oh, yeah. You really are different.’ It wasn’t until my second career [at another large private institution] where I had an Executive Vice President make a comment about my language and put it in the context of, you know, cultural, racial enunciation/pronunciation. But those types of more recent experiences don’t really phase me. How could they? I’ve lived my whole life with a very definitive set of beliefs about who I am, my self-worth, and value as a Black woman. And I know I’m lucky to have grown up the way I did. With parents and family that spelled it out for me, and really insulated me from any negative experiences... racially speaking (Jada).

Growing up, Jada explains that she first practiced resistance to media images that were not reaffirming or were counter to the belief system of her family. Mentioning that she only watched cartoons and shows with African American characters that she could relate to or found realistic, she maintains that she did not pay attention to anything else. “I didn’t necessarily know anybody that had Doctors as parents. But the idea of having professional parents that work, that care for their children, that do family oriented things, that was common for me.” Jada’s experiences speak to the importance and power of family in a person’s ability to develop counter narrative or oppositional knowledge. “So I don’t have any distinct memories of having my understanding of race shaken or disfigured... my father and my uncle were very Black-conscious people. And I heard them talk... I mean, I was named out of a book of African names. And my father was a

poet. So, you know, I've heard like, you know, "Be proud of your African-ness all my life."

Even in a case like Jada's where her media intake was limited and her family offered positive reinforcement to Black beauty aesthetics, she was impacted by media's attempt to discredit and disregard her beauty. While Jada felt concerned and upset with media representations, unlike most of the women interviewed, she did not feel like media images of white beauty applied to her or that she felt the need to strive to reach or compete with those images. Many (Mack 2001; Milkie 1999; Molloy and Herzberger 1998) argue that media images of beauty do not affect African American women negatively. In Jada's case, her self-identity and self-image are not negatively impacted, however Jada is very aware of the ways in which mainstream white society thinks that media images of Black woman should apply to her.

Her hair in dread locks and trendily dressed, Kelly, mid 20s, tells me about how losing her mother at an early age left her with one brother, a traditional African immigrant father, who told her not to date Black men, and a gaggle of aunts who taught her how to lather herself with skin lightening cream. But she says that while she socially considers herself African American, she does not believe that she has always experienced race and racism in the ways that Black people born in America think about race because of her family and upbringing.

Compared to other black people that are extremely aware of race, I can't say that I am all ways on that level. It's not something that I think about all the time. I've grown and lived longer here and I guess gone to school more I can see it I can understand it more now I can bring it through my own experience I can look at it perceptively and say oh that was really racist what that person said

to me, but like there are days that it does not touch me because it is not the experience that I had growing up and it is not what I was raised to be aware of... like I was taught that it did not apply to me. I didn't have to pay attention to those things. I come in with different expectation based on where I was born. I was born in a continent where everybody looked like me and the type of discrimination that happen was not based on race so then in terms of history and just experience so because I was raised in a different place and a different space and then moved to the south I still hung out with others from my home country even my girlfriends now are all African so I have been cocooned into my own reality of how I experience myself and my race (Kelly).

Because Kelly's experience with the colonial project is one where the various actors in her country of origin looked like her, she has a different gaze. Coming from the African continent, for Kelly, white presence is minimized. There, in her circles of operation, white images did not saturate her worldview. Despite the fact that lighter skin was understood as currency in her country of origin, it operated in muted form as explicit images of white people were not used as the standard by which to conform. As a former British colony, her country of origin replaced all of the colonial officials in power with those who looked like her. Because the majority of explicit white imagery were removed in the physical sense, the remnants of the colonial project is understood in the practice of privileging lighter skin in the absence of explicit white imagery. In this sense, white domination is not an immediate concept in her introduction to the United States. At first race and racism aren't concepts that Kelly grew up with as present in mind. However, with new experiences in the U.S., she begins to understand a shift in terms of power being normalized as literally European and white.

I think the biggest difference that I had was now learning that now I needed to be Black because that was who I was associated with... But being African it's in my hair it's in how I speak... I think my

brother felt this more than I did because he went straight into high school this huge high school this needing to prove or to become African American because that is cool so it's like how can I start getting rid of my accent or how can I start wearing my hair differently... in America we would listen to the Black stations because we were Black people now... for me it was more like black girls had a big butt and were sexual and that's how you want to be seen by the boys cuz that's what the boys think is really cute or like the little micro braids or long hair it was just little things like that that would increase your currency... (Kelly).

While Kelly describes a certain level of disconnection or protection from the impact of racism in America, she explains that she is aware of media, peers in America and family's role in her socialization about beauty, particularly tied up in becoming American. Her description as an outsider learning what it meant to be a Black woman is particularly troubling. As a teenager, it was made clear right away that Black women were sexualized and objectified things, expected to mimic white notions of beauty.

Kelly reflects on her process and begins to tell her beauty story; her coming to awareness and her transition both in and out of the force of white beauty criteria enforced by both family and media. "When I was little, it was like, oh you're cute. I remember back at home, I didn't care about my hair... When I was in the 3rd grade [shortly after her mother passed] my dad took me to the barber shop and had my hair cut short and it took about two years for that to grow back," Kelly laughs.

As I got older, my aunts started making comments about my hair and my looks and like talking about being pretty. In 5th grade is when I got my perm and I would go see my aunts every now and again and they would do my hair. ...It was just clear that kinky hair is not okay... We say things like, I need a relaxer to make it more manageable... but what are we really doing to ourselves? I think one thing we could all agree on is for sure is long hair is like a currency and not being too dark was a currency. And my family would make certain comments like you just look better that way or

you look prettier in the winter when my skin is much lighter. But I don't get as light as I used to get I look at some of the pictures that I have my knuckles use to be way darker than they are now and using this cream because all of sudden my knuckles were too dark but when you start to absorb like yeah my knuckles are dark I never noticed that and they do look better when they are the same color and you see other people like African Americans and their knuckles not as dark. I remember my brother being in love with curly head mixed girls... and I had darkened by like five pigments and the first thing that he said to me is oh my God you got so dark you are so black right now and I was like awe that hurt. I cut my hair and he was like why did you do that what is wrong with you? (Kelly)

As Kelly elucidates her family dynamics and her socialization toward European beauty aesthetics it becomes clear how ingrained those messages became for Kelly. Her juxtaposition in and out of past and present tense, as she describes her and her family's thoughts about beauty, hint at a current struggle and coming to terms with the question or pursuit of beauty. At least at that point in her life, she strived to meet her family's expectations, and agreed with them about her hair being too short and her skin too dark. The pain she felt when she realized that all her work toward a standard she could never fully achieve was in vain jolted Kelly into a different awareness.

In telling her story, Kelly talks about trying to achieve white beauty standards and then immediately says that she cut her hair off. I stop her, interrupting her story, "Wait, wait... okay first of all, he said 'what is wrong with you?' as in, 'have you lost your mind?' But please back up... what? What did possess you to all of a sudden cut your hair off when you knew what your family thought about what was pretty and what was not? And you thought it too. What changed your mind?" Kelly now seems definitive in her answer. When I reflected back on this point in the interview, it seemed to me that she

must have spent time writing, thinking, wrestling with these things. This was not the first time Kelly thought about beauty. For her, it was no insignificant thing and it was clear that she grew up with beauty, appearance, acceptability as constant topics of conversations.

I cut my hair because I have always just battled with it and I would get it braided just so I wouldn't have to take care of it and I would keep the braids for a long time just so I wouldn't have to deal with it. But after I went short I would still use the creams because I started to believe that yeah I am prettier when I am lighter even if it's just a shade lighter. It was a trade off. Well even when my hair was shorter it wasn't like my hair was short and I was letting it do whatever it wanted. It took me a while... it was funny because I would put a relaxer on it for just a short time so I could have curly hair. You know we say things like its more manageable this way and it's really about wanting to have a certain look... I wanted soft curly hair because I thought that's cute and I don't accept how my hair is. Then I moved to a place where I stopped putting relaxer in it and I just let it grow. I think I was like why am I doing this? I'm ruining my hair. I have to get it maintained still why can't I just let it do its thing and not let it take away from my aesthetic?

Kelly explains that after high school, she went to live with her aunt for her first year of college. It seems that this was the peak of her conflict in terms of heightened awareness of not being enough and at the same time gaining new experiences and learning about her health. "I had to free myself of my aunts' point of view of what's pretty or cute. Absolutely! I think part of the way that I did that was realizing that I had to choose between the expense of taking care of my hair or myself and, two, really understanding what it means to do all these things to my body."

Being able to read things that let me know that I am literally bleaching my skin and a part of it is pain too... A lot of it had to do with education and starting to understand what my own idea of what beauty is and coming to terms with that and realizing that some people might not like me when I have my hair short but

there's a whole bunch of people that will.... When I moved out of my aunt's I was open to a whole new demographic of people and I began to have different experiences. I wasn't staying with my aunts anymore so I didn't have that there for me to worry or think about. I didn't have to think about having to ask my dad. I live in my own apartment and I pay my rent. They were not a consideration anymore. There wasn't this hierarchy that had to go there to get approved. So moving away and moving out gave me a chance to create my own sense of what I thought was beautiful and dealing with all these things that I had to shed (Kelly).

While Kelly seemed to capture a sense of new awareness through her education about the harmful consequences of her beauty practices, her freedom still does not involve a critique of race. She explains that light skin and long hair were prized but at this point in the conversation race is still not directly emphasized or implicated in terms of how she and her family discussed and enacted beauty. "What if I would have made this complete turnaround in my appearance and I wasn't being asked on dates and nobody thought I was pretty? Would it have been a completely different situation?" Reflecting on her childhood and being made fun of about the shape of her head, Kelly explains, "I didn't think I could cut my hair because I didn't want to show the back of my head. But then I just got to a place where I was like that's stupid. Who cares about the back of your head and whoever does is clearly stupid. How am I still carrying that with me?"

To Kelly's surprise, the new crowd of people she was exposed to encouraged her to cut her hair. She makes clear though her reservations and reflection, "What if I had a totally negative reaction... like if everyone's reaction was the same to me cutting my hair or being darker was like my aunt or my brother and there was no flexibility?" I respond to her, "It seems like you still think about the what if's as if that still concerns you. But in the end you did it anyway. Was that courage or..." "It was..." she thinks for a

moment, “and I was frustrated enough to do it. So frustration plus knowledge plus independence plus situating myself in a community where I was accepted... like ooo that’s cool you have your nose pierced...”

Many Black women describe their acts of resistance, frustration and just being fed up with the ‘rat race’ of beauty. However many women, without structures of support go right back to old ways of being and striving for white beauty due to negative responses; especially from family and community. In Kelly’s story, it is clear that the community of support that she was newly surrounded by was crucial in maintaining her resistance and her position. “So like coming home after I stopped putting the relaxer in my hair and my [step] mom being like what are you doing to your hair? Why can’t you have it like you had it before? And she took me to the hair place and she was like you can get it braided...” Kelly screams in frustration, “I was just like really?! I am not five... But I’m still having to deal with that on a really shallow and super basic level. The length that she would go through to keep me in a certain place.” However, while Kelly was resisting white beauty standards and her family’s expectations on one hand, she was also attending a prestigious university, had African friends and began dating and later married a white man. This, she explains, satisfied her family. Having collected this information throughout the interview, I ask Kelly if she thought dating and then marrying a white man soothed her family’s concerns about her appearance and the displeasure over rejecting white beauty standards.

I think coming from a [African] background, if you marry a white person it’s like... people are like, ‘You’ve made it. Good for you... That’s awesome.’ We didn’t even care who these white people were or where they came from all of them were the same to

us it doesn't matter to us if that person was rich or anything... it could be the ugliest white man and the woman could be 10 times more beautiful than he is but just because he is white... So I realized moving here that there was that level... When we [she and her husband] started dating my dad was trying to find out what race he was and I'm like, 'Why does it matter?' I wouldn't give it to him. When we first moved to this country, one of the more stable jobs that my dad had was at the correctional facility and it was all Black. So we lived in this dangerous neighborhood where there were a lot of Black people and my dad would be like, 'You're never going to bring that home! You shouldn't date Black people. They're bad people... they're all people that I see in jail, they are rude, they curse so much. And then my brother would be sagging [his pants] and my father would be like, Why can't you pull up your pants?!' So taking him [her husband] home to meet my dad for my congratulations for getting into [an Ivy League graduate school] which turned into my engagement party... a woman walked up to me and said, 'I'm so proud of you!' And I thought she was talking about school and she goes, 'You found a really good man,' and she was holding a baby and she looks down and says, 'I think when mine grows up I am going to encourage her to go that direction too.' Then another woman saying, 'I have no doubt that you're going to be totally ok in the world...' Oh my gosh, are you serious?! And then being really intentional about what I said, I was like, 'I think no matter how you train your daughter she is going to grow up and be with a person that treats them well regardless of what they look like.' Like I was trying to not encourage that but it's totally like, 'Oh well, you married a white man...' The other day I was thinking in my head what would it have been like if I would have married into an African American family? What would that have been like for our families to come together? I actually don't think it would have been as harmonious as it has been with my husband's missionary family... [African's] love that narrative (Kelly).

Kelly's story makes clear her reevaluation and coming to awareness or resistance in terms of negotiating her own beauty definition as she became older and more independent. But Kelly's narrative is rich and complex as she both resists and plays out her family's expectations. Kelly's critique of her own beauty definition being in contrast to mainstream media representations reveals yet another layer of the depth of her

understanding and the dialectical experience as many Black women shift between different understandings, behaviors, and beliefs.

“I didn’t always feel this way, but I think in terms of black images... there is not enough diversity out there so there are always these extreme versions of what beauty is. And in one extreme it lends itself to wanting to look like a white woman.” Kelly goes on to discuss how Black celebrities like Rhianna and Beyonce have become lighter over time. “It’s like when people get better in their careers they get lighter and their hair gets straighter and longer. Or the girl from *Precious*... when they finally put her on the cover it was like— hair was long... So I think there is a beauty there, but it’s extremely... white. I ask, “So does media blatantly conflict with your own ideas of your own beauty.” Kelly shakes her head and says, “Well... then they start doing this whole African queen exotic extreme thing. But there isn't like this difference. There isn't a variance where they can say I’m more like this person or I’m like this person there isn't that at all. So no... yes... in conflict.”

Both Jada and Kelly’s families were extremely clear and direct about their expectations regarding the two women’s appearance and beauty standards. Other participants described varying levels of ambivalence, avoidance, or general lack of engagement around the issues of beauty, race, and media. “We didn’t really talk about race growing up. My parents didn’t really talk about it.” I’m surprised to hear Yvonne, in her mid 70s say this. As she tells me about growing up and going to school in a predominantly white neighborhood I imagine right away little brown skinned children being chased home from school. I also can’t believe that she spent her teenage and

young adult years in the late 1950s and 1960s but didn't think much of issues of race or beauty. "You grew up there!?" I say, "How was that?"

In our household, we grew up not really concentrating on that because I never heard mother and daddy even use the N word. And I didn't have any trouble fitting in the high school, which was three quarters Caucasian. Some of the kids did have a problem but I wonder sometimes, Jennifer, if it's not in your personality that people have problems. Cuz people could pick up vibes in you as to how friendly you are or that you think you're cute or something to that effect. And it... I don't know. It could have a negative effect on how you're seen by the Caucasian people, I think, because some of us would go over to the kids' houses, the White kids' houses and, you know, socialize (especially if we're working on projects together and stuff). But other kids, they just, you know, didn't seem to get along or some [white] kids... I'm not sure where this experience came from for some black kids but they would grow... just disliking Caucasian people. And you wonder, was it talked about in their household? You know, because parents talk about "those people" and the unfairness and all of that. But that just didn't touch me for some reason. We didn't even talk about race. We just didn't (Yvonne).

It seems part of a common narrative in middle class Black families during that time period that Yvonne's family was dismissive of race issues as it was seen as trouble making. As found in the scholarship of Frazier (1957, 1966) and Blackwell (1975) and others, skin tone played a significant role in shaping social and economic stratification in the black community. Often times, fairer skinned, middle-class or well-to-do Black folks in the 40's and 50's chose not to discuss race as their skin tone privileged them.

As Yvonne and I talk, her story unfolds and she explains that her family was very accepting of interracial couples. "Most of us, we are all... for the most part fair skinned." So you think that not having dark skinned people in your family impacted how you grew up not having issues with race or with white people?" Yvonne sits quietly. Moments go

by and suddenly her eyes grow wide and she perks up excitedly, “I’ll tell you what,” she starts as if she is about to release a part of the story. “This happened years ago... my grandmother, my mom’s mom... well, evidently she thought my brother Bill was too dark. So she made this concoction of lemon and something else and he never forgot that. And I remembered that and I didn’t realize the impact of it because with me not taking a whole lot of things seriously, I didn’t realize the impact... But she would have mother put this on his face to lighten his skin out.” Amazed at how this did not qualify as a ‘racialized’ event for her, I ask, “What did your brother say about that when he would recall it?” She explains, “He didn’t really talk about it. He just said that he remembered... her smearing this concoction on his face.”

Knowing Yvonne as a friend of the family, I also knew her brother Bill who was a severe alcoholic who recently passed away due to cirrhosis of the liver and pancreatic cancer. Yvonne’s story reminds me once more of hooks’ discussion of our inability to deal with severe trauma. The dissonance between recognizing racial incidence and pain seems to be the crux of avoidance and the dismissal of her brother’s unrecognized trauma. I ask, “Do you think that could have given him any kind of complex about his complexion?”

It could have because he and my other brother fought constantly through the growing up years. And I always think that there... You know, ‘cuz Bill was dark and Emanuel... you know is very light... I really think that affected Bill because he would pick on him all the time and mother would leave me home as the babysitter and I would have to separate them all the time because I would think that Bill was a bully because he picked on Emanuel constantly, would have him crying. And I thought Emanuel was a wimp. So I had to protect him. But I’m sure that in families where the kids are... one kid is darker than the other, there’s a problem sometimes. And

sometimes, parents aren't aware of it until kids get up in age. You know, there's always sibling rivalry. The color thing, I guess it can be really a monster in some people's lives. But for me I was never picked on or called the N-word or teased. Maybe goody two-shoes because they would use curse words sometimes (Yvonne).

All of this is emblematic of her brother's demons and her own internal conflict. The avoidance of pain, the fear of discussing race plays itself out in troubling and convoluted ways in Yvonne's life story. While certain aspects of Yvonne's narrative could be met with interpretations of resiliency, going further allows us to examine a potential internal suffering as well.

When I ask Yvonne if growing up, she felt pretty or attractive, she says she really didn't think about that too much either. She does say that she was boy crazy and remembered the first boy she ever liked and kissed. We laugh as she remembers. Then I ask her if her parents ever commented on appearance, like many of the women in Yvonne's generational cohort, she explained that her parents made sure they were well dressed and that her hair was always neat with ribbons in her pigtails.

When we broach the topic of media portrayals of beauty, she explains that she thinks media portrays all kinds of women. "Maybe they should have a separate list for each culture, for each type of race. Maybe they should have Caucasian women, then Black women, then Hispanic women... Maybe they should do it like that. In my opinion, though, women of color are more beautiful than Caucasian women. That's what I think." Surprised by these comments, I ask, Yvonne where that thought process comes from if it wasn't discussed growing up.

I just like color. I think color is pretty. And Caucasian women... Let's see. I'm trying to think. Caucasian women don't have color. I'm not prejudiced. I like all types of races but it's just that to me, Black women that have color are prettier. You know, from the fair skin to the dark, they are more interesting looking to me. Because if [you'll line up] Caucasian women in the back, they all look the same except they might have different color eyes.. In terms of different color hair... Okay if you put them opposite of a Black woman, the Black woman would win out all the time to me (Yvonne).

As that is not a popular concept that is portrayed in media, I ask, "Are you saying that media portrays Black women as more beautiful or beautiful at all? That is not a mainstream argument." Yvonne laughs and says, "Well the world is run by White people. So wouldn't it make sense that they would pick their own to be, you know, beautiful or what have you?" I respond, "Absolutely, but the question, then is, is how do Black women deal with that? So do they internalize that and say, 'Well, then, there's no way I can be beautiful if that's the definition.'"

My interview with Yvonne was one of the more difficult interactions to discuss as I could relate to her standpoint and perspectives the least. When I started the series of questions regarding media images, Black women's self-image, and positive self-identity, Yvonne's demeanor began to change.

Why do they [Black women] have to be beautiful? Why are they concentrating on being beautiful? It's really not all that important, I think. I don't know... doesn't that go back way back to slavery where they... cuz I'm sure there are a lot of white men that think Black women are beautiful... even the masters back there took advantage of Black women and they must've thought they were beautiful if they loved them or had sex with them or had children with them. I mean, let's face it. Black women are sexy, you know. And white men are attracted to Black women but I guess some of them are afraid to let other people know because I just... But secretly, down inside of them... I would be willing to bet on it that

they know and think that there are a lot of Black women who are just as beautiful, if not more so. But because society is like it is, it's a white-run world, they say what people want to hear. That's my opinion on it (Yvonne).

Despite her opinion, history reveals another narrative. While Black women during slavery were often the object of desire of white slave owners, it is important to emphasize that Black women were indeed objects; not human beings. Furthermore, as many (hooks, 1981; DeGruy Leary 2005; Roberts 1998) argue the devaluation and sexual exploitation of Black woman went well beyond slavery and was institutionalized into various oppressive practices and systems.

When I ask Yvonne to theorize about how Black women are impacted by media images and about African American women's confidence, she explains how frustrated and confused she is about what she sees going on with Black women.

You hear all this talk about Black women having to act strong. Why do they have to be strong? You never hear a white woman saying that they have to be strong. Why can't Black women be needy like the white women are? You don't have to be strong. Your Black man can be strong. You don't have to be strong... You've gotta be able to take this, take that in this world. And they've made themselves strong and cold. And they've turned the brothers away because the brothers become intimidated by this strong woman. Why can't you be strong and yet needy, you know what I mean? But you have to know how to work it. You know, you're strong for your man but you don't overwhelm him with it. But I can't see how Black woman say, "Well, I have to be strong. I have to be..." I don't get that. You can be lady-like. You can need. You can let your boyfriend or your husband know that you need them, not that you can do without them because you're strong. The Bible says that the man is the head of the family, not a strong Black woman. I don't get the strength thing. I don't know (Yvonne).

At play within Yvonne's comments are the "Cult of True Womanhood" and the "Cult of Respectability" (Higginbotham 1992; 1993; Carby 1997; Collins 1991; Wollstonecraft 1787; 1792; hooks 1981). In line with Darlene Clark Hine's (1994) discussion of Black Women's Clubs at the turn of the twentieth century, Yvonne's comments illustrate a common set of beliefs many Black women held about the "appropriate" position of Black women. For Yvonne, and many of the participants in her generational cohort, the notion that women should be pedestalled and careful not to emasculate men is a belief strongly rooted in patriarchy. Without asking the deeper question, Yvonne is affronting the "strong Black woman" paradigm but at the same time not problematizing the complexities of it.

Similar to Yvonne's story, other women in her generational cohort also expressed how family rarely discussed beauty, especially not as an external quality. However, Yvonne is clear that for the African American community, the family is the ultimate contributor to an individual's sense of self or identity.

How you were as a child, how your mom and dad treated you, and what they made you feel confident in and how much attention they paid to you, how much love they gave you. That's what builds confidence and self-esteem in kids. And if you have parents that constantly criticized you or found fault with things you did and didn't congratulate you even though it wasn't perfect, then you're gonna grow up a little iffy, a little unsure of yourself, a little unstable. You have to have that strong family background. Nowadays, the family structure has broken down because kids don't have the parents to be able to look up to anymore... and no discipline... They have different structures and it just... It's not working. So that's why we've got a world full of monsters (Yvonne).

As understood in hearing Yvonne's story, as well as many of the other women's narratives, in many African American families, "unlike any other group... family traditions [were created] through oppression, denial of resources, and lack of access to full participation as citizens" (Parmer et al 2004, 233). With the legacy of slavery and oppression, for generations, the African American family has submitted to and played out the stigma of notions of beauty as asserted by the oppressor which has resulted in family patterns and methods of survival such as denial and internalized self and community hatred.

Emily, the only child of divorced parents, who are also only children, explains how growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood and going to a private white all girls school impacted her sense of self. She lived with her mom but maintained a relationship with her father. "I would go see him sometimes for the weekend or just... like we'd go to dinner. He never commented on how I looked or told me that I was pretty or anything." She explains that she often wondered what he thought. However, she makes clear that her mother tried to make her feel better about herself. "I could tell that she felt bad about how I felt about myself. She used to try to cheer me up and say that I looked okay. But there is only so much you can hear and believe. She had to say that kind of stuff as my mother."

Growing up as biracial girl in a Black single parent household, Yeyo tells her story about being raised by her mother, around her aunts, grandmother, and male cousins. For Yeyo, beauty was discussed; however she received conflicting messages and explains that her mother's voice of reason protected her from a negative sense of self early on. "I

was the only girl and I was the favorite because of that. But there were definitely mixed messages that I got from my grandmother that my mother would then try to undo.” In her mid 40s, with a medium length curly afro, light complexion, tall, and athletic build, Yeyo recalls growing up and thinking, “There is something just not right about all this... this hair straightening and the comments my grandmother made... none of it was right...” Growing up, Yeyo’s grandmother would labor over her thick long hair, pressing it straight, all while telling her how nappy it was. ““One thing is for sure,’ my Grandma used to say, ‘You did not get the white people’s hair. But it is not a total waste. At least you have light skin and you’re cute because there is nothing worse than an ugly light skinned girl—that’s just a waste of light skin.’”

Yeyo also theorized about how she came to her various definitions and understandings of beauty. “As far back as I can remember I had a sense of injustice about that whole business around my hair.” We laugh and I ask her where she thinks that came from. Yeyo smiled and pointed proudly at a picture of her mother. “My mother set me straight. She was very political and talked about justice and equality. And I just remember thinking, she is so beautiful... she had a dark brown complexion and beautiful long hair... not as thick and unmanageable as mine... I got that from my aunt.” Yeyo explained how her mother reaffirmed her beauty, “from head to toe and inside out!” As the “favorite,” Yeyo also believed that she didn’t develop a complex about her hair or being different because, in her house and in her neighborhood she felt “Spoiled rotten, looked on as adorable and loved.”

However, Yeyo attended a private upper class all white middle school and high school, far outside of the working class poor neighborhood she lived in. She tells me, “They used to think my mother was the maid coming to pick me up. Can you believe that?! Things were so different then. Those white kids had no idea what to make of me and the few Black ones... they didn’t think I was Black... or at least not Black enough.” This, Yeyo tells me, is when she began to struggle with identity and fitting in. Around the same time her mother became ill and passed away in her senior year of high school. “See... my battle with identity and beauty and media and accepting myself... that was all complicated and convoluted by the pain of losing my mother. I had so many self hate issues; from feeling different and being treated different... and then the abandonment and rejection of my father... I was so devastated... losing my mother.” Yeyo’s pain and sadness as she speaks about her mother and her loss are uninhibited and tangible. “I just thought, nothing worse could happen to me... I went into a downward spiral that really... I didn’t recover from for years. I’m still not fully recovered.”

For Yeyo, she believes that her mother was the buffer between her and the rest of the world, “Anything people would say, anything I saw, she would make it right. Once I lost that... I lost everything.” I ask Yeyo if she thought media had an impact on her growing up and now. She explains that as a teenager it wasn’t until light skinned and biracial women like Vanessa Williams became popular that she felt affirmed or recognized by media or considered “fitting in” to popular notions of beauty. “When Vanessa Williams and Vanity and that whole light skinned crew really hit the scene hard, in the 80s, you could not tell me anything,” Yeyo exclaimed and laughed. “I was all that!

But you know, that isn't to say that I didn't find media images problematic and that I had a positive self-image. There were so many self destructive and horrible things I had going on inside of me... hell, it is probably because of what I look like that I got away with as much as I did..." She then describes how the absence of darker skinned Black women in media was glaringly obvious as she remembered her mother and questioned, "Why don't I see women who looked like her? My mother was beautiful."

If nothing else Yeyo believes that media imagery of Black women was something that she paid close attention to and still does. Even mentioning that her own beauty allowed her certain privileges and the ability to "get away" with certain bad behaviors, Yeyo is aware of both the power and price of beauty. "It has actually gotten worse as I've gotten older, now I'm doing Botox and facial things... gotta keep it youthful... I think it is particularly difficult for women who they let into the beauty club," she laughs and goes on. "Because media... society... whoever... considered me beautiful... because of my light skin and everything, the pressure, as a 'beautiful' woman is to keep that beauty. And I'm obsessed; constantly looking in the mirror and worrying about what I look like."

Elaine, married, early 30s, light skinned, with natural hair is dressed in trendy tight jeans and is wearing a full face of make-up. Having grown up in racially diverse neighborhoods and schools, Elaine describes her parents and experience growing up. "I cannot tell you how many times my family regulated my appearance... as an adult! I mean, as a child, I got the usual, I guess normal, teasing about my big nose or my nappy hair— from my sister or some of the kids on the block. When we'd go swimming, I'd

come home crying... with my hair all fro'd out, looking crazy... begging my mom for a relaxer," she laughs and remembers. "And she gave in pretty quickly. Messages were pretty mixed from my father who didn't want us bringing home white friends, but embraced everything else white: have long straight hair, stay out of the sun and maintain that light complexion... And as an adult... all the time, 'why are you wearing your hair like that? You better not cut your hair again, blah blah.' I even have a cousin who told me that she would not talk to me anymore if I cut my hair. It's really deep!"

Most of the participants expressed how family input shaped their perception of beauty as well as how much they could believe media as a trustworthy or accurate source. Many acknowledged that even with positive family input and socialization around healthy self-image, media's power to define popular standards and definitions of white beauty were inescapable and often times painful. Participant's narratives illustrate the importance of affirmation; the significance of growing up spending time with female family members and peers who looked like them; the impact of hearing positive opinions of fathers or other male peers about their beauty; and the value in having families who created safe spaces to talk about such sensitive and painful topics.

Truth Telling: Avoiding Pain and Maintaining Resistance

Teun Van Dijk argues that "elites have the means to manufacture consent... This does not mean that all opinions of elites are always adopted by the public at large, but only that their opinions are well known, that they have the most effective means of public persuasion and the best resources for marginalizing alternative opinions" (1993, 45). Interview and focus group data suggests that the participants are, for the most part, aware

of a white media agenda. Most participants believe that media images of beauty are harmful or at least meant to be an attack on the self-image and identity of Black women, especially without the proper armor or support of family and community. However, many participants, knowing their voices are stifled, that their realities are known to few, and feeling marginalized, find ways to resist, fight back, and avoid media consumption, messages, and impact.

Yolanda, late 40s, explains her frustration, pain and strategies of resistance. For many participants, the desire to oppose that which oppresses, marginalizes, or colonizes is a lifelong, daily battle. “Between media images of white beauty, Barbie, violence towards Black women for being Black, and my parents... my parents... growing up, their dream for me... the best thing they thought I could grow up to be was white.” Yolanda, heavy set, dark brown hair, and a medium length spiky afro theorizes about the war of her youth to regain her humanity, to be considered beautiful and to gain control of her self-image and self definition.

They didn’t understand the pain I had to navigate in order to even exist in the realm where I was so hated. So what did we do? We totally bucked the system... well some of us... we grew fros, we bathed in the sun, we became as Black as we could be... Blacker than Black. Black was beautiful to spite the hatred... no matter how ugly we were supposed to be, in defiant resistance, we refused to be ugly. We crowned ourselves as queens, raised our heads high... for some of us... it was just an act... but it was an act for survival. For others the performance became reality. There was freedom in the performance. For me, it was a choice... a choice to constantly fight back, say no... not accept whatever they thought we should... lifelong resistance (Yolanda).

Hooks (1992) puts forth the notion of the “oppositional gaze,” encouraging black women not to accept stereotypical representations in media, but rather actively critique them.

Acknowledging media as a negative source of pain but as something that one must resist, many participants go beyond talking about pain and discuss the ways they recognize, avoid, and respond to media representations of Black women and concepts of beauty in media.

“I am a Hip Hop baby. I grew up on the West side and I remember when Hip Hop first emerged. I loved it! But when I went to college I started to see this shift in hip hop and videos and I didn’t like what I saw at all.” Hip Hop as one of the most popular musical genres in the world is also a site for much criticism and debate over its impact on the African American community and Black womanhood (Morgan 1999; Rose 1994; Kitwana 2004). For Sofia, late 30s, Hip Hop was a central location of pain and betrayal. “I either have to numb my senses to watch most things or I just don’t watch it at all. How sad is that?! Even *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Essence*... they don’t portray that regular, real Black woman.”

Sofia, explains that she loves herself in spite of media. However, she also feels that while she is confident about who she is and is content, not completely satisfied or happy, about her self-image and appearance, she explains that “Many Black women have checked out of the competition altogether. In many ways, media and beauty is not for us. Things that are precious and fine, they are set aside for white women. That’s not for us... we don’t get to have that... so we tell ourselves, that’s not what we want or need. But really, most of us are left wondering if we are really even women at all...”

Justice, early 40s, grew up similarly to Jada. Justice, tall and athletic looking, unmarried, dark skinned, hair cut short, dressed plainly with no make-up or accessories,

says she grew up a tomboy, but knew what it meant to be deemed attractive. Attending a multiracial school and living in a diverse neighborhood, Justice came into contact with white images of beauty and being, both from media and her intimate surroundings. With a “Militant father... who did not ever want me to even get my hair relaxed,” Justice explains that while media does not solely shape the way one thinks or feels about herself, she is aware of its power.

Growing up was tough. On one hand I had my grandmother, who could not stand my father cuz he was ‘too dark’ and on the other hand my father who told me all the time how beautiful I was. He’d tease me... you better watch out for them boys... [she laughs and shakes her head] But that’s what fathers are supposed to say... well that’s what I thought for a long time. Meanwhile, my mother who was caught in the middle, trying to make me more appealing to my grandmother and appease my father to some degree by not forcing me to wear dresses and all of that... But my father never wavered from his position and I had a lot of guy friends and boyfriends and I just gained confidence in myself, in my independence, and my resolve to be the only person who could say who I am or what I look like... I don’t allow my children to watch television at all... they don’t complain too much either because that is all they’ve ever known... But it is only one less thing... I mean, there are still plenty of ways they will come to question their Blackness their appearance, feel bad about who they are or aren’t... (Justice).

Justice admits that she and her daughter both read a lot of magazines. While it started with Black magazines, she explains that it graduated to *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle*. “I struggle with that. And I always hear the voice of my father saying, why are you looking at that mess?” Justice tells me that while she thinks it is a bad practice, she uses the magazines to talk to her daughter about her own self-image. “I’m not too concerned with her. This is a girl who doesn’t want to get a relaxer because ‘It changes who a person is.’” She laughs and explains, “I asked my daughter if she was still friends with her little

friend Amanda and she told me, ‘No, she got a relaxer... it changes people, Mama...she got too cute for her friends...’ She is a trip!”

Of participants, only three women described their parents growing up as “militant” or commenting on Black Nationalist notions of Black beauty. Monica, Jada, and Justice all talk about how their fathers’ progressive political perspectives impacted their ideas of beauty and self confidence. Interestingly, it was primarily Black fathers who played the role of change agent in the lives of their Black daughters as they affirmed their self-image. It is important to point out here, how gender allows for this militancy to flourish, even with the reality of the racialized oppression of Black men. Black men, as observers of the gendered discrimination their daughters experience allowed them to intervene in ways perhaps these participants’ mothers could not. In fact, these three participants, with mothers all in the Baby Boomer generational cohort, all made clear that their mothers would not be interested in participating in this study. Still the prominent socializing positions’ of the fathers raises several questions that should be considered. Is their impact a reflection of a lack of female/ mother critique and/or a result of a lack of sociopolitical capital among Black women (especially those of particular generational groups and class)?

Participants not only discussed their ways of resisting media definitions of beauty by decreasing their media consumption, but many also illustrated their ways of adopting and embracing a *counter* aesthetic; an aesthetic that celebrated, natural hair, full figures, and dark skin. Clare (early 70s), Alexandra (mid 50s), Shug (late 30s), and Elaine (early 30s) all share their views of resistance and beauty practices that they understand to be

different from mainstream notions of beauty. For these women and other participants (Onna, Yeyo, Kelly, Jada, Justice, and Sofia), celebrating their natural beauty is “a journey and a battle”; “rewarding and about finding and loving self”; and “is the reclamation of something that had been stolen.”

Elaine wore hair extensions for years. She states plainly and raises her right hand as if she is confessing at an AA meeting, “I was obsessed with Beyonce. I admit it... As her hair got longer and lighter, so did mine...” Elaine, early 30s, talks about her reassessment of Black hair and explains that she was quite surprised at how she was treated with both long, relaxed hair and short natural hair.

People would stop me on the street...mainly Black people, in random places, flag me down to stop me and tell me how pretty my hair was. They’d say, ‘Where do you get your hair done, it’s so healthy and thick...’ I’d laugh and smile and let them in on my little secret... kind of like, you can look like this too. I cannot tell you how shocked I would be when these women would get so upset, and scold me telling me that I could not possibly be wearing a weave... ‘Oh, my gosh, it looks so natural. You really should not tell people that’s not your hair. No one would ever know!’ I almost enjoyed telling them so they could shake their heads and tell me how nice my hair looks and how I shouldn’t say that, like ‘weave’ is a four letter word or something (Elaine).

Years later, Elaine explains that she finally felt free enough and fed up enough to cut off all her hair. “It was something I’d thought about a lot. I just felt like it was a three ring circus and I kept asking myself why... My stylist, who had been doing my weave refused to cut it for a full year. She finally gave in and cut it all while telling me how much I’d regret this... I was just in a better place and I’d had enough; like just fed up with the whole weave thing.” For Elaine, similar to Kelly’s story, it was finding a new group of friends who had natural hair or who expressed an appreciation of ‘natural’

Black women. Cutting her hair, she explains, was the first step in becoming comfortable in her own skin. “It was definitely symbolic of where I was at in my life. I was kind of like ‘F you Beyonce’! I started to see the hypocrisy in all of it. I was just sick and tired of feeling like I had to work and PAY to look like that... like all the light skinned Black women or the white women on television... in order to be noticed, treated well, whatever...”

Beyond the *work* and money put into looking a particular way [read white for Elaine], what made Elaine most disgusted with her desire to achieve white standards of beauty was the feeling that she was being laughed at or made fun of for her attempts to “look white.” “Just during a time where it seems like we are such the object of conversation in the popular discourse... on radio stations, in books, in documentaries, in movies like *Precious*, and *For Colored Girls*... just the picture that is painted of us... we hate ourselves, we can’t get it right... we look ridiculous in their depictions. I felt like white and Black folks were laughing at all us Black women running around trying to look white. I even started looking for the *tumble-weave* all over the city... and I actually found it! Horrible! [a reference to the Chris Rock documentary, *Good Hair*].”

I ask Elaine if she was nervous about any adverse reactions from others about her new hair and aesthetic. “No, I was in a good place. I knew the people’s whose opinion would matter would love it. I knew my boyfriend preferred short hair; he wasn’t a fan of the weave. And I prepared myself for what my father would say. ...The people who loved me might not like it at first, but they would have to get over it.” Elaine seemingly

found a sense of strength and power, sitting in her jeans and a fitted long sleeve shirt.

Quite stylish, her hair twisted in individual two strand twists, she smiles,

But you know, it never fails to amaze me how people still make comments. Especially when they see my license picture- perfect strangers... especially Black women... huh, they really have a lot to say about how pretty my hair used to be and ask why I cut it off; like, it's such a shame. One woman at a bar at the airport saw my license... an older woman... she went off when she saw it. Like, 'You look so nice in this picture— so pretty... you young folks putting all that mess in your head... ridiculous.' I was like, mess? If anything, this is the mess that was in my head [referencing her license that she pulls out to show me]... all that weave (Elaine).

She shakes her head and sits with what seems like anger or disappointment then says,

"This [touching her hair] is my hair... not *mess*! She was a mess. It just makes me so sad to see Black women so enslaved by their hair and even each other's hair... so consumed by the need to contain it, to get it done, to hide what it really looks like."

She looks at her license one last time and puts it away as she continues explaining her theory on Black womanhood and beauty. "And really we are policing each other... keeping each other in check- doing it for each other. I have gotten so many compliments about my natural hair from... guess who... white people. Every day, I swear, I get at least two white women in my face ohhing and ahhing about how beautiful my hair is and at least one white guy staring at me like he just wants to bury his face in my hair." Elaine and I laugh hardily and for a long time. We laugh and then stop and then start laughing again.

I ask Elaine, why she thinks white women seem to love her natural hair and Black women seem so displeased. She shakes her head and throws her hands up, "I have no clue what is wrong with our people. I really do wonder if we hate ourselves. But I

certainly don't think that white women, who compliment me, necessarily love me either. There is so much power held over us in our hair." She tells me another story about a beauty shop experience with her natural hair. "...So I'm sitting under the dryer with my rod set in and I'm watching this girl who has weave down her back get it done. The other women sitting next to me under the dryer are talking to the stylist and the girl... she couldn't have been more than 16 years old." Now playing the roles of the women under the dryer, the girl getting her hair done and the stylist, Elaine animatedly reenacts the scene, giving each woman a different voice and persona: "'Oh, it's so pretty.' 'Yeah, that is really nice. How long is that?' [the girl]: '16 inches long.' [the woman]: 'Wow, well it looks nice, you can't even tell... the texture matches perfectly!'"

Elaine rolls her eyes and sighs with her entire body,

I could not believe the whole situation, it was making my skin crawl and then... then, even worse, I'm looking at this hair getting done and the stylist is flipping between straightening the girls natural hair, which was like shoulder length and real wavy and pretty and this long stringy ratty weave and she says, real ghetto, 'Well you should have seen her hair before. It used to be this long [the length of the 16 inch weave] but she cut it all off trying to revolt or resist or something' and then she and the other women start cackling like witches. And the girl is just sitting there; no expression on her face... I'm thinking, wow, that's sad. That girl cut her hair off only to put weave right back in it. What in the hell?! (Elaine).

For the 16 year old girl in Elaine's story, her stoic expression throughout the conversation about her 'resistance' seems to suggest that cutting her hair was in fact never actually viewed as liberatory; even if that was her initial intention. One could imagine her attempt to reject white standards of beauty by cutting her hair, only to not be supported by the community around her. For long hair, no matter how out of place it really looks, is still

closer to the accepted imitation of whiteness, no matter the cost. Elaine's interpretation of this event as problematic points to her own theorizing and reflection about beauty standards, race, and power.

While there is a sense of generational differences in how the women told their stories and whether beauty was understood as an external or internal quality, there is an overwhelming sense of worry over aging as the loss of beauty and of power. For Yeyo and Mary, getting older and trying to hang on to youth, was a struggle that they were always conscious of. However for Judith, Clare, Onna, and Alexandra, beauty was something they earned with age. As they grew older, they explain that they became more comfortable and accepting of who they are. "When you're my age, you don't really have anyone judging you. And you've earned what you have... no one can tell you to do this or that or wear this or that." Clare, in her early 70's, married, tall, caramel complexion, and a short afro explains, "Women look to me for guidance about what is beautiful. And I tell them, it is what is on the inside that counts most of all."

"Age has freed me in a way... I'm just... better... but better because the other rules, well, they don't apply to me anymore. I see those rules for what they truly are... lies to make us all feel bad... even white women." Alexandra, mid 50s medium brown complexion, unmarried, full figured, and wearing a big curly afro and full face of make-up, tells me that she never really wanted to hold herself up to media standards she knew she could never meet.

It was a losing uphill battle all the time. The pressure... the need for approval... to look like this and act like that and make him happy or them comfortable. To try to be someone who they [media/ white society] already told me I couldn't be... It is a

rigged game. But now... I set my own terms. I make the rules now and it took me a hell of a long time to figure that out. Hell, it took me a very long time... just to realize what was going on, to even talk about it, to even begin to change it.. I used to laugh with my girlfriends and even my daughters—that scene in *The Color Purple* [referencing Celie saying ‘I may be Black, I may be ugly... but I’m here...’] but I get that now. I’m here. I’m better than ever... I guess a person just has to go through a lot to get there... I don’t know (Alexandra).

Many participants, in acknowledgement of harmful media images of beauty and representations of Black women, in pain but also in resistance, struggle daily with media’s power to inaccurately define and silence Black womanhood and humanity. According to Collins (1998) oppositional knowledge, or understandings that are counter to white hegemonic ideas, stay hidden. I would argue that oppositional knowledge stays hidden if in fact ever learned in the first place. From an early age we are taught not to question hegemonic circumstances or whiteness in general. White hegemony becomes a naturalized condition for many Black people. In our differences, we are many times silenced and we are unable to come to voice with ease or vulnerability and without threat of violence or marginalization. In other instances, our voices merely become “...Any relatively powerless outsider group that begins to frame its own self-defined standpoint in hierarchical power relations of race, class, gender” (Collins 1998, x).

African American women have come far to see themselves as subject and not object; yet are still left desiring others to understand and see them in kind. The one dimensional stories or archetypes that many academic literatures have reproduced— the strong militant, confident woman with a self-image unblemished by media’s hegemonic representations and perfectly happy and content with her own appearance; or the Black

female puppet, unwittingly consenting to all that she sees, engulfed in self hatred, busily striving after white standards—have robbed African American women of their humanness, and power to have the depth of their true voices heard. Even here, on the flat pages of this dissertation, the fullness and multidimensionality of Black, female lives cannot be thoroughly unpacked or addressed. As Smith (2005) reminds us, decolonization, the correcting of narratives, nor the (re)humanization of an oppressed people cannot be limited to merely deconstructing the dominant stories. (See Appendix A which offers another glimpse into the richness of data collected, shared narratives, and the variety of participants' life stories.)

Unfolding My Research Dilemmas: The Baby Boomers— Mary's Story, A Vignette

I asked Mary if she would let me interview her: "I'm doing interviews with African American women about images of beauty and media. Would you be interested?"

Mary, with a stern face, looking me square in the eyes, indignantly said, "No." I laughed nervously and said, "Okay, that's fine. But please do this for me: just tell me why. Give me your honest answer. Why aren't you interested?" Mary paused for a few seconds, pursed her lips and then said, "It's not an important topic. It's not interesting to me. I'm busy. I don't have time for that."

"I can definitely respect that," I said lightly. "I just asked you why because I am having such a difficult time engaging women in your age group— age 45-65. They just are not willing to participate."

She went on to further express her disinterest and how unimportant that type of work is in her opinion. "I'm taking care of my two elderly disabled parents," Mary

explained, “...my grandchildren...” rolling her eyes and shaking her head to indicate her exhaustion. She went on, “...Trying to help my daughter in her career, taking care of my disabled husband, and looking for a job. I don’t have time for this!”

I threw my hands up in a defensive posture and said, “Wait, please... let me explain this a little more thoroughly. I gave you the real brief bullet point version of what I’m doing. I should say more.” She waived her hand as if to say, ‘go ahead.’ I went on to give her more in depth reasons as to why I am performing the study. “I’m trying to understand the impact that media has had on us as Black women; what it has done to us. But also what might be of interest or importance to you... I’m trying to figure out why your grandchildren hate themselves because of media’s impact; I’m trying to understand what that’s all about.” Several moments of silence went by while we looked at each other and stood face to face. I knew that saying that about her grandchildren would provoke her to either put me out or say more. Mary’s mouth hung partially open as if she was letting her words linger in her mouth and then boil over. I wondered, is she in shock or deep in thought?

Finally, Mary blurted out, “Fine, yes,” as if confessing. “Media has messed me up! I’m wearing the wig on my head, I’ve got weight and body issues, and I’m dealing with the husband who wants me to look like all these...” as if considering what word to use or not use, “women on the television.” “So, no... I don’t have time to deal with that pain in addition to everything else I’m doing. And I’m doing all the stuff that I’m doing because I’m picking up the slack for what *your* generation didn’t do but was supposed to

do. I go to bed at 2am and wake up and do it all over again at 7am. I don't have it in me to discuss that."

We stood again for several moments in silence. I sheepishly and a bit bewildered simply replied, "Thank you for that honesty. I completely respect that. That sheds some light on things for me. I won't take up any more of your time."

Where I know this one interaction is not a reflection of the totality of all Black women in the U.S. in this age demographic, it does allow me to ask a number of questions around individual and collective traumatic experiences that Black women in this age group may associate with issues of beauty as reflected in the media. One thing is clear, in this particular story, there is a possible onset of low self-esteem that could allow one to think that they are not beautiful because they don't have the time or the capacity to engage in all of the physical altering necessary to be deemed or considered beautiful/normal. Coupled with the responsibilities noted in our conversation, self-image can be viewed as burdensome or not in the scope of the things that need or can get done. Most striking and telling, from Mary's story is the pain and frustration associated with ideas of media, beauty, and self-image.

Even with this interaction, I remember the story Mary jokingly told me later about how her 84 year old mother often reminds her to "Make sure you put on your lipstick before you go out the house now..." As simple as this statement may seem, it is reflective of the realities Black women must confront on a daily basis. In some instances, concern with their self-image begs the question of whether or not they are enough,

normal, or beautiful. The very responsibilities within their motherhood, wifehood, and daughterhood may render the pursuit of beauty outside the realm of their reach.

Of the generational cohorts, Baby Boomers were most perplexing to me in terms of their accessibility, interest in the research, and perceptions about media and beauty. Of women who were initially interested in the study, those that backed out, cancelled, changed their minds or seemed resistant to participating were primarily women in the 45-65 years old age group. As this study progressed I completed most of my interviews with women in the other three generational cohorts but had only interviewed one Baby Boomer, Yeyo. I even asked Yeyo at the end of her interview if she could think of any reason as to why women in her age group might be disinterested in the study. I also asked her if any of her friends who were also Baby Boomers would be interested. "I'm not exactly sure," she says. Yeyo initially explains that most women, not just women in her age group, would have issues with talking about and being honest about their true feelings pertaining to media, beauty and self-image. "This is just stuff... that is placed down deep... that's hard to talk about. I don't know... we all know it is there, but if you just don't talk about it, or make it really real, maybe it won't hurt as bad. At least that is how many of us were raised just be quiet and be tough. Never let them see you sweat..."

For four of the seven Baby Boomers that I interviewed (Farah, Jaclyn, Mary and Barbra), Yeyo's words seem very applicable. Farah, Jaclyn, Mary and Barbra found little to no fault with media representations of Black women. These four women only participated in the interview and were all initially somewhat disinterested. Both Farah and Mary specifically expressed disinterest in the focus group and journal exercise.

When I asked them if there was any particular reason why they weren't interested they both explained that they didn't see the value in further discussion of these topics and that they were too busy. Five of the participants in the Baby Boomer cohort (Yeyo, Farah, Jaclyn, Mary and Barbra) seemed to subscribe to white beauty standards in practice and values.

Justice, Alexandra, and Yeyo however acknowledged media as a source of pain pertaining to white beauty standards and representations of Black women. Farah, Jaclyn, Mary and Barbra, for the most part during our interviews explained that they felt good about themselves, had high self confidence (which was also described and talked about as strength), and felt that media had hardly any impact on their identity or self-image. However none of the women claimed to have completely positive self- images as everyone articulated something that they would change if they had a magic wand (e.g. hair texture, weight, skin tone/ dark spots and under eye circles, wrinkles and signs of aging). Overall, all of the Baby Boomers conveyed a sense of pride in the achievements made in their lives, making it through 'tough times' of their youth, and most interestingly, all described their number one issue around beauty as an external concept as it pertained to aging.

Down the Rabbit Hole: In the midst of pain, how Black women talk about media, beauty, and family

The toddlers are thrown from the window during a fight between a battered wife and an alcoholic husband suffering from PTSD who is recently back from the war. "It's almost over... it's just a movie," a woman behind me pleads to her hysterical friend who

is wailing and rocking back and forth in the theater. The first time I saw Tyler Perry's interpretation of *For Colored Girls*, the theater was full of African American women who seemed to be late 20's and older. I could tell that many of these women read and were fans of Ntozake Shange's (1975) original work as they mouthed and recited lines and anticipating funny or sad moments during the film. At other times the women sat silent, captivated, shedding tears, and then clapping and cheering at the end of the film. That was the first time I went to see the film.

Several weeks later, after the film had been out in the theater for a while, I returned to the same theater to see the film again with my husband. The audience this time is very different. There are young teenage girls, men, and people of diverse racial and ethnic groups. I interpret this crowd as the curious ones; people who are probably not familiar with the work, perhaps Tyler Perry fans, and people who just want to see what the fuss is all about. From the entrance into the theater and observing people around me, I think this is a very different experience. Men and women talk behind us and in front of us throughout the movie, joking and laughing during serious scenes. Afterwards, I tell my husband how taken aback I am by the audiences' response to the film; how disengaged people seemed to be, how they talked and laughed as if not paying attention. I can't figure out how such serious, sensitive, and painful material could be shrugged off and laughed about. And I'm slightly offended and frustrated by the audience making jokes and snickering after the rape of Anika Noni Rose's character *Yasmine* or *Yellow*, and other sensitive scenes. And then it hit me.

Many black folks refuse to look at our present condition because they do not want to see images that might compel them to

militance. But militance is the alternative to madness. And many of us are entering the realm of the insane... black folks turn away from reality because the pain of awareness is so great. Yet it is only becoming more fully aware that we begin to see clearly (hooks 1992, 6).

hooks alerts me that instead of interpreting the laughter as dismissive or ignorant, I should understand it as complex. Another interpretation would view the laughter as a coping mechanism to deal with the pain that we are often faced with in Black life and with media images that mirror, distort or intensify that pain. As hooks explains, when those faced with the reality of madness and pain, that laughter could also be interpreted as how one deals with “entering the realm of the insane.”

And then I thought about my interview with 19 year old Sha’Ron, who laughed about how her mother calls her a “bitch with an attitude” and that she didn’t care about what people said, because she knows she’s cute. “Girls don’t mess with me, cuz they know I am not the one to use words. That’s why I had to switch schools... People think I’m quiet, but they know not to talk about me. And the boys will do what I say too.” She smiles and waits for me to respond. I ask her about her previous school and why she left. “Did people ever make comments about you being pretty or attractive? Compliments or anything like that? From school or at home?” I sit quietly giving her space to respond. Sha’Ron seems every bit of a 19 year old girl, with a sweet and quiet demeanor; her tough words don’t seem to match her girlish ways. “No... [long pause as she thinks about what to say next]. But I know I’m cute. I mean, I don’t do my hair or put make-up on or nothing... that’s just cuz I don’t feel like it... but I still look better than Beyonce

and Rihanna. I don't really care," laughing and smirking "what they say... TV, friends, family, whatever."

Sha'Ron grew up and lives in a predominantly African American community, has a large extended family (made up primarily of women), and does not have a relationship with her father. Dressed in a trendy and casual jogging suit, her hair up in a high bun, no jewelry make-up or accessories, Sha'Ron sits with her elbows on the table; holding her chocolate brown round face in her hands. Having switched schools from a predominantly African American school to a majority white but more diverse school, I ask Sha'Ron what things were like at her new school and if people ever made negative or hurtful comments to or about her. "I just used to, like... I mean, they [white female classmates] used to just always brush their hair and be like, 'You need to do like this to your hair!' No, don't tell me what I need to do with my hair. No need to tell me what to do with my hair... Not really... Like, if they did say stuff to me, I didn't hear them say nothing."

It is important for me to try not to respond to her comments in a challenging or dismissive way as I notice her responses and posture seem defensive. At other points Sha'Ron seems both defensive and confused or resistant in answering my questions. I realize for the first time that my interview protocol and approach might not be appropriate for Sha'Ron as she pauses for long periods of time, as if either wondering what I want to hear or confused and waiting for me to restate the question. In many instances, I restate the question only to get short one and two word responses. In that moment I doubt the sophistication of my interview skills and wish that I could find a way to enter what would seem like a more authentic conversation with Sha'Ron.

Instead of adapting on the spot, disappointed with my own ability to really talk to her and relate to her without being perceived as someone else she has to be tough around, I ask her about the type of media she likes. “Movies, shows, magazines, videos?” Sha’Ron, sweet and shyly now answers, “Uhhh... All kinds. I look through magazines and stuff, like Cosmo and the hair ones. My Aunt has those a lot. And then, umm, I don’t watch that much T.V. but like, MTV and BET all those shows. And I like *Gossip Girls* and some Disney shows too... like *That’s so Raven*, *Phineas and Ferb* and *Hannah Montana Forever*” she smiled.

Extremely perplexed by her shift in demeanor and by her answers, I ask “In all of that or any of that, do you see images that are representative of how you see yourself? Do you umm... identify with the characters or... the images you see? Sha’Ron looks confused and isn’t answering, so I ask more clarifying questions, “When you watch those shows or look at those magazines do you think Black women are represented in positive ways or negative ways? And do the images you see make you feel good or bad? “Oh, um, yeah...” she pauses and thinks some more, “I think they are positive. I mean obviously the girls on television are all gussied up and look good. But that’s because they are on television or models or in magazines or whatever. If I was on T.V., I’d look that way too.” Sha’Ron giggles again and then becomes fidgety and quiet.

Emily, early 20s grew up as an only child of divorced parents. In our conversation, soft spoken and shy, Emily candidly tells me about what it was like growing up amongst mainly white peers. Never having had a boyfriend, Emily explained how media confirmed her white suburban reality where beauty meant being “white,

skinny and blonde.” “Since I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and mostly around white girls, I feel like I kinda realize that I look different than they do. And I feel like you know like I have hips and I have all these curves, and all this stuff and there’s no way I’m gonna get rid of that.” Emily laughs loudly and fidgets in her chair. The coffee shop is loud and I am surprised at how she begins to speak up to compete with the volume in the room. I also regret meeting in this environment as it is definitely not intimate enough a space for such a conversation. But I appreciate Emily’s willingness to tell her story even in her discomfort she is honest and forthright. “ So, I already...I already feel like the distances there... the distance I have to go to be like them... so when I see celebrity figures, I just kinda do the same thing like you know... just tell myself I’m not gonna look like that.”

At first Emily’s comments seem to tell a story of understanding and acceptance, but then she goes on to explain how her reality impacted her identity and self-image. Her pain and ongoing struggle to accept herself, to believe in her own beauty, power, and self-worth is both subtle and intensely painful to hear. But her story, perhaps like many young African American women is important to tell:

Media is such a big part of our, our society so we strive and reach after it. We’re always seeing images of people and watching TV and all that kind of stuff. So it feels like that’s what we’re supposed to look like... like we’re bombarded with these images all of the time so, I feel like that’s what people strive to look like that and it just becomes what you’re supposed to look like. And I think, it tears down people’s self-esteem a lot... especially for Black girls, especially if you’re a Black girl and you’re not growing up around a lot of Black girls, too. And, seeing yourself, uhm, in the media also you know, if you’re not seeing yourself as pretty in the media, it’s hard to... I don’t know you’re just gonna feel kinda different, you know. And your self-esteem will be...will

be low. Well, being able to accept myself... that didn't really... that is really, that is a recent thing. Uhm, I always grow up feeling very, you know, like I look very different and I thought...I felt very, uhm, I felt like very ugly and unattractive and everything because I wasn't skinny and, I didn't have long hair and I have huge cheeks [nervous laughter] big lips and all that kind of stuff... Uhm, and you know, I just didn't really see anyone I could relate to that... was looking the same way I did, you know. So, I felt very different...so I did have low self-esteem for a long time...uhm, so, yeah... [long laughter]. But recently, well, actually... I was pretty depressed for a while. And, so when I was away at school, I started seeing a therapist. I guess just through therapy, things started to get better... Then, I move back here after school. And, I guess, I just...I just started focusing more inward like on my personality and who I am as a person, and not just what I look like, and you know, trying to focus on that. I would just say that, you know, if I can be a good person than people will like me for that. Not because I look really pretty or something. Uhm, so, I would say, just changing my mentality for being real superficial and vain and just looking inward more... and that's still a process... a hard one [laughter] (Emily).

Emily's acceptance of her only recourse to look within for beauty speaks to her submission to the idea that she will never be deemed externally beautiful or meet media criteria set forth. She is resolved to the fact that she will never feel beautiful either. Emily and Sha'Ron are no puppets with strings tied to media's stereotypes and negative images. There is consciousness even if it is only consciousness enough, in Sha'Ron's case, to know that she must not appear to be weak in the face of media images meant to harm her. "Widespread efforts to continue devaluation of Black womanhood make it extremely difficult and oftentimes impossible for the Black female to develop a positive self-concept. For we are daily bombarded by negative images. Indeed, one strong oppressive force has been this negative stereotype and our acceptance of it as a viable role model upon which we can pattern our lives" (hooks 1981, 86).

Another source of pain that some participants mentioned involved Black men and interracial dating. Sofia, a hip hop fan says that the shift from Hip Hop to the new rap culture impacted the way Black men regarded Black women.

I watched it play out on my college campus. That translated to actual Black men I knew and suddenly it was okay to refer to Black women as bitches and ho's. Suddenly on my entire campus, the Black men wouldn't touch a sister with a ten foot pole and all they could see as precious and good were white women. I watched them hold them on pedestals... it was disturbing at best. I remember... for a long time I was hurt by that and that really changed the way I interacted with Black men... Nowadays, it's the thing to do... every Black professional or athlete has a white woman on his arm and they aren't ashamed either... (Sofia).

Monica, late 30s also describes how her own self-image is tied up in how she sees African American women treated and regarded by Black men. Monica is heavy set, married, has light skinned, is tall, and has long straight hair. "It's kind of like the Chris Rock joke, 'they're not talking about me... they're not talking about me' ...ah boo, yes they are. They are talking about all of us." For Monica, to hear rappers and the hip hop community make derogatory statements or present degrading depictions about Black women was the most painful part of media. "Like... those are my brothers and they are talking about me like that... Then insult to injury, they all have white girls on their arms... it's like white women are like purses, everyone's got one."

In their tremendous study on "the double lives of Black women," Journalist and Psychologist, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) offer accounts of how Black women *shift* in and out of their true identity. While Jones and Shorter-Gooden take a clinical psychological approach to how Black women's self-esteem is impacted by internalized self hate and assimilation to white beauty standards, their explanation of how media

works to impact African American women is on point. “The media, chronicler and mirror of American life, is also the creator of images. If billboards and television shows connect thinness with beauty and wealth, the association takes hold in the national psyche. If movies tend to depict less desirable women as darker-skinned or fuller-figured, those are the images that the public internalizes and believes” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003, 198).

However, data in this study reveals that media does not render Black women powerless in their pain to resist, struggle, or see themselves as powerful. Many of the participants of this study, while acknowledging their own pain and the need for spaces of healing and empowerment, are creative and persistent in finding ways to critically counter media messages and keep their oppositional gaze and knowledge at the core of their sense of self. On the other hand, in line with the richness and diversity of the lives of Black women, other participants’ stories (like Rashonda, Mary, Emily, Sha’Ron, Anne, Yeyo, Kelly, Elaine) reveal how “...centuries of discrimination and the perpetuation of distortion and stereotypes have led many African Americans to internalize these negative messages, to reject their physical selves, to not recognize their own beauty and to be as critical of each other as the mainstream” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003, 191) at least at some point in their lives.

The findings in this study offer an analysis that acknowledges Black women’s pain in the face of media images and representation; the internalized and subconscious forces at work for some as well as the consciousness of those forces for others; Black women’s attempts to resist media images that are counter to their own beliefs and sense

of self; and the power of family, peers and community to counter media's impact by creating and cultivating knowledge of self that is counter hegemonic and more accurate to the actual individual lives and experiences of Black women. Again, this work is not the definitive account of the monolith of media's impact on Black womanhood.

However, if this data is reflective of what is happening within communities of Black women, then we need to revisit the necessity of healing and the idea of making depictions of Black women more multifaceted in a market driven, hyper-materialistic society. Most crucial to the aims of this study is to reveal how single stories, hegemonic messages, mainstream imagery, and unjust power relations, work to isolate, marginalize, and limit oppressed groups' views of truth and voices to be heard.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS PART TWO

Certainly we need to heal from our historical injuries and we need to do more. We need to become healthy. Healing will take us only part of the way. Working towards health and well-being will take us to our goal... If we are to heal and become healthy we will do so by building upon our strengths. We will need to draw upon our inner fortitude, resilience and endurance. We will need to tap into our industriousness and creativity. We will need to avail ourselves of our innate sense of justice as well as our proclivity for acceptance. Most of all we have to apply our spirituality and ability to love to the task before us (Joy DeGruy Leary 2005).

Introduction

A major aim of this study is to offer spaces for women to access and explore methods of healing while critically challenging negative media representations, and creating counter spaces and counter stories. I collaborated with participants in this study, to create opportunities and safe spaces where women could offer testimony and affirmation, share in pain and resistance, and reimagine their future selves as they work towards a notion of self recovery and healing. Together, with few other academic scholars, I argue that the work of healing through political resistance of dominant culture and creating a discourse of counter- hegemonic knowledge that is accessible to all women of color is the type of work that feminist scholars of sociology, women's studies and black studies should engage.

Rooted within healing is the significance of community and spirituality. As discussed in chapter three, African traditions predating slavery reveal that “Black women have relied on spirituality to sustain us, to renew our hope, to strengthen our faith” (hooks 2005, 141). A concept that is foreign to the scholarly realm is that of healing as it pertains to spirituality and political self recovery beyond that of a religious practice. “If we cannot define spirituality, how can we, then, write about a spirituality, that is distinctive to African American women... how can we suddenly ascribe to it such material qualities as race and gender?” (Gayles 1995, 6)

It is true that there is great difficulty in intellectually describing the component of spirituality beyond that of folklore or ancestral tradition towards the act of healing. However, many African Americans understand that an “indispensible source of Black people’s historical confidence and spiritual persistence despite all oppression...” lies in our connection to community, ritual, spirituality and paths toward healing regardless of intellectual ability to name or define (Cannon in Gayles 1995, 19). Thus healing through spiritual paths and understandings, political self recovery, and resistance are all parts of the narratives of participants in this study.

For scholars such as Marc Lamont Hill, Marimba Ani, bell hooks, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and Joy DeGruy Leary, healing is an act of resistance to hegemonic oppression, the production of counter knowledge, the celebration of the spirit, and the formation of community through affirmation and sharing. In Hill’s notion of *wounded healing*, people bearing the scars of suffering, share their stories in ways that provide a form of release and relief for themselves and others. This goes beyond “the

therapeutic dimensions of personal and collective storytelling, but also a critical engagement with majoritarian narratives that exposes and produces new possibilities” (Hill 2009, 65).

As described in chapter three, participants in this study partook in a series of focus groups that were referred to as healing circles. In the tradition of the Ring Shout as discussed in chapter three, each group brought women together to share experiences, hear each other’s stories, and together produce and (re)imagine narratives of Black life and Black beauty counter to current hegemonic messages. While each different healing circle, consisting of primarily the same core group of women, was themed differently, the goal of all three groups was to discuss and experience media, beauty, identity, and healing together. Different from the interviews, these healing circles were spaces for women to grapple with the question, “what next?”; discuss needs and desires in reaction to media; and hear from others, all for the purposes of building a sense of community and affirmation.

Several pertinent themes emerged throughout each group: the need for safe spaces to share stories, feelings, and pain; the desire to hear the stories and receive affirmation from other women, especially from older generational groups; the current state and future of Black women in media; and the power of the company that Black women keep. Many brought about issues regarding the Black family and how it once was a sacred space where families sat around kitchen tables, connected and bonded, and where children were taught to love themselves. This sacred space, participants agree was invaded by media. For many, the ability to find safe spaces at work, in school, or at home to cultivate,

discuss, and play out counter stories of being were made narrow or nonexistent.

Participants consumed current media imagery and discussed media maneuvers to make certain narratives invisible, incomprehensible or indescribable.

From Kitchen Counters and Living Rooms to Counter Stories: Creating healing circles, the invitation to write, and reimagining our future selves

Healing Circle Part One: As I sit with the women in my first focus group, wrestling with our encounter with *For Colored Girls*, I ask, “What does current media look like in terms of how our stories are told?” While participants make clear their general distrust around mainstream media’s portrayal of Black life, some understand that it functions in such a way that allows for its messages to become internalized. However, there is both a tendency to reject it completely and/or to give it some credibility. “I’m not having any part of *For Colored Girls* or that Tyler Perry,” Jada explains. “I know he is speaking, supposedly from his own experience, but I feel like he, being a Black man, goes out of his way to perpetuate negative stereotypes of broke down or ridiculously behaving sistahs... I don’t know those people.” Commenting on the scope and impact of Tyler Perry’s work, Abra Johnson of Honey Pot Performances in their performance *The Ladies Ring Shout* (2011) says that Black people, consuming media, become “The tricksters that laugh while laughing at...the outsiders within who both have no idea why this is so funny and have a sneaking suspicion that we are being laughed at; us by us and all of us by everyone else.”

Media, in its power to manufacture consent, portrays itself as telling our stories when indeed we must question if those *stories* are really true at all. Many times we

accept the blatant untrue images and representations as at least glimpses of reality into an imagined Black life. It may not be mine, my story, my reality, but it must explain why things are what they are for everyone else. “I don’t know...” says Barbra, in her late 50s, fair skin, short salt and pepper hair. “I liked it. Yes there were some exaggerated scenes, but all in all I think it showed a spectrum of the experiences of Black women.” Elaine responds, “Yeah, but at what cost though do we get to see a ‘spectrum’ and what is the spectrum? The spectrum of Black life where all the men suck and are trifling and all the women are victims?” The sameness of a message can create a one dimensional pathology that ‘reveals’ and ‘proves’ true the dysfunction of Black men, women, and family. It problematizes Blackness in such a way as it teaches us the lesson that the more one can transcend race and separate from Blackness, the more valuable one can become.

“Tyler Perry would not be successful if he didn’t make white people comfortable to laugh with/ at us. Oprah is the same way, ‘AMERICA, please like me... I’m just like YOOOOOUUUUU!’” We laugh hysterically at Monica’s mockery of Oprah. But her point is salient, the women agree, that African Americans in Hollywood buy into and help perpetuate exaggerated, raceless, watered-down or stereotyped versions of themselves in order to be accepted by white society. Beyond the story of acceptance and approval for moving beyond our ‘racial’ circumstances and embracing “mainstream” (read white) cultural standards lives what Patricia Hill Collins (1991; 1998) calls the stance or standpoint of the outsider within and oppositional knowledge. For Collins, Black women are dually marginalized as women and as Black. However, African

American women move among a variety of communities and are able to gain access to the knowledge of the communities which they shift in and out of. In this position, this *Black feminist standpoint*, Black women are unable to either authoritatively claim that knowledge or fully possess power. However from this collective viewpoint, Black women "can produce distinctive oppositional knowledges that embrace multiplicity yet remain cognizant of power"(1998, 8).

"Is it important to be critical of media representations? And what does being critical even mean especially in context to your own power?" The women sip wine and ponder this question. We must question how ideas, knowledge, and imagery are intrinsically connected to power. "Of course it is important," Elaine speaks up and the others agree. "Being critical is looking at things we are watching and consuming..." says Diamond, and Elaine interrupts, "All the time, bombarded with images, that sometimes we aren't even conscious of." Mya (mid 20s) and Minnie (early 20s) agree and start their own side conversation. They are recapping Janet Jackson's roles in both *For Colored Girls* and in *Why Did I Get Married 1* and *2*. Their commentary brings to life the points both Elaine and Diamond simultaneously make. For the ten women in this group, ranging from early 20s to late 50s, being critical means first paying attention to what is being consumed; that is, being responsible for or aware of what one is watching or looking at. Being critical of media representations also means asking deeper questions of what is being consumed; and asking if images and representations are reflecting negative, accurate, or problematic depictions. Mya explains,

I appreciated Janet's [Jackson] role in *For Colored Girls*. It was complex on so many levels... her strength and meanness or

bitchiness... while by itself is a stereotype, when added to a more full picture of everything else she was going through, how truthful was that? I like how she was powerful yet weak, a villain and a victim. Like many people, she wanted to be loved so badly that she missed a lot of what was really going on right under her own nose in a marriage with a gay man who gave her AIDS. It's like, yeah right, how could she be so successful in her own career and so sharp but then miss such obvious signs... but that is real... like that does happen and to some degree, some part of that story has to be true at least to some degree in each of our own lives or the lives of women we know. Everyone has a friend who has been cheated on, or who got an STD, or who has come off as a bitch or 'the angry Black woman' at work to get what she want and deserves. So many times that is how it goes. (Mya).

"But usually the story ends there or it is so dramatized or so isolated as this one story.

But in *For Colored Girls*, it was more than that," Minnie says as she agrees with Mya.

"But her role in *Why Did I Get Married*... just one big hot mess! Each and every character should have had a stamp on their heads... the name of the stereotype they were fulfilling... why is it that it feels like that should have been a musical too? They all should have been shuckin' and jiving, singing dramatic songs and dancing." Elaine dances a jig in her seat and the women laugh again for a long time.

While consuming media images of white standards of beauty, and false or less than accurate representations of African American womanhood, participants came to terms with their own standpoint around identity, self- image, media and beauty. I ask, "Back to the question of power... what does being critical do, if anything?" Barbra, having been somewhat quiet in comparison to the more boisterous personalities around the table says, "Well, why do we have to be so critical. I enjoyed the film." Yeyo, Elaine, Mya, Minnie, and Diamond assure her that they did too. Barbra, soft spoken, goes on,

I just related to the characters and the different experiences. I mean, life isn't all pain... no, and the men in your life aren't all going to be bad... but I feel like there wasn't a story in there that I felt was far off from my own personal experiences or the experiences of my friends and family members. Does it make it less real that my cousin was raped by a stranger after a party than by a guy she thought she knew? I guess if we are too critical, do we miss the pieces that are right on or do we push away the things that do resonate as not accurate enough? It's a movie... or a play... it's an artistic portrayal of life... it will never be completely spot on. The whole story can't possibly be told... it would take a lifetime (Barbra).

"But why isn't the whole story told," Diamond asks frustrated with the movie. "I understand what you are saying, yes pieces of it were true... but there is more to Black womanness than just pain... and this was a story about being a Black woman for me. I just think they can only take bits and pieces of who we are." Jada, agrees, "that is all they *want* to take... very specific, negative, pieces... the ones that keep us looking stupid and weak..." The uneasiness of media's treatment of Black life and the women's awareness of it is thick and palpable amongst this group.

"I remember sitting at one of the first showings of Ntizake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* in the 1970s and being amazed at the level of release— people were crying hysterically and unleashing so much of their stored anguish. I became really concerned about the context of this release" (hooks 2005, xi). I found bell hooks' statement in an interview that appeared in a new addition of *Sisters of the Yam*; a book about Black women's self recovery and healing. Hooks comments, written years before Tyler Perry would make Shange's choreopoem into a movie and read several months after I saw *For Colored Girls* for the second time, it

gave me chills to know that almost 40 years later, I had the same experience that Dr. hooks, and probably thousands of others, have had. “What has changed,” I asked myself?

Later when I reflected on this first focus group/ healing circle, I thought about Barbra in the 1970s, in her 20s, like Kelly, Mya, and Minnie now. I wondered how different her life was then and how real *For Colored Girls* would be for her 20 year old self. Would she have the same clear encompassing view of one’s reality or would she be just as perturbed or on the fence about the realness or lack of the whole story as Diamond was? This is the crux of where many people reside in terms of media’s power. As some are upset with media’s stereotypes and innuendos, others are consigned to the fact that no one ever gets the story right. For women like Yeyo and Barbra, the real story happens in the lived familial and community experience, reflected in their earlier exchange. However, to Diamond’s point, along with countless Black feminists, what is media’s responsibility to get as much of the story *right* as possible and to what advantage is there for hegemonic society to see that the story is inaccurate, false, derogatory, and defaming? Herein lies the tension between how Black women see themselves in relationship to media, self-image and healing.

“But...” Kelly offers after moments of silence, head shaking, and sighs of sadness and acceptance, “I think there is balance in this work. There was an element of multidimensional richness. Wasn’t there? Different stories, fully developed and deep characters...” The women agree that the movie is definitely better, in its portrayal of complex characters, than any prior work put forth by Perry. As we sit and discuss specific scenes in the movie, talk about our tendencies to both buy into and reject white

beauty standards and media stereotypes of Black women, we also talk about the hope for a not too distant future media; one in which all women's stories are told with richness, full of real humanity, and truth. "Well, I'm both nervous and excited about the possibilities of Black people, like Oprah and Tyler Perry owning their own studios," Jada exclaims. "What will that look like? I just hope that will give them the freedom to break from the status quo and start speaking to an African American audience that is sick of the chitlin circuit b.s.!" Diamond chimes in, "And I hope that our stories... women's stories won't be told by men in drag... that we'll be able to one day hold the power of telling our own stories, as fully as they can possibly be told in media..."

Almost three hours have gone by and the women become conscious of the time. It is clear that they have enjoyed each other's company and the topics of discussion as they linger and talk some more, all while checking missed calls and text messages. Each woman in this circle hugs the other goodbye as I remind them to be on the lookout for an invitation to the next group. I know that this was a fruitful conversation for both the participants and the research. I feel like this discussion engendered feelings of affirmation, community, hope, cathartic release and healing.

Healing Circle Part Two: It is a cold and snowy day, I am especially hopeful to see Yvonne who told me that she would come. As the women arrive, and the performers from Honey Pot Performances set up, I greet Yvonne and a friend that she brought with her, Paula. "You know, I really did enjoy our conversation the other day," Yvonne says, referring to our interview. While I didn't enjoy the conversation as much because some of her comments disturbed and confused me, I knew her story was as real and legitimate

as anyone else's story and I was glad to see her again and to have a second chance with her. In honesty I say, "I'm surprised you came, but I'm so glad that you did. Maybe you will enjoy this even more." Yvonne smiles and starts to walk towards a seat, but grabs my arm to get me to walk with her. "You know I was thinking, I really did not know... I did not understand the current state of things for Black women... well, I'm really interested in seeing what you've put together today and hearing from younger generations. I invited my granddaughter... I hope she can make it."

I welcome and thank the nineteen women in attendance and tell them what we plan to do today. I talk about the tradition of the ring shout, the healing circle, and the importance of community. Below is the transcript of my introduction at length.

Today, the goal is to give you 2 presentations: one presentation will, amongst many other things, address many of the issues that women of color face today; the other presentation will allow us to enter into the realm of beauty and media representations together. My hope is that we will share in the experience of these presentations together and then be able to reflect, discuss, respond, talk!!! As Black women, our voices are too often silenced or ignored, not just in media/in Hollywood, but in our own communities and even sometimes in our own homes. Today, I want to hear your voices, but more importantly, I want you all to hear each others. I am also interested in the ways that women of different age groups perceive media representations and each other. As I've been doing my interviews I am finding that there may be a disconnect between Black women of different generational groups. In Indie Arie's song called *Better People*, she says, 'I wish there was a video game to teach you your ancestors name. I wish there was a phone number like 1-800-Save-Your-Brother... There is certain information that you can only get in conversation when... Young People, who talk to Old People, it would make us Better People, all around...Yes it would. And if Old People would talk to Young People, it would make us Better People, all around....' So why are we here? This work, which is towards the completion of my dissertation is based on the idea that if we gather together and share our stories, process through media,

race, beauty, and do activities together, perhaps we will experience a deepened understandings of our selves, our stuff, our histories. The historical goal of a space such as this is to provide a safe space to engage in the healing of our own internal wounds but also the wounds between our relationship with each other as Black women, as sisters and mothers. Furthermore, it is in the sharing of our stories, the acknowledgment of our truths which may be counter to mainstream knowledge about us, that we begin to critically explore a different political consciousness around what it means to be a Black woman in this country. So after the 2 presentations, some time for feedback after each one, we will break into smaller groups and start the workshop process.

Participants nod and smile. I ask the women to introduce themselves and then I introduce them to the first presentation, Honey Pot Performances, *The Ladies Ring Shout* (as described in chapter three).

After the performance, the artists sit in the middle of the floor, and I invite women into a dialogue. A few women have tears in their eyes, someone blows her nose and then a conversation begins about how moving the performance is. Onna says, "...it reminded me of my childhood growing up, I was happy all of a sudden listening to the music, and then saddened by the notion that even today, in 2011, women are still asking that question, "Ain't I a woman". It was a full range of emotion, memory, and the shocking reality that this is what young Black women are going through today." Yvonne chimes in, "I had no idea... I really didn't." She goes on to explain how out of touch she feels with younger Black women and that after her daughter passed away several years ago, how hardened she had become to the idea that young Black women were struggling with so many issues. Clare then adds, "Yes, but these are issues that many of us once dealt with when we were younger: unemployment, finding a husband, our value in white society." Paula and Yeyo agree.

Yeyo, who has been openly tearful explains how Black women endure so much and that so much is not talked about by media or even amongst ourselves. “Maybe we have just come to a point in time when we think this is nothing new and nothing has changed so why talk about it? I don’t know...” Yeyo goes on, “I just always feel like older Black women go one of two ways. They either pass on the flame, sharing wisdom, stories, secret knowledge and such or they separate and isolate themselves, almost hoarding their goods. As a motherless daughter, maybe this is something I am particularly sensitive to, but I just am glad we are having this conversation.” The women continued to talk and share stories.

After about 30 minutes, we moved on to the next presentation which is also described in chapter three see Appendix D). Before I start the powerpoint I say, “During this presentation, I ask that you pay close attention to the imagery; especially the transformations in the faces of some of the women you will see. I ask that you watch this presentation keeping in mind the questions: what does Hollywood/ media say is beautiful and what do women have to do in order to be deemed beautiful.” There is no talking by me during the presentation. The slides go by either in silence or with music playing. Images of media’s beauty queens flash before them. Then a clip is played of African American celebrities before cosmetic surgery and after: Beyonce, Vivica Fox, Alicia Keys, Lil Kim, Janet Jackson, Rihanna, and others flash on the screen. Participants, talk lowly to one another. I hear gasps and comments, “Oh my goodness... I had no idea.” Then other clips are shown of various movies and ‘Black’ films: *Friday*, *Why Did I Get*

Married, and others. Again, there is laughter, comments are made, and by the end of the presentation, the women are busily talking amongst themselves.

After the presentation, the women discuss the imagery and representations of Black women. Together they come to realizations and agreements about the power of media and their need to resist it, avoid it, and think about themselves in ways that are defined outside of the scope of mainstream media or hegemonic society. The last hour of this three hour long circle meeting is spent in workshops. Several themes emerged in each: (1) generational disconnect and critiques of younger and older groups; (2) the dichotomist relationship Black women have with media; (3) the power and usefulness of healing circles; and (4) what beauty truly means.

The women in the workshop called, “What is Beautiful?” first start addressing the generational issue. Ranging from mid 20s to early 70s, Kelly, Sidney, Jada, Trina, Anne, Yeyo, and Onna talk about the gap of understanding between Black women and how the answer to the question, what is beautiful lies in self confidence, self-esteem, parenting or upbringing, and self-image. Jada and Anne begin the conversation as they talk about young girls. “If they are the future... I am scared for my daughter,” Anne says. Jada agrees and says,

These young girls... they don't even know what's ignorant or disrespectful anymore. I swear I get on the train or bus or walk around downtown all the time ready to take my belt off !!! It's like they missed the memo. They can't possibly love themselves... they act like they are all that, but you can see it all over how they present themselves, how they dress and act. They know they are not valued and so they act out and act accordingly. I know they must be hurting... but it's like, listen... you can't tell them anything... it's like it's too late. What can you do?

Trina talks about her mother and reminds the women, “I think that is the general sentiment of every generation of women about the generation or generations younger though... think about it. I remember how my Grandmother used to always talk about my mother and how she tried to do too much... or trying to be everything but really failing to be anything. And she struggled with depression and low self-esteem.” Anne chimes in, “It’s all over-compensation for what you think you lack. Or what you are told you lack by others. I’m guilty of that...” Onna, tells the women about how she was treated as a teenager working for a hospital.

The way we were all treated... back then was really bad... in the end, some people had complexes that they kept their entire lives. They believed what those white folks said to them. They bought into how they were treated thinking that was how it should be or at least that there was nothing that could be done about it. I remember trying to organize my friends. ‘Let’s just walk out tomorrow. Then what will they do if they don’t have anyone to do the dirty work.’ And my friends, they said they would. Everyone agreed. But the next day, well I was the only one who left. But I went on to get a better job and an education. I had a sense of what was right and a sense of knowing that I deserved to be treated with dignity and nothing less. Not everyone is taught that and not everyone believes that (Onna).

Yeyo comments “Well not everyone thinks they deserve that. For a long time, I thought I had the bad things in my life, my mom dying, all kinds of abusive situations, because I must be such a bad person and I must deserve that. It took a lot of therapy and finding other sisters that loved me and taught me that that wasn’t true. What do you do without that?” “Just like then, many of us believe what they tell us about ourselves,” Sidney (early 30s) speaks up. “I watch the news and the movies and Law and Order and all the reality TV, and I’m guilty of just not even questioning what I see. Pretty soon you

believe what they tell you about yourself, about your race, about other Black people... what you can or can't do, about your beauty."

Kelly, now playing task master and scribe, stands up as I walk over to check on the ladies progress. "Well I think we can all agree that we are divided by our age, but in the end we all have the same struggles and the same problems with believing what society tells us or how media tries to define us. But what is beautiful?" The women continue to grapple with the issues and write this on their white board: "What is *sexy*—sexually attractive, desirable; media portrayals—Blonde, blue eyed, particular body shape VS. What is out there in real life; Beauty is an experience, a life time; Beauty is inside—personality, behavior, how you treat others, the alignment of your spirit, the company you keep."

From their early 30s to early 70s, Bee, Shug, Monica, Sofia, Vanessa, and Clare discuss "Dear Media, I hate you, I love you." This group begins by talking about how media creates characters or caricatures that entirely do not exist. "What happens though when those characters become looked at as the reality of who black people are," Bee asks? The women sit and talk about the variety of characters, stereotypes, and archetypes in current media. Tyler Perry's name comes up several times. This group is critically aware of problematic representations. But why these images permeate media and become popularly consumed by Black people is what is so perplexing. "With the Angry black woman piece, what was going on with that? Why was she angry and how responsible... is it not to really show the other side or go into why she was angry? The distorted vision means that people can't really see what is going on."

The women agree and write on their board, “Dear Media, I hate you. You are an exploitative, expository, and an unquestioned archival that records the time period and present moment. The types of lies and distortions you tell.... You are so far beyond the actual story. You’re so superficial. It’s like I see Black people but it’s the misrepresented, type cast, one Black friend syndrome. But you caught me when I was young. You raised me and I applauded laughed and cheered as you taught me to hate myself. The things that are bad are Black. Disney’s black crows or the racist Looney Tunes cartoons. There is a lack of variety and inclusion, but we are bounded by audience expectations and media executive decisions. Really we are powerless with our only recourse to shut you off and out.”

On the other side of the board, they write, “Dear Media, I like you (crossing out the word love). You provide entertainment and distraction. iPods, computer, the internet... But it is through the promotion of propaganda, dogma, oligarchy that you intrusively play out your agenda on us. As children, you teach us things that we didn’t previously know about. You’re innovative. You offer us perspective of things that we might not have learned about.”

The women go on to discuss that even in their ‘like’ of media, its negative and harmful agenda has gotten so obvious. Shug says, “You really have to search for the good stuff... the stuff we deem important and real. Like who cares about Lindsay Lohan?” When I come over to join this group, and to ask them to wrap things up I can see that they are riled up, animated, moving around, laughing and talking loudly. Shug tells me, “You got us over here ready to find this media guy and beat the shit out of him!

All the women laugh. I look at the group's board and ask, "If we know all this about media, are we left with any power at all? Bring that question with you to the big group report back."

Elaine, Diamond, Justice, Barbra, Yvonne, and Paula, ranging from early 30's to late 70s, gather together to discuss what elements they'd like to see in healing circles and whether healing circles are beneficial to Black women. This group discusses their views on healing circles and writes on their white board. It was clear that out of the women there, no one thought healing circles were useless and all found value in the idea and practice. I start with this group first to make sure they understand what it is I'm trying to learn. I ask, "So how can we utilize this space to our advantage? What needs could be satisfied in a space such as this?" And then I leave. The women write,

This space allows for:

- Spiritual aspects and guidance
- You don't need to have 'problems' everyone needs this type of community (educated, loving, positive, Black women)
- There is a need to converse with others like us
- There is a need to hear perspectives of others; to get outside of yourself
- The Circle today made us think about the things we see all the time but do not question or comment on; no release before this
- Healing circles make people feel less alone
- There are unexpected benefits
- Vulnerability; fragility
- Reframing issues; and reframing expectations
- Finding common ground and reaching out to generations before us

When all the small groups come back together to form a large circle and share what was discussed in their respective workshops, everyone is interested and engaged in hearing each report. Each group summarizes and describes their workshop. Afterwards I

invite the entire group to ask questions make comments. The most resounding theme reported was the effectiveness of the healing circle is the appreciation of being surrounded by and engaging with such a diverse and open group of women. Many participants commented on how they were able to see themselves in each other's stories and comments as well as learn from each other.

"Where else have I been able to say these things? Not at work, not with coworkers... not even with my family... it just doesn't come up," Barbra says. Kelly agrees, "I loved this. Thank you all. This was really a different experience for me. I think it was the first time I've heard strangers talking and thought they were speaking for me; so clearly about the dilemmas of being a woman of color and media and beauty and identity. I was engaged in learning something about myself." Yeyo, teary eyed again, says, "Yes, I feel gratitude in my heart as well. To hear from my elders, to feel affirmation in this group... this was very healing... all of it. We need more things like this." I point out, "As Black women, we don't allow ourselves or make room for ourselves to have our own healing and recovery time."

I ask if anyone wants to give us some parting words of wisdom or encouragement. Onna and Yvonne raise their hands and Onna speaks first. "Love yourselves first. You are all worth it. Know that you were created by the Divine and that God makes no mistakes! I am so proud to see what you young women are doing, that you are reaching out to each other and to older generations. And I say, yes, this is needed. More of this is needed. Keep up the good work!" Yvonne, her voice choked up, "I agree, I feel blessed to have been here too. I am really honored to know you women and to know that young

Black women really do have their heads on straight. There is a lot wrong in the world and a lot that you are up against. Really keep your chins held high and stay close to one another. You cannot do this alone. We didn't when we were your age. Just keep going..."

Healing Circle Part Three: The final healing circle piqued the interest of 26 women who expressed interest and desire to participate. Due to conflicting schedules and busyness, only 8 women were able to participate. While it seems that many of the original participants genuinely desired to participate in the last session, I question whether the low turnout is reflective of deeper issues. As we all make choices about how to spend our time, to what extent is low attendance possibly indicative of the potentially low level of priority we place on matters that are related to our own healing process; an indication of deep pain or injury caused by media; or feelings of helplessness in the face of media power and other institutional domains that oppress? The data collected here does not speak directly to these questions. However the absence of many participants, who initially expressed interest in this final healing circle, is significant in that at least implicitly it speaks to the multiple ways Black women engaged with the counter hegemonic healing process.

The small group yielded a productive conversation where everyone was able to offer meaningful input. Beforehand, I sent my dissertation proposal to Kelly, Jada, Monica, Sofia, Shug, Anne, Onna, and Diamond and asked the women to read it beforehand. I also had these questions on white boards for the women to think about and discuss: what should a healing circle look like; what was missing in the previous two

healing circles; what should happen to this work moving forward; and how can healing become a sociopolitical process moving beyond a psychological or clinical model?

In this final circle, the participants occupied the roles of theorists, teachers, and healers for self and each other. I participated only by asking that they consider the questions posted on the walls, thinking about the proposal that I sent and what they thought this study should say and do. Each woman was handed a journal and asked to take the first 30 minutes to write.

“If we don’t study and understand ourselves, reinforced by media and popular culture, we can easily begin to hate ourselves as we rationalize our own destruction” (Shug, late 30s).

“A Healing Circle should be a group looking for solutions and actions. We have the power of being problem solvers. We can find and discuss solutions. That is where it all starts anyway” (Anne, late 30s).

“Healing circles are places of power. This work should open up new spaces that offer ownership, boldness and intervention. But healing circles need to have two main components: action and community. It has to include all who want in and it has to be open to talking about what disturbs the community that forms” (Diamond, late 30s).

“I want this to occur regularly. Just giving ourselves weekly or monthly time to say, this is ours, this is time to work on me. That is revolutionary. We don’t know how to do that as Black women. But what will make us do that? It is a decision we must make. It is access to something like this” (Kelly, mid 20s).

“This group and this work should incorporate educational components. We should always be teaching each other, learning about our statistics so that we can speak to other women who are going through what we are; so that we can speak to the experiences of all women; so that no one’s story goes unacknowledged. How does this work help us to deal with conflicted feelings about Black men, build bridges, and strengthen the entire community?” (Jada, mid 30s)

“We need professional help to process through anger, pain, past issues, but we need to find our power in that process. Many times the clinical route victimizes us further. We can use healing circles to produce strategies of healthy living, of helping our community, and enriching positive self-concepts. It is an ongoing process” (Monica, mid 30s)

“We can use technology/ media to counteract. We can use it as a tool for our own purposes, like with children to address disturbing issues; address predatory behaviors, “being watched,” spoken to in inappropriate ways; or just not feeling safe in general” (Sofia, late 30s).

“Black people have a lot of self-hate. How can that be addressed? Should it start with the parents or children? Either way, they both need support. This work should reach out to parents and children. People need to be embraced and to know how much they are worth. That is a lifelong thing” (Onna, early 70s).

In the final healing circle, centered on the work and necessity to create spaces for counter stories and healing, each woman validated the intention and the value of the healing circle. Shug explains, “Trauma thrives on avoidance. The best way to deal with

pain is to examine it... name it... confront it. The healing circle can be that space.” The women in this group shared a consensus of the need for witnesses to their stories; stories that are mutually lived and understood. Further, as hooks would explain, the women in this group became *enlightened witnesses* who were able to be critically vigilant about both what is told or seen and how to respond to or resist what is told or seen with a proactive sense of agency (1992; 1996).

Empowerment involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge, whether personal, cultural, or institutional, that perpetuate objectification and dehumanization. African-American women and other individuals in subordinate groups become empowered when we understand and use those dimensions of our individual, group, and disciplinary ways of knowing that foster our humanity as fully human subjects. This is the case when Black women value our self-definitions, participate in a Black women's activist tradition, invoke an Afrocentric feminist epistemology as central to our worldview, and view the skills gained in schools as part of a focused education for Black community development (Collins 1991, 222).

The series of healing circles in this study were offered to participants as a start of a Black female anti-hegemonic project unified by a common goal of moving toward healing and cultural resistance. In this work, it is critical to acknowledge both what is at stake and what can be done. Ideological media representations of race, gender and sexuality are central in the maintenance of racial, patriarchal and class domination. “Black women deserve to have multiple paths to healing, multiple ways of thinking about spirituality, multiple paths towards recovery... When we choose to heal, when we choose to love, we are choosing liberation. This is where all authentic activism begins” (hooks 2005, xxx).

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

No one leaves his or her world without having been transfixed by its roots, or with a vacuum for a soul. We carry with us the memory of many fabrics, a self soaked in our history, our culture; a memory, sometimes scattered, sometimes sharp and clear, of the streets of our childhood (Paulo Freire 1994).

With the goal of interrupting current popular narratives, this study aims to join with Black feminist bodies of work in developing new theories that engage African American women to reflect and acknowledge the complex and varied realities of medias' impact on gender, race, sex, equality, and identity as converging constructs. Historically, the path of Black women is one where they have had to struggle to find a space to tell their stories of the impact of race, gender, class, and sexual oppression. The contribution to existing literature and society at large is the analysis of the intersection of beauty, race, and feminisms while critiquing and interrupting cultural imperialism.

Our understanding of the mechanism of hegemonic media is essential to our comprehension of identity, gender, and race. "In today's mass-mediated consumer society, popular cultural artifacts like television play an increasingly important role in the construction of reality and the maintenance of social hierarchy" (Coltrane and Messineo 2000, 17). There is tremendous power in media's ability, as a central cultural institution, to define and promote the hegemonic values, beliefs, and definitions of beauty for those who consume it. Hazel Carby, discussing Feminist works and the women's liberation

movement (WLM) said, “Many black women have been alienated by the non-recognition of their lives, experiences and herstories in the women’s liberation movement (WLM)” (1999, 69). If this political statement can be made concerning feminist theories and work regarding oppression, then the same question must be asked of media as a totalizing force that many African American women must contend with on some level. Based on this work, I think we still need to consider questions such as “How do we uncover our narrative concerning our own well-being and identity as media has historically alienated and mis-represented us?”

Overall, we need to revisit mainstream research literature’s assumption that African American women’s identities are not negatively impacted by media images. This assertion is vital in order to deconstruct racist notions of beauty and move forward beyond the dialogue. Additionally, it is of extreme importance to discuss and explore how powerful the media can be in promoting constructs that support and uplift white hegemonic cultural positions, which in turn perpetuates structural inequality as well as racism and discrimination. Concluding that African American women go unaffected by media images simply allocates and promotes the media’s ability to negatively affect African Americans’ self-images and identities. This is essential to explore as media can be implicated in maintaining discriminatory and racist notions of beauty. Conversely, it begins the work of African American women regaining the power to righteously define their own identities.

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) encourages African American women to gather the knowledge necessary to be informed about their own personal biographies, their African

American community and how the structural institutions of racism function.

“Domination operates by seducing, pressuring, or forcing African-American women and members of subordinated groups to replace individual and cultural ways of knowing with the dominant group's specialized thought” (Collins 1991, 229). As she states:

Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. One distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge is important for both dimensions of change (Collins 1991, 221).

Exploring this discourse and subject matter forces readers to challenge mainstream assumptions and discover the underlying mechanisms of racism in America and in the media. With that, in solidarity with Dr. hooks, I am committed to exploring the “process of looking [that will] allow us to counter the seduction of images that threatens to dehumanize and colonize” (6, 1992).

Synthesis of the Findings

Beyond the acknowledgement that media detrimentally impacts its audience, by forging problematic and negative racial and gender identities, this study reveals the complexities related to how African American women cope with and respond to media. Women in this study all saw media as a powerful source for the dissemination and enforcement of the definition of beauty and Black female identity. While views slightly varied on whether media representations were positive or negative/ harmful or helpful, all

women described a love/ hate relationship with media. Much of the variance in media impact depended on generational group and familial/community upbringing.

Another significant finding, based on the stories of each participant, is the idea that community and family can serve as significant barriers of protection from media's negative impact. However, it is also clear that depending on family dynamics, support, and Black family/ community immersion, individuals could also be more susceptible to low self-esteem, negative self- image and lacking in a sense of racial identity. This study also offers insight regarding African American women's feelings of disconnectedness from different generational groups of women. The impact this has on one's sense of self, feelings of powerlessness, self- hatred or intolerance of other African Americans is a powerful and disturbing finding.

However, participants also expressed the desire to heal those divides; awareness (at least after their experiences in the healing circle) of the harm divisiveness and lack of understanding amongst generational groups can cause. Simultaneously there is the need for reimagining or reinventing that Black female image while promoting and exploring the counter narrative. Participants also acknowledged the healing power of exploring, sharing, and hearing each other's life narratives through alternative sites absent of mainstream media narratives and understandings.

Challenging and Deepening the Paradigm

While the findings of this study are multilayered and complex, one should not get lost in the variance of the data. Instead, the themes that have been uncovered, in their richness and multidimensionality, interrupt the idea of a monolithic culture of Black

womanhood. Because these understandings are oft ignored in media and the broader academic milieu, we need to consider these understandings as part of the views and values that construct the lives of Black women. In addition, if these stories are indicative of the myriad of stories of African American women, we should continue to pay close attention to the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Methodologically, this study offers an approach that is contextually aware of the historical lives of African American women and thus is able to bring to light authentic data and interpretations. More importantly work in this mode has the potential to positively impact the lives of Black women. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) situates critical social theory and its role of doing work centered around producing change for and with oppressed peoples. Furthermore, this study has taken unique and useful routes through the use of engaged narrative to better understand African American women as social, political and historical actors.

Further, my inquiry seeks to bring us to question the ways in which the discourses of traditional academic or intellectual work historically function for purposes of academic consumption. If handled irresponsibly such discourses could operate to reify the colonial project, while maintaining elitist privilege, and reinforce inaccessibility to power. The methodological approach and theoretical standpoint of this study challenges scholars to begin to probe the elitist ways in which The Academy operates as an institution contributing to the dehumanization, detriment and dysfunction of researchers and participants. Taking this into account, my work seeks to bridge “academic” and “cultural” work to suggest an inseparable and required intersection instead of mutually

exclusive or oppositional entities. Both should be required in order to be considered legitimate contributions towards the goals of social justice, healing, progress, and knowledge production.

In *Living Room* (1985), June Jordan describes a place free from oppression, where lived experiences are analyzed but acknowledged and validated. Media has invaded and become our living room: a force that in many ways is counter to the humanity of African American women. What then is the work of sociology beyond describing and theorizing about this phenomenon? Creating a space to dialogue about how African American women are impacted by media representations and images of beauty for the sake of a study alone would be a disservice to not only the African American women involved in such a study but to all African American women. Beyond the parameters of this study, collective efforts should be made to create programming that builds critical media literacy and analysis skills within a sociological approach amongst adolescent and adult African American women; and that works to combat the negative impact of media on their overall well-being (see Young Woman's Empowerment Project, Chicago; Ella's Daughters, Chicago; Media Advocates for Prevention, New Orleans; Females United For Action, Chicago; Brotherhood/Sister Sol, New York; Black Butterflies, Salt Lake City and Chicago; Beyondmedia Education, Chicago).

In Madison's work on performance ethnographies she speaks to the responsibility of asking to what end is our academic inquiry. As a performance ethnographer, for Madison it is an ethical responsibility to translate "scholarly" work from the field to the stage so that the social and political implications have impact on those she works for: her

subjects, not the institution. “In a performance of possibilities... the possible suggests a movement culminating in creation and change. It is the active, creative work that weaves together the life of the mind with being mindful of life, of merging the text with the world, of critically traversing the margin and the center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and paths...” (Madison 2005, 172).

The challenge, then, of my work is to produce critiques of the systems of media, hegemonic culture and academic institutions that police the production of knowledge instead of merely being reduced to the telling of stories that white folks just don’t know about. These stories must have the power to challenge systems and produce mobilized, liberatory and transformative spaces.

Future Research: Moving Ever Forward

This work is aimed at interrupting current popular narratives of Black women as object, puppet, or the fulfillment of various negative stereotypes which maintain hegemonic power and domination. Indeed, this ethnography aims to join a body of work, and to develop new theories that reflect and acknowledge the complex and varied realities of African American women. Such work must begin by listening to the narratives of real women as well as interpreting narratives and behaviors within the critical theorizing that the women themselves offer. It is also imperative that the researcher take into account various social processes at work in Black women’s private and public lives. For example family connections and upbringing, education, community, religious practices, the experience of sexual or violent trauma, etc. may all

intertwine and impact how we might understand the ways in which women interpret, respond to media portrayals and representations of beauty and race.

Black women, joining with Latino studies, Asian American studies, and Gender and Women studies scholars in the exploration of media representation and the lives of women of color, allows for challenge to existing frameworks which incorporate hegemonic standards of beauty, disempower and inhibit self-worth. Scholars such as (Yen Le Espiritu, Elizabeth Martinez, Peter Nardi, and Robert Lichter), in their work, allows us to engage a nuanced and complex view often missing in discourses on media and the lives of women. In seeking to expand the dialogue of scholars like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Linda Thuiwai Smith, and Joy DeGruy Leary, my purpose is to join their efforts to propose unique challenges to The Academy in how we think about the lives of Black women, to consider what counts as research, and the methods used to account for the complexity of personal experiences. Because we are in desperate need of a paradigmatic shift in what is accepted as research, this work should be understood as an attempt to deepen and strengthen existing challenges to current discourses within The Academy and the broader community.

APPENDIX A:
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND
STUDY PARTICIPATION

Participant	Generational Group	Age	Parent or Self Not U.S. Native (ie. Born in African Country)	Education	Race/Class Access: Diverse, Black or White School/ Neighborhood	Self Described Class	Marital Status/ Children	Interview	Journal	For Colored Girls Healing Circle	Black Butterflies: A Woman's Healing Circle	Unfolding Dilemmas and Creating Counter Spaces
Sha' Ron	Millenials	late teens		HS	DS/BN	working class/ poor	S	x				
Emily	Millenials	early 20's		GS	WS/WN	middle class	S	x				
Kelly	Millenials	mid 20's	S	GS	WS/WN	middle class	M	x		x	x	x
Jada	Generation X	mid 30's	P	GS	DS/BN	middle class	S	x	x	x	x	x
Monica	Generation X	mid 30's		GS	BS/BN	middle class	M	x		x	x	x
Sofia	Generation X	late 30's		GS	BS/BN	middle class	M	x		x	x	x
Shug	Generation X	late 30's		HS	BS/BN	working class poor	D	x	x		x	x
Anne	Generation X	late 30's		HS	WS/WN	middle class	M	x	x		x	x
Elaine	Generation X	early 30's		GS	DS/DN	middle class	M	x	x	x	x	
Rashanda	Generation X	late 30's		HS	BS/BN	working class/ poor	D	x				
Yolanda	Generation X	early 40's	P	GS	DS/DN	working class	S	x				
Yeyo	Baby Boomers	mid 40's		GS	WS/BN	upper middle class	D	x	x	x	x	
Farrah	Baby Boomers	mid 40's		BA	WS/DN	working class/ middle	S	x				
Jaclyn	Baby Boomers	mid 50's	S	BA	BS/DN	upper middle class	M	x				
Mary	Baby Boomers	late 50's		HS	DS/DN	upper middle class	M	x				
Justice	Baby Boomers	early 40's		BA	DS/BN	middle class	S	x			x	
Barbra	Baby Boomers	late 50's		HS	BS/WN	working class/ middle	M	x		x	x	
Alexandera	Baby Boomers	mid 60's		BA	BS/BN	upper middle class	D	x				
Onna	Pre- Boomers	early 70's		BA	BS/BN	upper middle class	M	x			x	x
May	Pre- Boomers	mid 90's		no HS	BS/DN	working class poor	W	x				
Cissely	Pre- Boomers	early 90's		HS	BS/BN	middle class	W	x				
Clare	Pre- Boomers	early 70's		BA	BS/BN	upper middle class	M	x			x	
Yvonne	Pre- Boomers	mid 70's		HS	BS/WN	upper middle class	W	x			x	
Judith	Pre- Boomers	late 70's	S	HS	BS/DN	middle class	W	x				
Lucy	Pre- Boomers	late 80's		HS	BS/BN	working class/ middle	W	x				
Trina	Generation X	late 30's	P	GS		working class	S				x	
Diamond	Generation X	late 30's	P	GS		working class	S			x	x	x
Bee	Generation X	early 30's	P	BA		working class/ middle	M				x	
Mya	Generation X	mid 20's	S	GS		middle class	S			x		
Sidney	Generation X	early 30's		HS		working class/ middle	S				x	
Paula	Pre- Boomers	late 70's		HS		middle class	M				x	
Minnie	Generation X	early 20's	S	GS		middle class	S			x		
Vanessa	Generation X	early 40's		GS		middle class	M				x	

APPENDIX B:
JOURNAL WORKSHOP
EXERCISE

Please spend at least 25 minutes writing about your reflections and thoughts for each journal entry. Also, each day that you work on an entry, please keep track of media consumption by answering the media log questions. You can also write your entries in a separate journal or type them in a Word document and email to me. Please take your time on this project, but please give this back to me within two weeks of receiving it.

What are the first memories you have about understanding what was considered beautiful in general? What is physical beauty? And what does it mean to be beautiful?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on its right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Daily Exercise- Media Log:

- What media did I actively and purposefully consume/ seek out?

-
- What media, if any, did I engage only because I had no choice but to engage it?

-
- When I think about it deeper what did that media intake allow me to do or feel?
Was it an escape, was it comforting, did it allow me to be reflective about my life
or a personal situation/event, did I feel inspired, did I feel insulted, was I a part of
the story, what did I like about what I saw?

DAY 2

Have your understandings about what is considered beautiful or what it means to be beautiful changed throughout your life? How have those understandings changed? Why do you think those understandings changed? Can you think of any specific life events that may have changed, weakened, or strengthened your perspective about what it means to be beautiful or what is considered beauty?

[illegible]

Daily Exercise- Media Log:

- What media did I actively and purposefully consume/ seek out?

-
- What media, if any, did I engage only because I had no choice but to engage it?

-
- When I think about it deeper what did that media intake allow me to do or feel?
Was it an escape, was it comforting, did it allow me to be reflective about my life
or a personal situation/event, did I feel inspired, did I feel insulted, was I a part of
the story, what did I like about what I saw?

DAY 3

What are the first memories you have of the time that you first considered or understood whether or not you were thought of as beautiful? How old were you? Where did you live? Who were your best friends? What was your family life like at that time? What was it that made you beautiful or not beautiful?

-
-
-
-

-
-
- What media, if any, did I engage only because I had no choice but to engage it?
-
-
-
-
-

-
- When I think about it deeper what did that media intake allow me to do or feel?
Was it an escape, was it comforting, did it allow me to be reflective about my life
or a personal situation/event, did I feel inspired, did I feel insulted, was I a part of
the story, what did I like about what I saw?
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

DAY 4

Has your understanding of your own beauty changed throughout your life? In what ways has it changed? Can you remember any particular events or experiences that impacted that change (positive or negative) that stand out in your mind?

-
-
-
-

- [illegible]

How has media influenced your understanding of yourself? Does media impact in any way your personal beliefs and understandings about your own beauty; identity; womanhood; self as a Black woman? Define those terms for yourself. Can you think of specific examples of meaningful/memorable media images/messages that had an influence on the way you see yourself? Remember media can mean whatever public forms (tv, magazine, books, etc) you want as long as you explain which kind you mean.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

-
-
-
-
-

- When I think about it deeper what did that media intake allow me to do or feel? Was it an escape, was it comforting, did it allow me to be reflective about my life

or a personal situation/event, did I feel inspired, did I feel insulted, was I a part of the story, what did I like about what I saw?

Thank you so much for your participation in this study! You will receive this journal back for your own safe keeping after my dissertation is complete. I hope that this will be a lifelong tool for you to use to reflect on and tell your story! ☺
~Jennifer Richardson

APPENDIX C:
ARTICLE USED FOR FIRST HEALING
CIRCLE “TYLER PERRY’S NOT THE ONLY
ONE STILL WRITING FOR COLORED GIRLS.”

[Get Emails](#)

COLORLINES

NEWS FOR ACTION

HOT TOPICS Celebrate Love Debt Deal Drop the I-Word Drug War London Riots Raqu

T Tyler Perry's Not The Only One Still Writing "For Colored Girls"

by [Jamilah King](#)

Wednesday, November 10 2010, 10:00 AM EST

[ShareThis](#) | [Print](#) | [Comment \(3\)](#)Tags: [film](#), [for colored girls](#), [Tyler Perry](#)

33



167



It took me years to finally read Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf." And it wasn't because I was lazy, or frightened, or particularly uninterested. I grew up in a family made up almost entirely of black women and often wondered about why my folks often got the shortest end of the stick. But for years, I thought the play's significance had been appropriately summed up in my first visual introduction to it: a Kodak picture of my older sister, at 15, standing in front of the play's poster.

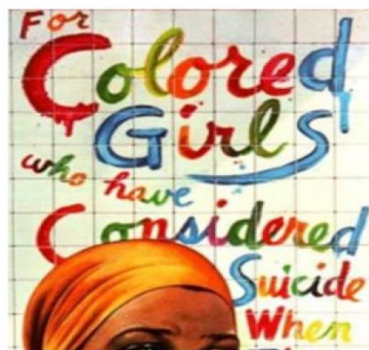
Taken two decades ago, the picture catches my sister in a moment when she's sporting a side ponytail with an oversized yellow t-shirt. She's smiling, with her tongue out, and has got her brown arms on her hips and is rolling her eyes upward, playfully annoyed by the persistence of whoever's behind the camera. Directly behind her is Shange's poster, with a portrait of the playwright's mournful face beneath a yellow headwrap, with the book's title written above in vibrant rainbow-colored cursive.

The picture is ironic for several reasons, the most important being that my sister was shot and killed not too long after she took it. Suffice to say she chose the wrong night to walk down the wrong street with her best friend to the corner store, and got in the way of a kid with terribly bad aim. Her playful smile contrasts deeply with Shange's knowing frown, but it's an appropriate contrast, a tragic sense of foreboding on which to map some of my family's history. In the photo, my sister couldn't have known that her days were numbered, or that 1990 was a particularly bad year to be young and black in an American city. But there she is, smiling, skeptical, and, most importantly, alive.

It's moments like these that I imagine have made Shange's work so enduring over the years. Though I could barely pronounce her name and was largely unfamiliar with her exact

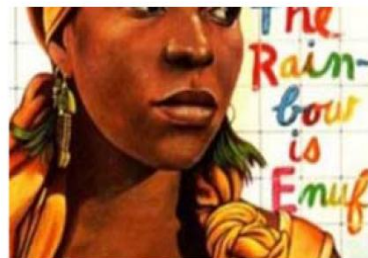
RELATED

[Five Things People Are Saying About "For Colored Girls"](#)



words, I knew that it was terribly important to have nearly written into existence that colored girls often hurt in unimaginable ways, and are sometimes fortunate enough to live and tell their stories.

I didn't finally read the play until last year, and while I skimmed through some, and wished at other parts to see it in all the movement and color that it was intended, there were other parts I couldn't deny. When Shange writes, "Being alive, being a woman, being colored is a metaphysical dilemma I have not conquered yet. Do you see the point?" I do. And so do many others, because they live that dilemma every day.



That gets into why Shange's original work is so important. It's one of the first widely recognized treatments of the pain and beauty of being a black woman in this country. Much like the catalogue of work often associated with it—Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved" immediately come to mind—it centralizes the beauty of black womanhood while powerfully arguing that pain and struggle are essential to it. What sets Shange's work apart is its ambition, and dynamism. It's a choreopoem, a work of art that relies equally on poetry, color, and movement to convey the complicated reality of life inside a black woman's body. That form sets it apart in several ways, by at once making itself more accessible to large audiences and also working as a deeply political metaphor. The poems are meant to be seen, heard, and felt on the street, on stage, and on screen. It's aggressively inserting itself into the literary cannon, haters be damned. Shange's even written about the early days of performing the play for free in cities across the country with a constantly shifting cast of performers who each brought their own stories along. It was then, and still is, a work in progress.

So it's not surprising that there have been so many different iterations. Tyler Perry isn't the first director to bring the work to the big screen. In 1982, the Broadway Theatre archive released its highly dramatized version starring Shange, Lynn Whitfield, and a young Alfre Woodward as Lady in Red. The work was produced by Lindsay Law and directed by Oz Scott. And the soundtrack starred none other than Aretha Franklin belting out the words to Nina Simone's classic "Four Women." It's a moving adaptation, undoubtedly popular. And it's probably starkly different from its on-stage predecessor. For one, it's largely missing the choreography. But, of course, it has to. Like many things, movement doesn't translate as well across forms. And in the quest to popularize the work's general sentiment to larger audiences, certain things inevitably have to be compromised.

That's a tough pill to swallow. Sure, there's laughter, and beauty, and light. But it's a story whose dramatic arcs involve a back-room abortion, domestic violence, and beautiful babies being thrown from tenement windows. Anyone who can relate to those pains has understandably earned their right to be protective of it.

There's still something troubling about someone, anyone, profiting off of the pain of black girls. And it's especially unsettling when that someone is a man who's made a fortune masquerading as a badly decontextualized one. But whatever the critiques—and there **have been many**—the fact that we're talking about this work 36 years later as a feature film, and possibly an Oscar-winning film, means something. It means that there's a market, yes. But it also means that for all of the complaints that the work is melodramatic and too heavy handed, people still need to hear and see it. Black women have still got to fight to love themselves, and each other. Shange's enduring legacy shows that it's okay to celebrate that. And it's also liberating for the world to acknowledge that battle still exists.

So while I'll admit to sometimes proudly riding the bandwagon of Tyler Perry haters, a part of me can't help but concede that his adaptation is an enviable, even necessary, part of a story that's still being written, all in an effort to unravel the centuries-old myth that black women's lives aren't worth sharing. Those often painful stories are still being told because they're still being lived, and no director—be it Perry or a female artist with 10 times more nuance—will have the final say.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1954. "How to Look at Television." *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 8(3): 213-235.
- Adorno, Theodore W. & Horkheimer, Max. 1986. *Dialects of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Advancement Project. 2005. *Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track*.
- Akbar, Na'im. 1984. *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery*. New Jersey: New Mind Productions.
- Allen, T. W. 1994. *The Invention of the White Race*. London and New York: Verso.
- Allport, Gordon. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
- Althusser, Louis. 1972. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Ammons, Linda. 1995. "Mules, Madonnas, Babies, Bath Water, Racial Imagery and Stereotypes: The African-American Woman and the Battered Woman Syndrome," 1995 Wis. L. Rev. 1003, 1006.
- Ani, Marimba. 2000. *Yurugo: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Austin, R. 1994. "A Nation of Thieves: Consumption, Commerce, and the Black Public Sphere." *Public Culture*. 7(1): 225-248.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1994. *The Bakhtin reader: Selected writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Voloshinov*. New York: E. Arnold.
- Baldwin, James. 1990. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon.

- Banks, Ingrid. 2000. *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*. New York: New York University Press.
- Banton, Michael. 1998. *Racial Theories*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bell, Derrick. 2000. *Race, Racism, and American Law*. Gaithersburg MD: Aspen Law & Business.
- Bennett, Michael & Dickerson, Vanessa D., eds. 2001. *Recovering the Black female body: Self-representations by African American Women*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Bhopal, Raj 2007, "The beautiful skull and Blumenbach's errors: The birth of the scientific concept of race." *BMJ* 335:1308–9.
- Blackwell, James E. 1985. *The Black Community: Diversity and Unity*. New York: Dodd, Mead.
- Blauner, Bob. 2001. *Still the Big News: Racial Oppression in America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bobo, Jacqueline & Curren, Randall, eds. 2001. *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Bobo, Jacqueline, Hudley, Cynthia & Michel, Claudine, eds. 2004. *The Black Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 1997. "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation." *American Sociological Review* 62: 465-480.
- Borden, Karen Wells. 1973. "Black Rhetoric in the 1960's: Sociohistorical Perspectives." *Journal of Black Studies* 3(4): 423-431.
- Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bordo, Susan. 1999. *The Male Body*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Bracey, Gerald. 2003. *On the Death of Childhood and the Destruction of Public Schools: The Folly of Today's Education Policies and Practices*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
- Brand, Peg Zeglin, ed. 2000. *Beauty Matters*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Britton, Akissi. "Deconstructing Lil' Kim- To Kim, With Love." *Essence* October 2000.

- Britton, Akissi. "Shades of black: The hang ups, the hurt, the healing: three women explore our skin-color issues- Sister Dark, Sister Light." *Essence* June 2002.
- Brown, J.C. 1993. "Which black is beautiful?" *Advertising Age*. 1(19).
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Byrd, A. D. & Tharps, L. L. 2001. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. New York: St: Martin's Press.
- Byrd, Rudolph P. & Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, eds. 2001. *Traps: African American men on gender and sexuality*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Callaghan, Karen A., ed. 1994. *Ideals of Feminine Beauty: Philosophical, social, and cultural dimensions*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Carby, Hazel V. 1997. "White Woman Listen: Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood" in Mirza, Heidi Safia. eds *Black British Feminism: A Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Carby, Hazel V. 1999. *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*. London: Verso.
- Chandler, S., Abood, D., Lee, D., Cleveland, M. & Daly, J. 1994. "Pathogenic eating attitudes and behaviors and body dissatisfaction differences among Black and White college students." *Eating Disorders* 2: 319-328.
- Chávez, Alicia Fedelina & Guido-DiBrito, Florence. 1999. "Racial and Ethnic Identity and Development." Chapter 5, in *An Update on Adult Development Theory: New Ways of Thinking About the Life Course: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, No. 84, edited by Clark, M. Carolyn & Caffarella, Rosemary S. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1987. *The Chomsky Reader* ed. James Peck. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Clark, M. & Clark, K. 1950. "Emotional Factors in Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children." *The Journal of Negro Education* 19:341-350.
- Cleaver, Eldridge. 1968. *Soul on Ice*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Cole, Johnnetta Betsch & Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. 2003. *Gender Talk: The struggle for women's equality in African American communities*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Coleman, Robin R. Means, ed. 2002. *Say it Loud: African American Audiences, Media, and Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Collier-Thomas, Bettye & Turner, James. 1994. "Race, class and color: The African American discourse on identity." *Journal of American Ethnic History*. 14(1): 5-33.
- Collier Thomas, Bettye & Franklin, V.P., eds. 2001. *Sisters in the Struggle, African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movements*. New York: New York University Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1991. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1998. *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2005. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Coltrane, Scott & Messineo, Melinda. 2000. "The perpetuation of subtle prejudice: Race and gender imagery in 1990s television advertising." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 42(5/6): 363-390.
- Combahee River Collective. 1981. "Black Feminist Statement." Pg. 213-218 in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Moraga, C. & Anzaldua, G.
- Commons, Marla and Wilson, Midge. 2000. "Fat prejudice as a determinant of African American and White men's preferences in a potential romantic partner." *An Abstract* <http://condor.depaul.edu/~mwilson/multicult/lbfmarla.html>
- Cooley, Charles H. 1902. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Scribner.
- Cox, Oliver. 1970. *Caste, Class, & Race: A study in social dynamics*. New York: Modern Reader Paperbacks.
- Craig, Maxine Leeds. 2002. *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics,

and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241–1299.

Crenshaw, Kimberle, ed. 1995. *Critical Race Theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co.

Cress Welsing, Frances. 1991. *The Isis (Yssis) Papers*. Chicago: Third World Press.

Creswell, J. W. 1998. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Cunningham, M., Roberts, A., Barbee, A., Druen, P. & Wu, C. 1995. “Their ideas on beauty are, on the whole, the same as ours: Consistency and variability in the cross- cultural perception of female attractiveness.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68:261-279.

Currell, Susan & Cogdell, Christina. 2006. *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in The 1930s*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Czitrom, Daniel J. 1982. *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Daniels, Jessie. 1997. *White Lies: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse*. London: Routledge.

Darwin, Charles. 1998. *The Descent of Man*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books.

Davidson, Basil. 1992. *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*. New York: Times Books.

Davis, Angela Y. 1981. *Women, Race, & Class*. New York: Random House.

Davis, Kiri. 2005. *A Girl Like Me*. Film.

““Dealin’” with poet and Pan African supporter Haki Madhubuti” January 7, 1976 *Say Brother*. African Liberation Production.

Delgado, Richard & Stefancic, J. 2001. *Critical Race Theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

Demo, David H. & Hughes, Michael. 1990. “Socialization and Racial Identity Among Black Americans.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 53(4): 364-374.

Dennis, Everette E. & Pease, Edward C., eds. 1997. *The Media in Black and White*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

- Denzin, Norman & Lincoln, Y.S., eds. 1994. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dickerson, Debra J. 2004. *The End of Blackness: Returning the souls of Black folk to their rightful owners*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Dijk, José van. 1995. "The Public Image of Genetics: Reading the Human Genome Narrative." *Science as Culture* 23: 217-47.
- Diouf, Sylviane. 1998. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. New York: New York University Press.
- Doane, Woody. 2003. "Rethinking Whiteness Studies." Pp. 3-18 in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, edited by Doane, Ashley W. & Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. New York: Routledge.
- Dolan, B. 1991. "Cross-cultural aspects of anorexia nervosa and bulimia: A review." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 10: 67-79.
- Downing, J., & Husband, C. 2005. *Representing "Race": Racisms, Ethnicity and the Media*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- D'Souza, D. 1996. *The End of Racism: Principles for a multiracial society*. New York: Free Press.
- Dubois, W.E.B. 1939. *Black Folk, Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race*. New York: Henry Holt.
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York: Dover Publications.
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1996. *The Philadelphia Negro: a social study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. 2004. *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.
- Entman, Robert M. & Rojecki, Andrew. 2000. *Black image in the white mind: Media and race in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Essed, Philomena. 1991. *Understanding Every-day Racism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. London, England: Sage.
- Fanon, Franz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove.

- Fanon, Franz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove.
- Feagin, Joe. 2001. *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations*. New York: Routledge.
- Ferguson, Robert. 1998. *Representing Race: Ideology, identity, and the media*. London: Arnold Publishers.
- Festinger, Leon. 1954. "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes." *Human Relations* 7(2):117-140.
- Fitzgibbon, Marian L., and Stolley, Melinda R. 2000. "Eating Disorders Information Sheet: African American Girls." *Girl Power*
www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/thin/minorities.html
- Floyd Jr., Samuel A. 2002. "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry." *Black Music Research Journal* 22: 49-70.
- Friedan, Betty. 1984. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell Pub. Co
- Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. New York: Picador.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Frankenberg, Ruth, ed. 1997. *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social Criticism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. 1966. *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. 1957. *The Black Bourgeoisie*. New York: Free Press.
- Fredrickson, George. 2002. *Racism: A Short History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 1994. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gabriel, John. 1998. *Whitewash: Racialized Politics and the Media*. London: Routledge.

- Gandy, Jr., Oscar H. 2001. "Racial Identity, Media Use, and the Social Construction of Risk among African Americans." *Journal of Black Studies* 31(5): 600-618.
- Gayles, Gloria Wade, ed. 1995. *My Soul Is A Witness: American American Women's Spirituality*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self Identity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Giddings, Paula. 1984. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: W. Morrow.
- Glesne, Corrine. 1999. *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Goffman, Erving 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books Doubleday.
- Goffman, Erving. 1979. *Gender Advertisements*. New York: Harper Colophon.
- Goldberg, David Theo. 1990. *Anatomy of Racism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Goldberg, David Theo. 1993. *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the politics of meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1972. *Prison Notebooks*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Graves, Joseph. 2003. *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millenium*. NJ: Rutgers University Press
- Graves, Joseph. 2004. *The Race Myth: Why we pretend race exists in America*. New York: Dutton.
- Gray, Herman. 1995. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for 'Blackness.'* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gray, J., Ford, K. & Kelly, L. (1987). "The prevalence of bulimia in a black college population." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 6: 733-740.
- Grossberg, L., Wartella, E. & Whitney, D.C.. 1998. *Media Making: Mass media in popular culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. 1990. *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes toward Black women, 1880-1920*. Brooklyn: Carlson Pub.

- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. 1995. *Words of Fire, An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*. New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton.
- Hales, Dianne and Robert Hales. 1995. *Caring for the Mind: The Comprehensive Guide to Mental Health*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Hall, Stuart, ed. 1997. *Representations: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Newbury Park: Sage Publication.
- Hall, Stuart. 1990. "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media." Pp. 7- 23 In *The Media Reader*, Edited by Alvarado, M. & Thompson, J.O. London: BFI Publishing.
- Hebel, M., & Heatherton, T. 1998. "The stigma of obesity in women: The difference is black and white." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24: 417-426.
- Helms, Janet, ed. 1990. *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. 1992. "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs* 17: 251-274.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Hill, Marc Lamont. 2009. "Wounded Healing: Forming a Storytelling Community in Hip-Hop Lit." *Teachers College Record* 111: 1 248-293.
- Hill, Mark E. 2002. "Skin color and the perception of attractiveness among African Americans: Does gender make a difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65 (1): 77-91.
- Hine, Darlene Clark. 1994. *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-construction of American History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hobson, Janell. 2005. *Venus in the dark: Blackness and beauty in popular culture* / New York: Routledge.
- hooks, bell. 1981. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA : South End Press
- hooks, bell. 1990. *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston: South End Press.

- hooks, bell. 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- hooks, bell. 2005[1993]. *Sisters of the Yam: Black women and self-recovery*. Boston: South End Press.
- hooks, bell. 1996. *Reel to Real: Race, sex, and class at the movies*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, bell. 2000. *Feminist Theory: From margin to center*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, bell. 2003. *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*. New York: Atria Books.
- Hunter, Margaret. 2002. "'If You're Light You're Alright': Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color Export." *Gender & Society* 16(2): 175-193.
- Hunter, Margaret. 2005. *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*. New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, Toby. 2009 "A Seat at the Table That I Set: Beyond Social Justice Allies." *About Campus*
- Jewell, K. Sue. 1985. "Will the Real Black, Afro-American, Mixed, Colored, Negro Please Stand Up?: Impact of the Black Social Movement, Twenty Years Later." *Journal of Black Studies* 16(1): 57-75.
- Jewell, K. Sue. 1993. *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of the U.S. Social Policy*. New York: Routledge.
- Jhally, Sut & Lewis, Justin. 1992. *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences & the Myth of the American Dream*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Jipguep, Marie-Claude & Sanders-Phillips, Kathy. 2003. "The Context of Violence for Children of Color: Violence in the Community and in the Media." *The Journal of Negro Education* 72(4): 379-395.
- Johnson, Abra, Holman, Felicia & McNeal, Meida. 2010. *The Ladies Ring Shout*. Performance.
- Johnson, Kirk A. 1991. "Objective News and Other Myths: The Poisoning of Young Black Minds." *The Journal of Negro Education* 60(3): 328-341.
- Jones, Charisse & Shorter-Gooden, Kumea. 2003. *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black*

Women in America. New York: HarperCollins.

Jordan, June. 1980. *Passion: New Poems, 1977-1980*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Jordan, June. 1985. *Living Room*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.

Karanja, Ayana I. 1999. *Zora Neale Hurston: The Breath of Her Voice*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Keating, Ann Louise. 1995. "Interrogating 'whiteness,' (de) constructing 'race.'" *College English* 57(8): 901-918.

Kellner, Douglas. 2003. "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture." Pp. 9-20 in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, edited by Dines, Gail & Humez, Jean M. Boston: Sage.

Keyes, Cheryl. 2004. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

King, Jamilah. 2010. "Tyler Perry's Not The Only One Still Writing 'For Colored Girls'" *Colorlines: Art and Culture*. Retrieved from http://colorlines.com/archives/2010/11/for_colored_girls_essay.html

Kitwana, Bakari. 2002. *The Hip Hop Generation: The Crisis in African American Culture*. New York: BasicCivitas Books.

Ladner, Joyce. 1971. *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Ladner, Joyce, ed. 1973. *The Death of White Sociology*. New York: Random House.

Larson, James. 1968. "The Species Concept of Linnaeus." *Isis*, 59: 291-299.

Larson, Stephanie Greco. 2006. *Media and Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Leary, Joy DeGruy. 2005. *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. Milwaukee: Uptone Press.

Levine, Lawrence W. 1977. *Black culture and Black consciousness: Afro-American folk thought from slavery to freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

LoBuono, C. 2001. "Identifying and managing eating disorders." *Client Care*, 35(22):25-39.

- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Mack, Tracy. "Setting the Standards." *Chicago Tribune* 8:1. April 4 2001.
- Madison, D. Soyini. 2005. *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Manring, M.M. 1998. *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Marable, Manning. 1983. *How Capitalism Under-developed Black America*. Boston, MA: South End.
- Marable, Manning. 1996. *Speaking Truth to Power: Essays on Race, Resistance, and Radicalism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Massey, Douglas & Denton, Nancy. 1998. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Maultsby, Portia K. 1990. "Africanisms in African-American music." In *Africanism in American Culture*, edited by Holloway, Joseph E., 185-210. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- McAdams, Dan. 2008. "Personal Narratives and the Life Story." Pp. 241-261. In John, O., Robins, R. & Pervin, L. Eds. *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*. New York: Guilford Press.
- McAdams, Dan., Josselson, R & Lieblich, A. eds. 2006. *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*. Washington, DC: APA Books.
- McCaffree, Jim. 2001. "Eating disorders: All in the family?" *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 101(6):622.
- McClary, Susan & Walser, Robert. 1994. "Theorizing the Body in African-American Music" *Black Music Research Journal* 14(1): 75-84.
- McCracken, Ellen. 1993. *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* New York: St. Martin's Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McWhorter, John. 2008. "Racism In America Is Over" *Forbes.com*.
- McWhorter, John. 2006. *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*. New York: Gotham.

- Mead, George Herbert. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Memmi, Albert. 1965. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Boston: Beacon Press
- Merriam, Sharon. 1998. *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Metzler, Christopher J. 2008. *The Construction and Rearticulation of Race in a "post racial America"*. Bloomington: Authorhouse.
- Miles, Robert & Brown, Malcolm. 2003. *Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Milkie, Melissa A. 1999. "Social comparisons, reflected appraisals, and mass media: The impact of pervasive beauty images on black and white girls' self- concepts." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62(2):190-210.
- Molloy, Beth L. & Herzberger, Sharon D. 1998. "Body image and self-esteem: A comparison of African-American and Caucasian women." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 38(7/8): 631-644.
- Moynihan, Daniel P. 1965. "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action." *Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor*.
- Morgan, Joan. 1999. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My life as a hip-hop feminist*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Morgan, Joan. "Sex, Lies, and Videos." *Essence* June 2002.
- Morley, David. 1986. *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*. London: Comedia.
- Nielsen, Linda. 2000. "Black undergraduate and white undergraduate eating disorders and related attitudes." *College Student Journal* 34(3): 353-69.
- Norris, James. 1990. *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960's to the 1990's*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ore, Tracy. 2006. *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ortega y Gasset, J. 1933. *The Modern Theme*. New York: Norton

- Owens, Timothy & King, Adam. 2001. "Measuring Self-Esteem: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Reconsidered." Pp. 56-84, in *Extending Self-Esteem Theory and Research*, edited by Owens, T.J., Stryker, S. & Goodman, N. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Painter, Nell. 2010. *The History of White People*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Parmer, Twinet, Arnold, Mary, Natt, Tuoanyene & Janson, Christopher. 2004. "Physical Attractiveness As a Process of Internalized Oppression and Multigenerational Transmission in African American Families." *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 12:3 230-242.
- Patel, Kushal A. & Gray, James J. 2001. "Judgment Accuracy in Body Preferences Among African Americans (Statistical Data Included)." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 44(3/4): 227-236.
- Peterson, Eric. & Langellier, Kristin. 1997. "The Politics of Personal Narrative Methodology." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17, 135-152.
- Polivy, J., & Herman, C. P. 2002. "Causes of Eating Disorders." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53,187-213.
- Posavac, Heidi D., Posavac, Steven S. & Posavac, Emil J. 1998. "Exposure to media images of female attractiveness and concern with body weight among young women." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 38(3/4): 187-193.
- Pough, Gwendolyn. 2004. *Check it While I Wreck it: Black womanhood, hip hop culture, and the public sphere*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Poussaint, Alvin F. & Alexander, Amy. 2000. *Lay My Burden Down: Unraveling Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis among African Americans*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Powell, John A. & Wiley, Maya. 2006 "Tearing Down Structural Racism and Rebuilding Communities." *Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law Clearinghouse Review*.
- Progoff, Ira. 1992. *At a Journal Workshop: Writing to Access the Power of the Unconscious and Evoke Creative Ability*. New York: Penguin.
- Proshansky, H. & Newton, P. 1968. "The Nature and Meaning of Negro Self-identity." In *Social Class, Race, and Psychological Development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. Edited by Deutsch, M., Katz, I. & Jensen, A.R..

- Ransby, Barbara. 2003. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Reagin, Joe. 2000. *Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparations*. New York: Routledge.
- Rex, John. 1969. "Race as a Social Category." *Journal of Bio-Social Science*, Supplement 1: 145-162.
- Richie, Beth E. 1996. *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment Of Battered Black Women*. New York: Routledge. 1996.
- Roberts, Dorothy. 1997. "Who May Give Birth to Citizens?: Reproduction, Eugenics, and Immigration." Pg. 205-220, in *Immigrants Out!: The new nativism and the anti immigrant impulse in the United States* edited by Perea, Juan F. New York: New York University Press.
- Roberts, Dorothy. 1999. *Killing the Black Body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty*. New York: Vintage.
- Rodney, Walter. 1973. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover: Wesleyan University.
- Rosenberg, M. 1965. *Society and the Adolescent Self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rosenfeld, Lawrence B., Stewart, Stephanie C. & Stinnett, Heather J. 1999. "Preferences for body type and body characteristics associated with attractive and unattractive bodies: Jackson and McGill Revisited." *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 89:459-79.
- Root, M. P. P. 1990. "Disordered eating in women of color." *Sex Roles* 22: 525-535.
- Russell, Kathy, Wilson, Midge & Hall, Ronald. 1992. *The Color Complex: The politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Schudson, Michael. 1984. *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*. New York: Basic Books.
- Semmes, Clovis E. 1995. *Cultural Hegemony and African American Development*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Serneau, Scott. 2001. *Worlds Apart: Social Inequalities in a New Century*. Thousand

Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

- Singer, Benjamin D. 1973. "Mass Society, Mass Media and the Transformation of Minority Identity." *The British Journal of Sociology* 24(2): 140-150.
- Shome, Raka. 2000. "Outing Whiteness." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17(3): 336- 348.
- Smedley, Audrey & Smedley, Brian D. 2005. "Race as Biology Is Fiction, Racism as a Social Problem Is Real: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives on the Social Construction of Race." *American Psychologist* 60(1): 16–26.
- Smith, Andrea. 2005. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Boston: South End Press.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2005. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Staples, Robert. 1973. *The Black Woman in America: Sex, marriage, and the family*. Chicago: Nelson Hall.
- Staples, Robert. 1975. *Introduction to Black Sociology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Staples, Robert. 1994. *The Black Family: Essays and studies*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Steinem, Gloria. 1995. "Sex, lies and advertising." Pp, 112-120. In Dines, Gail & Humez, Jean Eds. *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A text-reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sterling, Scott. "Lil' Kim And What Fresh Hell is This?" *Code Magazine* 32 September 2000.
- Striegel-Moore, Ruth H., Dohm, Faith A., Kraemer, Helena C., Taylor, C. Barr, Daniels, Stephen, Crawford, Patricia B. & Schreiber, George B. 2003. "Eating Disorders in Black and White Women." *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 160:1326-1331.
- Stuckey, Sterling. 1987. *Slave Culture: Nationalist theory and the foundations of black America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomson, Ann. 2003. "Issues at Stake in Eighteenth-century Racial Classification." *Cromohs* 8: 1-20.
- Thompson, John. 1995. *Media and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Tobin, Joseph. 2000. *Good Guys Don't Wear Hats*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Tyler, Indira D. 2003 "A true picture of eating disorders among African American women: a review of literature." *ABNF Journal* 14(3): 73-74.
- Van Dijk, Teun. 1993. *Elite Discourse and Racism*. Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications.
- Vaz, Kim Marie. 1997. *Oral Narrative Research with Black Women*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Wallace, Michele. 1990. *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*. London: Verso.
- Wallace, Michele. 1999. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. London: Verso.
- Wanzo, Rebecca. 2009. *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American women and sentimental political storytelling*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Williams, Patricia. 1991. *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, Olly. 1985. "The association of movement and music as a manifestation of a black conceptual approach to music-making." *In More Than Dancing: Essays on Afro-American music and musicians*, edited by Jackson, Irene V., 9-24. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Wilson, William J. 1990. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- Wise, Tim. 2009. *Between Barack and a Hard Place Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama*. San Francisco: City Lights.
- White, Deborah Gray. 1999. *Ar'n't I a Woman? Black Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Wolf, Naomi. 1991. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: William Morrow.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1985[1792]. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. London: Penguin Books.
- Woodward, Kathryn, ed. 1997. *Identity and difference*. London: Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Wright, Bobby E. 1984. *The Psychopathic Racial Personality and Other Essays*. Chicago: Third World Press.
- Wright, C. 1986. *Mass communication: A sociological perspective*. New York: Random House.
- Wright, Talmadge. 2000. "Resisting Homelessness: Global, National, and Local Solutions." *Contemporary Sociology*. 29:27-43.
- Zuberi, Tukufu. 2000. *The Study of African American Problems: W.E.B. Du Bois's agenda, then and now*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yarbrough, Marilyn, and Bennett, Crystal. 2000. "Cassandra and the "Sistahs": The Peculiar Treatment of African American Women in the Myth of Women as Liars." *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, 626-657.

VITA

Jennifer Richardson received a Masters Degree in Sociology from DePaul University, and PhD from Loyola University Chicago. As a sociologist, her research focuses on race, gender, sexuality, media, and social inequalities. She teaches courses in Sociology, African American Studies, and Women and Gender Studies, including courses such as The Sociology of Education and Multiculturalism, Mass Media and Popular Culture, Social Inequalities: Race, Class, Gender, Difference, and Introduction to Sociology.

Jennifer is deeply committed to issues of diversity, gender justice, equitable education, and well-being and has been involved with various advocacy and justice organizations throughout Chicago. She has served in multiple capacities as researcher, evaluator, educator, board member, and grant writer.

Currently, Jennifer is a Research Associate at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Scientific Careers Research and Development Group. There she is working on a National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded project: The Director's Pathfinder Award to Promote Diversity in the Scientific Workforce.

