Defining Us: A Critical Look at the Images of Black Women in Visual Culture and Their Narrative Responses to these Images.

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

There is a disconnection between the visual and visuality when it comes to the issues of representation and identity for a particular group of people. According to Sturken and Cartwright (2001) visuality can concern how we see everyday objects and people, not just those things we think of as visual texts (p. 370). The relationship between images and their visuality renders serious consequences when the group (i.e. Black women) in question is misrepresented. Images of misrepresentation are even more consequential when it occurs within the realms of mass media and popular visual culture because the viewing audience is pervasive. So then, the question that must be asked is how can marginalized groups that are misrepresented in a highly visual world take control of their images? How can they acquire the agency to construct self and group identity? These questions addressed in this research study where their answers can be cultivated and examined within the realm of contemporary art, mass media and popular visual culture. I use a mixed methods approach to collect data through the development of both a focus group and use of content analysis, rhetorical analysis and a quantitative survey (i.e., The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale). A focus group is useful in gaining knowledge from disenfranchised or marginalized groups. Specifically, the goals of this study call for the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) with a small population of Black women at The Ohio State University and the use of a survey and questionnaires that measure self-esteem and perception.
The main goal for conducting a theoretical and participatory study of the images of Black women in visual art and popular visual culture is to develop pedagogical recommendations of how visual culture scholars can use narrative inquiry and counter-narrative to explore race and gender representation.
Dedication

Dedicated to my mother Rea Ann Jackson, my grandmother Annetta Yvonne Avery and my aunt Darla Hawkins; three women who taught me how to redefine.
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Most Importantly, I thank God for His guidance, love, enlightenment and favor.

“I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well (Psalm 39:14)
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“STANDING ON SHAKEY GROUND I POSE MYSELF FOR CRITICAL STUDY BUT WAS NO LONGER CERTAIN OF THE QUESTION TO ASK”. ~ Carrie Mae Weems

I sat under a hot dryer at the beauty salon and I looked at a mature woman who was flipping through Essence Magazine. In it was a picture of Beyonce in a very hypersexual pose with a white man. I squinted, and the woman asked, “What, you don’t like her?” I began with a mini lecture about how it wasn’t that I didn’t like Beyonce; after all I don’t even know her. My response focused on what I did not like and it was the overdone, over worked over representation of Black women as overtly sexual, “Hottentots” in the media. I said, “The media always represent us in this way!” The woman nodded in agreement and gave a sigh. Satisfied that I had just enlightened her or in more colloquial terms “spit knowledge” to anyone who could hear my voice over the noise of the running hair dryers, when my hair was done, I left feeling that I had said something necessary about images of Black women.

Issues about the way Black women are perceived today are often the main topics by men and women in beauty salons. Stephen Carpenter (2003) makes a similar connection to barbershops when he points out that, “[A barbershop] is a site of discourse,
interpretation and commentary about social and cultural norms. All statements are fair
game for critical deconstruction” (p. 12). Likewise, the beauty salon is a space where
women come to get beautified and to be around a group of people with common interest
and sometimes values and perspectives. Many conversations develop out of commentary
on popular culture.

Black culture at its finest is well preserved in Black salons. I should specify that I
go to an all Black salon in what is considered the hood or in politically correct terms an
urban Black neighborhood. This salon is owned and run by a Black woman, the operators
are all Black and women with the exception of one man and the clients are mostly Black
women, children and occasionally men. It is a space where an outsider may observe
Black culture at its finest. It is also a space that is heavily loaded with images and popular
culture text. Simultaneously, one may find magazines such as Jet, Ebony, and Essence
that give focus entirely to the Black audience and sometimes these are read by
mainstream America. It is not rare hear comments about articles and pictures in Jet or
Ebony magazine and to then see these passed around an office or beauty salon. From
there a conversation begins or as usual a debate ensues. A radio is always playing music
from one of the local Black radio stations such as smooth jazz from 98.9, R&B, and from
107.5 or the gospel/ contemporary Christian station power 106.3. Sometimes a tune
inspires patrons to sing out loud. A tune evokes memory. At the same time the TV is
playing shows on Black Entertainment Television (BET), soap operas, football and
basketball games, bootleg tapes and even the news get their fair share of play. And if
what is showing on television is most contemporary that show wins over the competition,
and the radio is shut off. What I am describing here is what Carpenter (2003) calls a
“hypertext” or environment of visual culture. Landow, 1992, Carpenter & Taylor, 2002 go on to explain “numerous simultaneous associations” (as cited in Carpenter, 2003, p. 12). These types of associations are often worked and reworked in the beauty salon and this makes this a space of learning and agency.

I mention all of this to suggest that the beauty salon is a very significant space and yet one of many places where Black people and Black women in particular have a voice, and possess agency to freely define, reinvent and perform in a way in which they truly see themselves. What occasionally takes place is what hooks (1992) postulates as the “critical Black female spectatorship” that emerges as a site of resistance (p. 128). This is a space that has a pervasive amount of materials; visual pop cultural text that reiterates some stereotypical narratives that devalue Black women, and could potentially undercut their self-esteem. The two reinforce each other making the process by which Black women construct their identity cyclical in nature. The focus of this research is not to explore the social instructional components of a predominately African American beauty salon. There is a need for dialogue about the ways in which Black women actively engage in redefining various forms of a collective identity in everyday life and how visual culture educators should look to Black women to develop critical questions and affective pedagogy that address their visual images. Space and the position of groups of people are essential to this study and it should be taken into consideration that:

A classroom is not simply a room in which learning takes place based on a prescribed curriculum, a textbook, or questions on an exam. “The real classroom” exists when the classroom environment is viewed as a complex text—comprised of interactions among teacher, students, visitors, subject area content, artifacts in the room, external references, and other
stimuli – worthy of interpretation and relevant to students’ lives” (Carpenter, 2003, p. 15).

Such an undertaking could inform educators who explore the content and impact of visual culture on society.

**Background to the Problem**

Scholars explain that, “While most people of color, and African Americans in particular are perceived through a distorted lens, Black women are routinely defined by a specific set of grotesque caricatures that are reductive, inaccurate, and unfair” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 3). Essentially, Black women are heavily stereotyped. And this issue has a strong presence in their visual representation. According to Webster’s dictionary a stereotype is, “something conforming to a fixed or general pattern; especially: a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment. As it relates to race and ethnicity, stereotypes are attached to every group. Silverman and Rader (2009) remind us that, “the problem, of course with all stereotypes is their propensity to attribute group characteristics to individuals. Believing all Jews are smart or all African Americans are athletic can have subsequent negative effects that balance out any positives” (p. 271).

Still people living in a society are unlikely to be neutral and cannot move away from the practice of ascribing stereotypes to other people; it is a part of our socialization process. An even more significant issue related to stereotypes is their connections to
prejudices. Patricia Devine (1989) extends the conversation on *inevitability of prejudice* and explains that “as long as stereotypes exist, prejudice will follow… stereotypes are automatically applied…knowledge of stereotypes is equated with prejudice toward the group” (p. 5). The argument that stereotypes are socially inescapable aids in our understanding of just how significant they are to our navigation in the world.

If we are to believe that stereotypes are inescapable then we must pay attention to the processes under which they operate. There are two models of responses, automatic processes and controlled processes, which convey how individuals deal with their knowledge of stereotypes. Shiffrin & Dumais (1981) explain that Automatic processes involve the unintentional or spontaneous activation of some well-learned set of associations or responses that have been developed through repeated activation in memory. They do not require conscious effort and appear to be initiated by the presence of stimulus cues in the environment” (as cited in Devine, 1989, p. 6). Automatic processes occur at the subconscious level and within a time period before any cognitive control takes place. What is revealing about the automatic process is its capacity to reveal how certain stereotypes about a particular group are activated despite the fact that it may conflict with a person’s belief. In contrast, controlled processes “are intentional and require the active attention of the individual. Controlled processes, although limited by capacity, are more flexible than automatic processes” (Devine, 1989 p. 6). It is through the controlled processes that a person can acquire new personal beliefs that overtly challenge the already established stereotype. The application of both processes allows us to understand the difference between high and low prejudiced people.
Priming Stereotypes

Regardless of whether a person is of high or low prejudice, what is always present is the exposure of stereotypic messages that are significantly and culturally identifiable. One way in which stereotypes are identifiable in the mainstream is through a process called priming. Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Fiske & Linville, 1980; Hastie, 1981; Taylor & Crocker, 1981, have all argued that, “Priming occurs when a certain category or schema is activated and applied to other, even unrelated, objects or events (as cited in Power, Murphy & Coover, 1996, p. 39). As it relates to racial signifiers, many studies have been done where researchers will prime participants with text to see how it affects their responses to people of a particular race. One study in particular by Devine (1989) presented words related to African American stereotypes to participants. This was done at an exposure threshold below conscious awareness. In a later task participants who had been primed subliminally with stereotypic traits were more likely to rate Donald, an unrelated target person, as hostile—in keeping with the racial stereotype—than participants who were subliminally primed with traits unrelated to the stereotype. (Power et al, 1996). Priming occurs often. For example, within society language and media (especially media which incorporates visual imagery) have been rich sources for priming. They pervasively provide the access to these racial signifiers and make them relevant and recognizable in mainstream society. When looking at race, priming of certain minority groups appears to be most salient in society because of the media and this has often led to negative stereotypes regarding race specific groups.
Abraham and Appiah (2006), In “Framing News Stories: The Role of Visual Imagery in Priming Racial Stereotypes” offer some invaluable references to theories that are related to visual imagery. The article’s thesis is founded on a theory called “implicit visual propositioning” and this theory explains the cognitive connection between visual images and textual narratives as it relates to news media. Specifically, implicit visual propositioning is, “defined as the use of visual images (with implied information beyond that stated explicitly in the verbal text) juxtaposed with the explicit verbal statements to make a comment, proposition or suggest new meanings that go beyond the meanings simply produced through the written or verbal narrative” (Abraham & Appiah, 2006, p. 185). This theory makes a direct connection between the multi-modal messages that are disseminated when visual images and text are intertwined. From there the article makes a direct linkage to how this process works in relation to race.

The production of racial stereotypes is rehashed and reinforced through the juxtaposition of images and text. Texts alone create racial subtext of meaning and are only elaborated and enhanced with pictorial images (Abraham & Appiah, 2006). This article shows how visual images have a dominant majority power when it comes to media messages. In relation to my research on visual culture and the representation of Black Women, this article is an appropriate reference for theoretical considerations of race and imagery. Two other theoretical frameworks, Cultivation Theory and the Theory of Accessibility further establish the sustaining existence and affects of stereotypes in visual culture media.

Cultivation Theory and the Theory of Accessibility allow us to critically evaluate the acceptance of messages of African Americans found in television media.
Fujioka (1999) posits that cultivation theory conveys messages via television that are cumulatively internalized by viewers as a result of massive exposure (i.e. frequency of television viewing to television’s uniform messages). Although this research is not interested in measuring repetitive exposure to television portrayals of African American women, the concept Cultivation Theory leads to our understanding of the acceptance of these messages and long standing survival of these messages. The Theory of Accessibility uses the concept of automatic processes; which is the unintentional and spontaneous activation of a well-learned set of associations that have been developed through repetition. And this theory suggests that the availability of these repetitive associations that are distinctive, unique and vivid have a disproportionate impact on human judgment (Tyversky & Kahneman, 1973). This theory also works in conjunction with the Schema theory that explains images or schemas are stimulus cues, which help us, understand how we process and interpret messages. From these theoretical frameworks we gain a better understanding of the profound nature of the stereotypical nature of visual images of Blacks and stereotypes.

**African American Stereotypes**

The general representation of Blacks in the media has historically been steeped in denigrating stereotypes. In Chapter 11 *Media Stereotypes Of African Americans*, of Lester and Ross’s (2003) *Images that Injure*, Linus Abraham explores racial stereotypes that are recurrent in the media’s depiction of African Americans. He first explicates that there is a historical narrative of African Americans that dates back to slavery. In reference to Donald Bogle’s (1991) identification of five dominant mythical character
types used to stereotype Blacks over time (Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks), Abraham establishes that, “the character types are subsumed under two mythical character portraits, the sambo and the savage: “sambo—meaning lazy, indolent, carefree, optimistic, and intellectually limited, and the savage—a synonym for sexual prowess, dangerousness, and impulsiveness” (p.87). Abraham’s re-introduction of these character portraits sets readers expectations of what narratives can be found throughout the media because his argument is that these narratives are present and often perpetuated visually and covertly.

**Definition of Popular African American Stereotypes**

The article “Black Stereotypes As Reflected In Popular Culture, 1880-1920”, presents a list of images of African Americans that were prevalent in popular entertainment; all of which were denigrating to Blacks. Lemons (1977) explicates that, “all these stereotypes were part of the popular culture of America at the turn of the twentieth century. They were so familiar that few people had any notion that they degraded Black Americans (p. 103). I’m not sure whether or not I agree with his argument that few people realized how these images of African Americans were denigrating. Regardless, it is important to know specifically what these images were denigrating as well as the messages they conveyed about African Americans. The typical stereotypic images that were commonly found about Blacks are:

**Zip Coon** – “is a preposterous, citified dandy who is recognizable through bright loud and exaggerated clothes…a high stepping strutter with a mismatched vocabulary” (Lemons, 1977, p. 102).
Jim Crow/Sambo – “represented the slow-thinking, slow moving country and plantation darkey. He wore tatters and rags and a battered hat. He spent his time sleepin’, fishin’, huntin’ possums, or shufflin’ slower than molasses…except when stealing chickens or dancing on the levee” (Lemons, 1977, p. 102).

The Black brute/Black Buck - (1870s -) is a violent, angry Black male. He tends to have a violent nature and an uncontrollable sexual appetite, often for white women. The quintessential example is perhaps Gus or Silas Lynch from the film “Birth of a Nation”, 1915. They cannot control themselves…As stereotypes go, this one is pretty new: it did not arise till the 1870s, after the Black slaves were freed. As slaves they were seen as simple and childlike. Once freed, they were seen as being wild and out of control (http://abagond.wordpress.com/2008/04/23/the-Black-brute-stereotype/).

Jezebel - The portrayal of Black women as lascivious by nature is an enduring stereotype. The descriptive words associated with this stereotype are singular in their focus: seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd. Historically, White women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty—even sexual purity, but Black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory. This depiction of Black women is signified by the name Jezebel (http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/).

The Tragic Mulatto - stereotype reflects a mixed-race child, the product of a Black/white relationship. They are usually light-skinned and attempt to pass for white in a society that considers Black a bad thing. Being chronically unhappy and confused are standard traits of the tragic mulatto. The Peola role in both the 1934 and 1959 versions of “Imitation of Life” was a tormented mulatto stereotype (http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/3219/Stereotype.html).

The Pickanny - is a Black child with his or her hair uncombed, nappy, and often shooting straight up on the head. With clothes that are sometimes dirty and raggedy, they are usually depicted as dim-witted. Stymie and Buckwheat, two of the Little Rascals in The Our Gang series, are early examples (http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/3219/Stereotype.html).

The Tom and Mammy– are often portrayed as kind, loving "friends" of whites. They are also presented as intellectually childlike, physically unattractive, and neglectful of their biological families (http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/caricature/).
“Hottentot”/Quintessential buttocks— for a long time, Europeans have had a fascination with the genitals and the buttocks of the African woman. This fascination reached its zenith when a South African woman, Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, was taken from her homeland in 1810 to London and then Paris as the prized human specimen to show the supposed inferiority of the Black female physique. She was exhibited naked daily, sometimes in a cage; other times private viewings were organized for men of “higher standing.” …After her death, Baartman’s body was cut up and put on display in a French museum to illustrate the French Scientists’ misconceived notion that the female African form was “abnormal” and “animalistic.” (Aduonum, 2004, p. 291).

For the purpose of this study it would be a benefit to look particularly at the stereotypes that are applicable to Black women and how they are strategically used for socio-economic and political purposes. Through these images we learn so much about the social implications of race. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) explains that, “In order to exercise power, elite white men and their representatives must be in a position to manipulate appropriate symbols concerning Black women” (p. 68). This maintenance of power is done through exploration of already existing symbols and through the creation of new ones (Patterson, 1982). Furthermore, Page (2003) goes on to say that studies of racialized gender and other media enhanced instruments of social stratification perform special social functions in the new world order (p.99). She establishes a direct relationship between the representation of Black women in the media and a white cultural practice to establish certain social structure in mainstream society. What seems like old practices of racism is in part new because of the more covert ways in which these historical stereotypes of Black women are being disseminated. This we can credit to popular culture and how it is widespread through the constant advancement of technology.
African Americans and Representation in the Visual Culture media

Abraham (2003) warns readers that because of egalitarian political correctness, the blatant racist text and messages that were once overtly expressed is not done now. Instead, “what is increasingly worrisome is the fact that racial stereotyping manifests itself in less apparent and subtle forms that are more difficult to detect and therefore to confront” (p. 90). It is the covert forms of racist visual images that are more dangerous than those that are blatant because their difficult detection provides a false sense of progress in the media effort to fairly portray African Americans and other people of African decent. The reality is that racist stereotypes still exist and go unchallenged as Abraham states above. It is efficiently easy to play on stereotypes when it comes to using visual narratives in juxtaposition with other media text. The goal for most media formats is to have audiences buy into and easily read the message with little effort. The visuals in the media have a substantial amount of power and according to Abraham (2003), “can serve very implicit and subtle functions of stereotyping that call little attention to the artifice of construction. And because this practice seldom proclaims itself openly, visual stereotyping can be very insidious and more potent than explicit verbal stereotyping (as cited in Browne et al., 1994). The lack of checks and balances in the production of media stereotypical visuals leads one to question the social responsibility, if any, that the producers of these images have to audiences? It is acknowledged that the use of such narratives is not always intentional and can even be created subconsciously but in a market media that arguably aims to be fair and balanced; the issue of accountability must be raised.
Osei Appiah (2007) makes a direct connection between the act of stereotyping and the media. His research argues that the media is a powerful source of stereotypes because, “the media are powerful in developing, reinforcing, and validating stereotypical beliefs and expectations concerning certain groups, particularly when the audience’s personal experience with those groups is limited” (p. 1). When stereotypes become the only access or exposure of a particular group then this makes stereotypical narratives all the more powerful and believable. Appiah further discusses the functionality of stereotypes in media when he explains that, “the stereotypical images found in media messages are easily accepted because they are usually simple and have little ambiguity (as cited in LaFerle & Lee 2005, p. 142). This suggests that stereotypes have a functional role in society that is both desired and needed.

In fact, this article makes a distinction between social stereotypes, positive stereotypes and negative stereotypes. Social stereotypes are acquired through a variety of media. Their presence is explained here, “in an effort to reach a broad audience with a clear message, the media often uses stereotypical categorizations of individuals or groups based on attributes such as ethnicity, gender, class, employment, sexual orientation, religion, mental or physical disability, and age (Appiah, 2007, p.1). So then, if stereotypes are necessary in order to create a sense of order in society, then why does the term have such negative connotations? Well, according to Appiah (2007) “stereotypes are not inherently bad or harmful…it is generally not until stereotypes are used in negative ways—to serve as the foundation for negative prejudice—that stereotyping becomes particularly problematic, potentially leading to discrimination and intolerance of certain groups” (p. 2). A lot of negative stereotypes that are in the media are usually centered on
racial and ethnic groups. Visually these are the first or most obvious markers when it comes to socially contextualizing people. Appiah (2007) makes a point in explaining that, “in American media, many of the most blatant examples of racial-ethnic stereotypes are associated with Black people (p.3). As stated before, there is a long history of denigrating images of Blacks in the American media and as a result this has impacted the attitudes and opinions of audiences and particularly white audiences.

The effects and challenges of stereotypes in the media are critically explored throughout the remainder of the article and Appiah (2007) establishes that “it is important to realize that stereotypes are permanent fixtures in our mediated society and in our minds” (p. 3). The permanency of stereotypes has many implications the most important being that there is a social responsibility that should be assumed when creating these images and more accurate diversified images should exist (Appiah, 2007, p. 3). This is definitely important as it relates to racial stereotypes about Black women.

“The Intersection of Race and Crime in TV News” is of relevance to the research on Black females in visual culture media because this article is based on its definition of the term racial stereotypes and the explanation it gives of the importance of visual images. Mark Peffley, Todd Shields and Bruce Williams (2001) conducted a quantitative study in which they explored the questions, “To what extent do visual portrayals of Black criminal suspects in televised news stories, independent of the audio and textual portions of the broadcast, activate and reinforce whites’ negative stereotypes of African Americans? Once activated, to what degree do racial stereotypes bias viewers’ impressions of Black (versus white) suspects portrayed in television news stories about violent crimes?” (p. 312) The study is founded on the theoretical notions that, “racial
stereotypes are commonly defined as cognitive structures that contain the perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about human groups” (Mark Peffley (2001), Hamilton & Trolier, 1986, p. 133). The most interesting thing about this theoretical argument is the fact that the same behaviors performed by Blacks and whites are interpreted differently by white subjects, with Blacks often seen as more guilty and more aggressive when it comes to criminal narratives. Although this study is specifically looking at race and crime in television, its notion that “racial stereotypes are likely to be activated automatically by encountering racial cues and symbolism” (Mark Peffley et al, 2001, p. 312) aids in our understanding of how people might read race in other media formats; and is applicable to the discussion of visual representation of Black women in the media.

Mark Peffley et al (2001) specifically explain the importance of visual images when they tell readers that visual images have a great potential for generating powerful emotional responses (Biocca, 1991). The response to African Americans in media and particularly television is a testament to that. The rationale is that there are negative stereotypic images of both Black males and females that portray them as a menace to society or that objectifies and marginalizes them into a state of “otherness”. In order to understand the prolific nature of African American stereotypes one must look at contemporary media with a critical eye. Blacks’ representation in visual culture media embroils today’s notion of a post race/racial society.
Statement of the Problem

Our girls are in Crisis! According to Janice Ferebee, BPDC Director, “‘Girls [of color] in the 21st century are faced with challenges that threaten their future including poverty, poor self-esteem and body image, teen pregnancy, high drop-out rates, media exploitation, ‘man girls’ and sophisticated cyber bullying, and lack of positive leadership and mentoring.’” Despite these challenges, girls [of color] not only can, but do survive and succeed with the support of women who believe and invest in them for the health and sustainability of our communities.”” (Women & Girls Changing The World, Para. 2).

The quote above comes from the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) website and it establishes that the attention to the state of minority females and particularly Black females is a current and relevant concern. Because of this, organizations like the NCNW develop initiatives to combat some of the challenges that these women face; it also provides a sound purpose for this study. The purpose of this study is to bring race to the forefront of visual pedagogical discourse through the exploration of Black women’s perceptions of their representation in visual art and visual culture media; and in the observation of the effects that these messages have on their identity. The purpose of this study is also to promote social uplift and empowerment among the Black females that participate in this study. Throughout the remainder of this proposal I will refer to the targeted subjects of this study as Black women. This term is also inclusive of Black teenage girls who according to the above quote are faced with the challenge of media exploitation. I believe that their point of view is equally important because visual media heavily influences their process of framing a self-image. The critique of the visual images of Black women is not new in scholarly discourse. However, this study gives participants an opportunity to develop questions about Black women and
visual culture representation that they consider to be pertinent. Art educators and visual culture scholars can refer to the questions to get insight about how to engage visual culture in the exploration of race and gender specific representation. Through the focus of artwork created by Black female artists and the use of Black female participants, this study pushes Black women from the periphery of visual culture discourse to the forefront and in a position of agency. The problem is that we (society as a whole and Black women in particular) are not looking at these images critically. Also, there are few opportunities provided for Black women and others who are concerned about the misrepresentation of this group, to challenge the existing meta-narratives of Black female inferiority. This study will also use the practicum of counter storytelling as a means of recreating narratives and messages that authentically express the ways in which a particular group of Black women view images of Black females. This is not to suggest that the narratives that will be created in the study are representative of all Black women, but rather it is an opportunity for creating narratives that are socially uplifting to the participants involved in the process. These endeavors are guided by a particular set of research questions.

**Research Questions**

The main goal for conducting a theoretical and participatory study of the images of Black women in visual art and popular visual culture is to establish and reinforce practical approaches in academia that will provide fresh discourse on how we use this media to explore race and representation in the field of Art Education and Visual culture studies. In order to find out how African American women perceive visual
representations of themselves and what pedagogical approaches should be taken to develop critical questions about these images, I will seek answers to the following question:

How does the investigation of visual images (fine art and popular culture images) portraying Black women help Black women and others to critically view and engage with representations of themselves in visual culture? This question prompts additional sub-questions:

1. What critical questions should be asked about the images of Black women according to Black women?

2. In what ways do Black women identify with commercial images of Black women?

3. What is the relationship between the images of the Black female body and Black women’s self-esteem?

4. How can the convergence of the images of Black women and personal written narratives be used to interrogate the concepts of race, gender and identity?

   - From these personal written narratives what understanding can we get about Black women’s perception of: empowerment and disempowerment, beauty and sexuality, and their various roles in society?

Artists are always responding to, interpreting and questioning what is taking place in the world. Their art is a mimesis; a mirror of the culture in which the artist lives and works (Silverman & Rader, 2009, p. 199). Concomitantly, art education pedagogy, should offer a platform for exploring the effects of artists’ cultural interpretations.
This research attempts to explore an aspect of these effects through the creative art making and narratives of Black women to artists’ interpretations of their images.

**Rationale of the Study**

*I sensed grave reluctance, denial even. And it struck me that for Black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity* (hooks, 1992, p.3-4).

The quote above suggests that there is a disconnection between the visual and visuality when it comes to the issues of representation and identity for a particular group of people. According to Sturken and Cartwright (2001) visuality can concern how we see everyday objects and people, not just those things we think of as visual texts (p. 370). The relationship between images and their visuality renders serious consequences when the group (i.e. Black women) in question is misrepresented. Images of misrepresentation are even more consequential when it occurs within the realms of mass media and popular visual culture because the viewing audience is pervasive. So then, the question that must be asked is how can marginalized groups that are misrepresented in a highly visual world take control of their images? How can they acquire the agency to construct self and group identity? I believe these questions can be deeply explored through a research study where their answers can be cultivated and examined within the realm of contemporary art and popular visual culture. Furthermore, I want both Visual culture educators and students to consider the power of images and text. Particularly, I want them to consider the use of counter-narratives as a means of investigating and contextualizing visual art and pop-culture images of race and gender in ways that make them relevant to their lives. In
recent scholarship, Art Educators have used art as a transformative tool to communicate “that it is our responsibility to harness the transformative power of art in order to educate the next generation of students to become informed and critical global citizens” (Desai, 2005, p. 306). So then, this study expands the opportunity for educators to see how contemporary art and popular visual culture can be used to foster social change in the art education classroom and the field itself.

**Scope and limitations of the study**

My research identifies the presence of historic stereotypes, meta-narratives that are ascribed to the female body through contemporary images found in popular visual culture and fine art. The research also looks at the significance of impact and interpretation that these images invoke through the critical investigation of Black undergraduate college women who believe that these images are a representation of their race and gender group identity. I am not examining whether or not these images are interpreted to be positive or problematic. Nor am I trying to promote an overall representation of ideas and interpretation of these images as something that represents all Black women’s sentiments on the issue. This research acknowledges that individuals who self-identify as Black women are diverse in a multitude of ways. This includes how we define Black womanhood itself and the acknowledgement of whether or not an image accurately is a representation of Black womanhood.

My shared background as a student and self-identity as a Black woman positions me as an insider in the focus group. This could prove to be beneficial to providing me
with access to the focus group and in removing social distance. However, I acknowledge that I already have determined notions about the issues of Black female identity in visual culture and both of these factors come into play in my role as researcher. This could be considered problematic for fellow researchers and for those who adopt a quantitative approach to methodology. My goal then in this study is not to be an objective researcher but rather reflexive. Hesse-Biber, and Leavy (2004) establish that, “Reflexivity can be an important tool that allows researchers to be aware of their positionalities, gender, race, ethnicity, class and any other factors that might be important to the research process” (p. 143). Through the use of mixed methods, the objective is not to solve a problem but rather to establish meaning(s) and to excavate multiple voices as it relates to this one particular issue: the visual representations of Black women.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE: HISTORICIZING THE BLACK FEMALE BODY NARRATIVE AND BLACK VISUAL CULTURE

Introduction

Narratives about the Black female body have been documented by Hill Collins (1990); Hobson, (2005); hooks, (1992); Mohanram, (1999); Guy-Sheftall, (1995); and Williams & Williams, (2002). In this chapter I discuss the representation of Black women in Western society. I also insert some of my own personal experiences with the issues of gender and race representation as an effort to assert and validate my own narratives. I begin by looking at 19th century Western European culture’s ideology about gender and race through a critical analysis of visual and written narratives of Sarah Bartmann, a South African Khoisan woman who was displayed on an English and French national stage. Next I address the influence of the United State’s social strata on the media’s representation of Black women and how specific stereotypic narratives have been ascribed to African American women. Lastly, I talk about the pedagogical role that Black visual culture has in teaching audiences about the nature of Black culture. I conclude this chapter by discussing the implications for using Black visual culture as a pedagogical tool in Art Education and for visual culture educators.
Bartmanmania: Reading the Black female body from an European perspective

The Black body has, of course, been demonized in Western culture; represented as ogreish, coarse, and highly menacingly sexualized. But the Black body has also been valorized, represented as darkly alluring—still highly menacingly sexualized but, well, in a good way. And this, historically, is its ambiguous role in the Western imagination.

--Henry Louis Gates JR.

There is an image of a woman; a Black woman with short cropped hair who stands stoutly before viewers. She is naked. Her eyes are cold and lifeless. Her breasts are large. Her hips are unusually wide. Still what is even more defined about her is not her character, or her occupation or even her achievements in life; it is what is considered to be an enormous and abnormal butt. We don’t see this butt in the first image that presents a front view of the woman but rather in the second image that shows a profile view.

Images like these were pervasive throughout Western European societies and soon made their way to North America. The image presents a woman without the context of her culture, and personal background. These sketched images of the woman are similar to those found scientific journals of the 18th and 19th century. These journals depicted animals and plants objectively and in profile in order to help readers and other researchers identify what species they belonged to. Consequently, these images described here invoke a scientific presence in the way it objectifies this Black female body. Furthermore, they are evidence of the long history of the display of human “others” for the amusement and entertainment
of the ruling classes in Europe (Willis & Williams, 2002). Within context, these images are actually depictions of a real person exhibited under the gaze of white eyes. What this image does not depict is the journey of which this woman took to be in this position of objectification. The sketches do not tell her story and yet they are images that are socially ascribed to countless Black females’ who have come after her.

In an effort to further expand the discourse on the images of Black women in popular culture I look to the 19th century phenomenon known as Bartmannmania. Specifically I am talking about the exhibition of a South African KhoiKhoi woman known as Sarah Bartmann, (Saartjie Baartman) or the Black Hottentot Venus. The variations of her name alone lead to evidence about colonial domination, possession and mythical identities that have been commonly attached to Black women held in subjugated positions. Master (2004) explains that “The discourse concerning Sarah h Bartmann’s name has centered around the use of the diminutive ‘Saartje’ or ‘Saartjie’ as opposed to Sarah, offered as an example of the way indigenous people were belittled and robbed of their dignity” (p. 77). Master’s insight on the issues surrounding Bartmann’s name serves more than an example of how indigenous people have been denigrated but is a signifier to how text or narratives about Black, about women, about Black women are changed and altered for the purposes and goals of white hegemony.

Willis and Williams (2002) report that Sarah Bartmann was exhibited as a curiosity in Europe, first in London and then Paris, from 1810 to 1815 (Early Dutch settlers of South Africa dubbed the South African natives “Hottentots” and Bushmen). Furthermore, “Bartmann was given a sobriquet linking her to a Western icon of physical pulchritude and sexual desirability. Yet, by European standards Venus, the Roman
goddess of love and beauty, differed from Bartmann as day from night” (p. 60). Her notoriety as the Black Venus or Venus noir was part of the attention grabbing that was needed to lure spectators to her 8-month exhibit. Bartmann was herself lured to Europe based on a promise or contract that she would earn a significant amount of money by exhibiting herself. Accordingly, “Contemporary accounts allege that she stayed willingly and lived a free woman. Some reports say that visitors paid two shillings each to view her and that she was given half the admission fee” (Willis & Williams, 2002, p. 60). Bartmann was presented in the nude, with the exception of an apron and became a sensation for her large buttocks, a condition known as steatopygia, genitalia, and a large breast. It is not surprising that Bartmann was exhibited since according to Thompson (2008) “From the beginning of the nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century in Europe and America, the display of indigenous bodies increasingly occurred in circuses, zoos, and museums” (p. 27). Thompson’s historical account establishes that there was a large public interest in Sarah Bartmann. Even if people in London and Paris did not get an opportunity to see her in person they could see depictions of her because “she was widely portrayed in the popular press, although most often in caricatures” (Willis and Williams, 2002, p. 61). The depictions of Bartmann in caricatures and the construction of her in popular ballads and plays have huge implications about the role narratives play in the mythic representations of Black women. The narratives of Bartmann are evidential to how white Western Europeans viewed the Black female body. Yancy (2008) notes, “Functioning as a site of rhetorical wealth, the Black female body inhabits a social and discursive universe within which she is constantly named, always already interpellated. As a “sexual abnormality,” Ba(a)rtman(n)’s Black body is a site of discursive formation
that is structured through a larger historical a priori that constitutes a white epistemic orientation to the Black (female) body” (p. 9). Yancy’s view of the Black female body as rhetorical wealth, suggests that the body itself is a text. It’s presence aids in the construction of particular knowledge that supports a white epistemic and ontological point of view of self-normalcy. This is why the Black female body has and continues to be presented as a “sexual abnormality”.

Many narratives have been constructed from myths about the Black female body and they have been deconstructed in Women Studies, African, African American Studies, History and contemporary studies. However the contention of T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s (1999) is that the discourse on the Black female body particularly Black women in French culture and literature has not been defined as a critical issue. Her book *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* overwhelmingly explore the presence and role that Black women in France have played within French culture during the 19th century. Her thesis reads:

The specific thesis of this work then is that Black women, embody the dynamics of racial/sexual alterity, historically invoking *primal fears* and desires in European (French) men, represent ultimate difference (*the sexualized savage*) and inspire repulsion, attraction, and anxiety, which gave rise to the nineteenth-century collective French male imaginations of Black Venus (*primitive narratives*) (p. 6).

I look at Sharpley-Whitting’s findings about difference through the exploration of three themes: The Development of a Master text, Representation and the Gaze, and Black and Identity. These particular themes give insight to the assignment of difference through narrative, on the Black female body and the social and cultural implications that this difference answers to.
In her first chapter *Writing Sex, Writing Difference: Creating the Master Text on the Hottentot Venus*, Sharpley-Whitting examines how little is known about Sarah Bartmann except for the narratives that have been constructed by white men. She explains how the penned writings of naturalists about the Black female body are actually dominating narratives that subjugate the Black female to white patriarchal oppression. The pen of the naturalist is a reference to the scientific, ethnographic and historical writings that was conducted in Europe’s colonized spaces. The naturalists who constructed these texts did so through a process of observation. The process “allows objects under the gaze to be ordered into a totalizing system of representation that allows the seen body to become the known body” (Sharpley-Whitting, 1999, p. 22). Knowledge, the perspective of seeing is also a Constructivist point of view in which it is predicated on experiences. However as Sharpley-Whitting (1999) point out, “a significant problem within the constitutive framework of the discipline arises because of its dependency on the human eye” (p. 22). The Master texts about Bartmann are social constructions built out of the perception of white Westerners.

The master text consists of seeing Bartmann as a highly developed animal, primitive and alluring. Much of the works that have been examined to support this argument are descriptions of Sarah Bartmann from the journals and published text of the anatomist George Cuvier. Cuvier observed Bartmann and published a book *Discours sur les revolutions du globe*, in which he writes:

> That which our female Bushman possessed that was the most repulsive was her physiognomy. Her face takes in part after the Negro by the jutting out of the jaw, the obliquity of the incisor teeth, the thickness of lips, the shortness … of chin … and in part after the Mongol by the enormity of the
cheek bones, the flatness of the base of the nose ….Her hair was Black and woolly like that of Negroes, the slits of her eyes were horizontal … like that of Mongols …her eyes were dark and lively; her lips, a bit Blackish, 2awand monstrously swelled; her complexion very swarthy…Her ears were much like those found in many monkeys, small and weakly formed at the tragus. (as cited in Sharpley-Whitting, 1999, p. 25).

As stated before, Cuvier’s description of Sarah Bartmann is similar to how scientist classified animal species. This is known as the Scientific Gaze in which animals and plants were classified into certain categories based on their physiological characteristics. It would be a few decades later, “In 1854, Josiah Clark Nott, a physician and surgeon, and George Robins Glidon, an Egyptologist, published *Types of Mankind*, popularizing the polygenist theory of separate origins of human races” (Sharpley-Whitting, 1999, p. 25). The application to people was done in order to explain racial diversity except Cuvier’s description above likens Bartmann to a monkey. She is not described in a way that establishes her as either a human or a woman. Keep in mind, there is a difference in language that identifies something as female and someone as a woman. Sex can be applied to animals and plants but the label woman is associated with a particular social and cultural construction predicated on aesthetic and behavioral values associated with human being. Bartmann cannot be described in the master narrative as a woman because of her physical difference to white womanhood. Rather, the narrative presents her as the antithesis of this nomenclature. It is Sharpley-Whitting, (1999) argument that Cuvier’s text on Black female sexuality and Black remains superficial and incomplete. Furthermore, she explains “Cuvier endeavored to prove that Blacks were not only physiognomically and physiologically distinct, but that Black women were anatomically
different‖ (p. 27). His endeavor, led to the plaster molding of her body, and preservation of her brain, skeleton and reproductive organs.

The dissection of Bartmann’s reproduction organs after her death in December 29, 1815 or January 1, 1816 (she died of smallpox aggravated by alcohol poisoning) was done so because upon examination, Cuvier discovered that Bartmann had an enormous labia minora or nymphae. Prior to her death, no one knew she had this except for people she agreed to give private showing too. She had her genetalia discretely tucked between her thighs. It is my contention that Bartmann herself did this as a means of agency and control of her body and what she actually was willing to let be observed. There is debate as to whether the condition of this area of the body was done purposely for fashion or if it is a result of natural development. Bartmann was not the first woman from her area to be observed with this condition. Described as the “Hottentot apron”, the overdeveloped nymphae were visual evidence of the underdevelopment of female Black bodies according to Cuvier. Accordingly, “Cuvier racially naturalizes—in a few short paragraphs—its existence, suggesting primitive, and consequently a difference in comparison to European women’s sex‖ (Sharpley-Whitting, 1999, p. 29). This comparative difference of feminity is what allowed Bartmann and many other Black women to be presented to society as a spectacle, sexual deviant and derision. However, what is ironic is the contradictory reception of the Black female body.

Figure 2 Drawing of Bartmann and "Hottentot Apron"
As much as the master text works to show difference and repulsion, the Black body was also conceptualized as erotic and seductive. Sharpley-Whitting, (1999) presents this contradiction by analyzing Cuvier’s description of Bartmann in which she concludes, “Cuvier’s gaze, it appears, is tempered with eroticism. The hand, foot, and other body parts, endowed with grace, charm, and allure, become a synecdoche for the palpably titillating Black female body” (p. 24). So then within the master text of Black femaleness there is a contradiction in the representation of it. The descriptive language of sexual abnormality as well the descriptive language of eroticism supports Yancy’s (2008) point that, “In reference to Hottentot Venus, French male knowledge production and the perception of “reality” is negotiated within a context that ensures immunity to its own vested interests and desires” (p. 12). These vested interests not only influenced the development of written text and caricatures of Bartmann but also in the representation of her in Vaudeville and through a socio-cultural Gaze.

Another theme that Sharpley-Whiting presents is the representation of Black women under the Gaze. Specifically, she explores the representation of Sarah Bartmann in the vaudeville production *La Vénus hottentote, ou haine aux Francaises*, or A “one-act vaudeville,” *The Hottentot Venus*, which was written in 1814 by Messieurs Théaulon, Dartois and Brasier. The vaudeville production reveals how Europeans, and specifically the French have defined self by contrasting it to the Other. The premise of the play is about a French man, Adolph, who has developed a hatred and fear for Frenchwomen because he was “Disgracefully deceived” by his first and second wife. Through the reading of his uncle’s travel memoirs Adolph determines that his next wife will be “une exotique”. Once again, text plays an essential role in the desires and exotic notions that
European men had of Black women during that time. The conflict arises when Adolph’s widowed cousin, Amelia secretly arrives to the family chateau and plots with the baroness to trick Adolph into marrying her. She decides to impersonate the Hottentot Venus through dress and darkening of the skin (Blackface). Shipley-Whiting analysis of the play centers on the representation of the Hottentot as comedic, ridiculous and savage. This must be done because “surely the desire for an Other woman is utter madness. [Adolph’s] incomprehensible desires not only run counter to French ethnocentrisms and racial hierarchization, but also deviate from the aristocracy’s well-noted propensity for incestuous liaisons” (Shipley-Whiting, 1999, p. 36). Amelia’s impersonation of the Hottentot becomes satirical through her choice of speech and actions; her impersonation is a social commentary on the absurdity of Frenchmen desiring the Other over Frenchwomen.

It is important to note the significance of the Gaze as it relates to representation. Sarah Bartmann was literally subjected to the Gaze of numerous Europeans while under exhibition in London and Paris and then she is personified in Théâtre de Vaudeville in an attempt to redirect the gaze. Shipley-Whiting (1999) suggests that:

> The gaze is always bound up with power, domination, and eroticization; it is eroticizing, sexualized, and sexualizing. The indisputable fact that throngs of a predominantly male, French crowd paid to gaze upon Bartmann as the essential primitive, as the undeveloped savage unable to measure up to Frenchness…yet the comedy’s intentions of redirecting the gaze have still more far-reaching and insidious cultural implications. The de-eroticization of the French male gaze with respect to Black women (embodied in the objectified Sarah h Bartmann) and the redirection of the eroticized gaze of white female bodies underscore the pervasive nineteenth-century male fear of cultural/racial dissolution embedded, as Sander Gilman has noted in the act of miscegenation. (p. 34-35)
Looking at Bartmann with an eroticized gaze challenges the sense of self that the French have; and their ideas of what is beautiful and desirable. It could be that the presence of the Black female body under the gaze of white European eyes is actually what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*. In his rationalization to determine the relationship between the subject (which in this case would be the European patriarchal society) and a lost object (the Black female body) Lacan describes the gaze as:

> The objet petit a of the scopic drive (the drive that motivates us to look)...The objet petit a is in each case a lost object, an object that the subject separates itself from in order to constitute itself as a desiring subject...The subject is incomplete or lacking because it doesn’t have this object, though the object only exits insofar as it is missing. As such, it acts as a trigger for the subject’s desire, as the object-cause of this desire, not as the desired object. (Todd McGowan, 2007, p. 6)

The Black female body operates as the *objet petit a* because within European social conventions it is an object that is not permitted to be obtained or accepted as a human being. This conflicts with how Black female bodies like Sarah Bartmann are exhibited and positioned as objects of sexuality; consider the fact that Bartmann was always displayed nearly naked. The Black female body gets missing in the translation of white desirability and yet it also triggers the subject’s desire.

Black female bodies operate so much as a trigger of desirability that soon this desirability turns into fetishism. The implication of the Black female body under the gaze of white patriarchy has resulted in certain thematic representations that reveal it as a fetishized object. Historically and presently, we see images of Black women in subjugated
positions, which according to film critic Laura Mulvey, is a result of the gaze being associated with male spectatorship and with the ideological operations of patriarchal society (McGowan, 2007, p. 4). Consequently, a lot of the contemporary images of Black women are replications of already existing master texts that are constructed through white patriarchal fetishism. Still, in order to fully understand how the Black female body becomes an object of contempt and desirability, we must take into consideration the issue of identity and Black as a racial signifier of difference.

The third theme that will be explored in Sharpley-Whiting’s work is Black and identity. Specifically, she looks at Black as difference through the prose of Charles-Pierre Baudelaire and the nineteenth century French cultural fetishism of the Hottentot apron and prostitution. Baudelaire wrote a series of poems based on his affair with mulatto prostitute and travels to French colonies. His collection of poems in Les Fleur du mal were at one time censored but it is through close analysis that Sharpley-Whiting finds significant evidence of how Black female bodies and the notion of the apron or tablier is closely connected to venal sexual activities that were taking place between bourgeois Frenchmen and their maids as well as prostitutes who dressed like maids. A maid holds a domestic occupation whose dress often requires the wearing of an apron. As discussed earlier, Sarah Bartmann, wore an apron around her apron or “sex” and Sharpley-Whiting (1999) explains, “In the early nineteenth century the apron, or the tablier, was already fetishized in the French scientific and cultural imagination thanks to Sarah Bartmann, the Hottentot Venus…The conflation of the Venus at this juncture with her apron(s) into the prostitute body as the quintessence of vice, disease, and venality is equally noteworthy” (p. 65). The amalgamation of Black female bodies with sexual proclivities is definitely a
process that is connected to the issues of Black identity. According to Fanon the question of “In reality, who am I” that is asked by the colonized Black body has to do with the fact that its identity is connected to the ideas that others have of it (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999, p. 69). Baudelaire’s touches upon this in his poem La Belle Dorothéé in which a freed Black prostitute Dorothée develops an identity bound in her actions. Specifically:

Her livelihood as a prostitute is bound up with this identity, which continuously denies her Frenchness and, at one time, rendered her a bondwoman. In essence, Dorothée is Black; she is a prostitute because she is a “freed” Black woman in the colonies; she can never be French because she is Black; she was a slave because she is Black. Hence she can exist only as either slave or prostitute in the colonies, because she is a Black woman (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999, p. 67).

The circumstance surrounding Dorothée’s social status is directly connected to her Black and the fact that it is inherently different in French society when compared to white Frenchwomen. As a result Dorothée can never obtain “Frenchness”. Instead she is positioned as sexually venal and useful, racially subjugated, and economically dependent….” (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999, p.69). Like Cuvier’s narratives of Bartmann, Bauldelord’s poems can be taken into consideration as evidence of the sexual deviance and difference that Black female bodies are identified with. Along with these examples is contemporary evidence according to Thompson (2008) who notes, “The representation of Black women as sexually available bodies in present day European advertisements indicates that some of the same ideologies that enabled the mobility of Baartmann and [Josephine Baker] in European society are still entrenched in current spatial politics and inform the spaces available for negotiating Black womanhood in contemporary France (p.
This is also evident in the contemporary representation of Black women in North America and especially, the United States.

From Mammy To Miss America: A look at K Sue Jewell’s reading of the Black female body in American media

About two years ago, I purchased a Verizon Internet package (I was switching from my Insight Services because they had lost the monopoly on my area of services and had been robbing me for over a year). I found out soon that one of the reasons why Verizon was cheaper was because customers have to assemble the service themselves. So here I was with a box full of wires, a picture diagram and a one eight hundred number just in case I ran into installation problems. Needless to say I called for some assistance. When I eventually broke through the automated prompters a technical rep that I’ll call LeRoy greeted me. LeRoy was all too helpful and had gotten comfortable enough to tell me that he was new to the city of Columbus (he had just relocated from Detroit) and was getting grounded in his new job. I must admit the conversation was entertaining and it became obvious that LeRoy was flirting. He wanted to show me his savvy technical skills and prompted me to give him access control to my laptop. This means that he could control my mouse function. This was necessary in order for me to get my wireless service set up. Soon while he was fixing the network service he got into a conversation about his My Space page and within minutes he took me to his site (two things was going on here, remember he has control of my computer and his agenda was to show me what he looks like). My first thought was, “this dude is crazy and a little unprofessional!” Then my second thought was “I really need to get my wireless Internet access so I’ll tolerate this”.
LeRoy scrolled through his My Space page and showed me pictures of him, his mother and homeboys all while we waited for some program to download. And then that’s when it happened. As LeRoy scrolled down his page, I was soon looking at various images of half dressed women. These women were clearly music video dancers. One particular image caught my attention because it unlike the other images wasn’t still. It was a graphic video image of Black women dancing erotically around a group of men.

One woman in particular was dressed in a Black swimsuit and was bent over while rolling her butt in a circle. In captions were the words “Tip Drill”¹. The scene then got even more degrading as one of the men took out a credit card and slid it down the crack of her behind! I was shocked! This was unexpected. The thoughts that went through my head were “Oh my God why is she doing this?” “Why is he doing this?” “Why is this being allowed to happen?” “Why does LeRoy have this on his page?” “Is this the expectation of Black women that men have?” I was disgusted. I suddenly saw Leroy completely

¹ “Tip Drill” is the name of a 2003 Nelly song, the video of which became controversial among students at Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU), most notably Spelman College, black political and popular cultural commentators, women’s groups, and other activists for its overt depiction of women as sexual objects."² It was meant to be a single, but withdrawn due to its potentially offensive content.

Most interpret the phrase “tip drill” to mean “a person with a ‘nice’ body but an ‘ugly’ face” or “a man with an ‘ugly’ face who has a lot of money,” due to the lyrics “it must be yo ass ‘cause it ain’t yo face” and “it must be yo money ‘cause it ain’t yo face.”
different than how I saw him a few minutes ago before he took me to his page. I asked, “Why do you have that on your page? I mean really come on!” His response, “I know, I know, it was meant to be a joke”. Needless to say the remainder of the technical support was strictly more business-like (the way it should have been in the first place). And I promptly hung up after my wireless service was working properly. Yet, my experience with Leroy left me in deep thought. What was the joke? How could this man, some sister’s brother, some mother’s son, have a picture of his mother and that video clip on the same page? Where was the disjuncture? According to Dr. David Pilgrim (2002), a professor of sociology at Ferris State University:

The portrayal of Black women as lascivious by nature is an enduring stereotype. The descriptive words associated with this stereotype are singular in their focus: seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd. Historically, White women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty – even sexual purity, but Black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory. This depiction of Black women is signified by the name Jezebel. (http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/)

It seems now more than ever that the shadow of Jezebel is pervasively haunting Black women whether they choose to participate in denigrating performances or not. Despite many of the insurmountable odds that Black women have survived and their achievements, collectively Black women are still viewed and (re)presented to the nation
as “nappy headed hoes”.\footnote{On April 4, 2007, during a discussion about the NCAA Women's Basketball Championship, Imus characterized the Rutgers University women's basketball team players as "rough girls" commenting on their tattoos. His executive producer Bernard McGuirk responded in his familiar "urban-speak" vernacular by referring to them as "hardcore ho's". The "urban-speak" banter continued with Imus describing the girls as "nappy-headed hos"\cite{9}\cite{10} and McGuirk remarking that the two teams looked like the "jigaboos versus the wannabes" mentioned in Spike Lee's film, School Daze; apparently referring to the two teams' differing appearances. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Imus#Controversial_Rutgers_comments)} This should have come as no surprise to those who have followed the narrative text of Black women because the writing is on the wall. Now with the prevalence of such misogynistic images the new arsenal of objectifying text makes the mission of renegotiating Black female subjectivity even more challenging.

Sociologist K. Sue Jewell explains how policy and the American social strata influence the representation of the Black women in the United States. In her book, *From Mammy To Miss America And Beyond: Cultural Images & the Shaping of US Social Policy* (1996), her argument is that the United States has a social hierarchy in which, a paucity of individuals have a monopoly on wealth and power (p.4). This power is sustained through hegemony, meaning that other groups outside the dominant group, white males, have limited access to power, which they control and they believe and play into various ideologies that keep them under white male subjugation. Some of the ideologies discussed in Jewell’s research is that of a meritocracy system that teaches the masses that people are without because they are not working hard enough or don’t have the innate talent or skills necessary to acquire the resources of wealth and power. This has
been the message about Black women, who are at the bottom of the rung in American society (Jewell, 1993, p. 6). The American media’s roll in espousing this message has huge implications for the representation of Black women. Jewell (1993) gives an explanation of how the media operates:

The media can and does validate and legitimizes one’s relative worth to society, as an individual and a member of a particular racial or ethnic group. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the media’s role in constructing images of society’s members along the lines of race, ethnic group, gender, social class and other ascribed categories is that it does so using diametrically opposed categories…these categories in society are ordinal, meaning that categories are ranked as higher or lower, and better or worse. Thus, certain races are defined as better than others, men are more valued than women, and so forth. (p. 23)

Jewell’s explanation has value when considering the images of Black women in the American media. Black women’s position of wealth and power are determined on two significant criteria’s, race and gender and this would explain why they hold a lower social status in comparison to other groups. Consequently, images of Black women in the American media continue to have a residue of denigration despite the major breakthroughs and individual successes that prove that Black women have the talent and can acquire the skills to succeed. Specifically, there are cultural images of Black women that are stereotypic, inaccurate, and false and yet they are accepted and internalized. These images, which influences the expectations of Black women are best defined as specific symbols. Scholars have pinpointed that the representation of Black women in America have historically fallen into these four categories: Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, and Jezebel/the bad-Black girl. As discussed earlier, the image of Mammy is
often a passive domestic worker who is large in size. The Aunt Jemima stereotype is similar to Mammy but different in that, she is limited to the task of cooking and can be jolly and cantankerous. The Sapphire image, serves the purpose of presenting Black women as being fiercely independent, headstrong and often emasculating when it comes to her interactions with Black men. This suggests that Black women are hypo-masculine and finally the Jezebel/ bad-Black girl image in American media often can be identified when lighter complexioned Black women are presented as sexually alluring, arousing and seductive. Here, Black women are presented as having hypersexuality (Jewell, 1993, Wallace-Sanders, 2002). There are many other stereotypical images attributed to Black womanhood as the media and society has evolved but these four are the staple. All of these stereotypical images of Black women are considered to be the antithesis of white womanhood. Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, and Buchanan (2008) explain the origin of this difference and the perception of white womanhood:

Many of these differences grew out of the cult of true womanhood (Perkins, 1983; Welter, 1966), a notion of womanhood that emerged for White (middle-class) women in the mid-1800s. This ideal emphasized modesty, purity, and domesticity for White women and identified wife and mother as their primary and most important roles. (p.455)

In a society that builds its social relations on a foundation of dichotomies, Black women in the United States context, still must contend with visual messages that suggest they are not “true women”. So then, how have Black women challenged these messages? There are many ways that these stereotypes have been confronted. The African American community has a strong legacy of protest and
confronting ideologies that challenges our civil liberties. As it relates to women, there has been a very strong heritage of literacy that proves this. One literary work that comes to mind is Sojourner Truth’s (1851) speech, “Ain’t I a Woman”. Here she stood at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio and rhetorically asked the question “Ain’t I a Woman?”

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! (Widmer, 2006)

This excerpt from her speech supports Jewell’s argument that Black women in the United States are placed in a lower social stratum due to gender and race. And yet, the fact that Sojourner Truth, an ex-slave and abolitionist, penned a speech to challenge American patriarchy and racism is proof of the methods in which Black women have used to rewrite and challenge their society’s meta-narratives about them. Likewise, the production of visual art as a means for producing counter-narratives can also be found as an effective method to produce new ways presenting the Black female body.

**Speaking out: Black women artist addressing the Black female body in fine art**

Trying to confront and challenge the stereotypes of Black people is an arduous task that has been approached before. Harry B. Shaw (1990) reminds readers of this in his discussion of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960’s. He explicates that, “Black artists not only confronted the numerous racist and white supremacist ideologies, but in their attack on the former, they confronted themselves” (p. 90). Shaw brings to light that the
denigrating narratives of Blacks is not solely coming from whites but also, Blacks themselves are complicit in perpetuating and embracing these narratives. One artist in particular who challenges the racist stereotypes of Black women is Murry DePillars. Through his reproduction of the Aunt Jemima image, an iconic image of the Mammy stereotype, DePillars develops a counter-narrative of Black women. Specifically, in his work entitled *For Ron Smith and John Carlos* he challenges the docility of the Aunt Jemima narrative. Shaw (1990) explains:

Before [DePillars' work] Aunt Jemima smiled contentedly from the sides of pancake and syrup containers, just like Uncle Ben, Elsie the Cow, and the nameless but loveable pooch that is always used to sell dog food. However, in this work by Depillars, Aunt Jemima is assuming a role that is completely different from her historic one. This Aunt Jemima, with its full-length figure and stern facial expression, indicates the emergence of an image of heroic proportions. (p. 90)

DePillars' image and narrative of Aunt Jemima as a hero alongside Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman in the struggle for Black liberation mirrors the historic image of Ron Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics holding their fist in air as a symbol of Black Power. These images are counter-narratives that challenges what Shaw describes as “positive negative images”, or rather positive images of Blacks that are used for commercial purposes but lack a substantive change in the way white Americans deal with the question of race (p. 88). Positive negative images uphold the stereotypes that we have come to know and images that have shaped America’s narrative about race. However it is the “negative positive images” like those found in DePillars' art that disrupt the meta-narratives of race and cause us to be self-reflective of the inherent social injustices that still persist within American society.
DePillars is not alone in trying to deconstruct the Aunt Jemima narrative. Artist Betye Saar does this in her mixed media titled “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima” (1972). Here, there is a figure of a gun and broom-toting mammy against the backdrop of the popular Aunt Jemima pancake mix logo. Also, within the Mammy figure’s dress is a picture of another Aunt Jemima figure holding a distressed white baby. The dress of this Aunt Jemima figure is actually part of a Black fist (a symbol for Black power). Saar’s image is similar to Depillars in that it represents protest and resistance through the imagery of the shotgun and Black fist. And like Depillars, her work represents a counter-narratives of the Aunt Jemima image. The works of these artist and other like them suggests that the construction of counter-narratives is a necessary activity for social justice because it instructs us to look keenly at everyday embedded images of race and racist narratives that we receive from them.

From June 10th to July 19th, 2008 at the Arlington Art Center in Arlington Virginia, 11 Black women artists displayed counter-narrative images of Black women in the exhibit “She’s So Articulate: Black Women Artists Reclaim the Narrative.” Like DePillars and Saar they presented work that established new narratives about Black women while simultaneously challenging existing ones. Executive Director Claire Huschle notes, “[The exhibit] presents eleven artists all operating on the front lines of contemporary culture. They employ the strategies and conventions of narrative for a variety of purposes: from dissecting new media technology, to critiquing popular culture,
to attempting to alter the way our national story itself is told (Catalogue, 2008, p. 7). With a combination of emerging artists and established artists, this exhibit provided a space for dialogue that suggests the appropriateness and necessity to actively construct counter-narratives of the images that represent them. Through my own exploration of images of the exhibit I have come across three themes that are informative of my current research on the images of Black women and the development of counter-narratives. These themes are: Assuming power, Memory and Hegemony, and Culture.

Similar to the works of DePillars and Saar, artist Renee Cox challenges the commodified and stereotypical images of Aunt Jemima along with Uncle Ben. In her Cibachrome print entitled, “Liberation of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben (1998) there is a theme of “Assuming Power”. The print consists of recognizable Aunt Jemima pancake box and the Uncle Ben’s rice box joined side by side. Yet in the middle of the iconic images is an image of the artist Renee Cox dressed in a superhero outfit. Joined on each side of her arm are the image of a Black woman with an Afro, Black bikini and tall Black boots and a Black shirtless man in Black and red shorts and Black boots. Cox appears to be pulling them along with her, which suggests that she is freeing them or helping them to escape. The Black woman and the Black man are representative of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben. Consequently, “Cox’s or Raje [her Black superhero name] rescued the Black stereotyped advertising

Figure 5 "Liberation of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben" (1998)
figures of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima from their products’ labels” (Catalogue, 2008, p. 20). Since, Cox has inserted herself in the print as the superhero; this has implications for assuming power. She is assuming the role of superhero and taking the liberty of liberating not only Black stereotyped figures but also herself. The theme of assuming power is strongly connected to my goal of agency that I would like the participants of my study to define and establish for themselves. Cox’s is known for reconstructing popular images as well as masterpieces by Da Vinci and Michelangelo in order to alter their existing narratives for narratives that are inclusive of contemporary Black figures. Her art is an assumption of power and is often met with controversy. It is also a strong example of how I would like my participants to personally engage with the production of their own images.

The second theme that I find relevant to my research is memory. Often the narratives that get told about Black women are exclusive of our memory and experiences. Artist Maya Freelon Asante’s painting “Blood of our Ancestors” is made with tissue paper, and seeks to capture memories of the Black Diaspora in order to prove that “we recognize that we have the power to represent, rewrite, rethink and recreate ourselves” (Catalogue, 2008, p. 18). Asante’s reconstruction of narratives and the layering of memories through visual art are also useful to my research goal of constructing counter-narratives and of exploring issues of both individual and collective identities of Black women. Cox’s description of her working process supports this goal. She states:
For the last three years I have worked with this vibrant, fragile paper, witnessing its deterioration—in and out of water, ripped and pieced back together, thrown, saturated, baked, stepped on, forgotten, and remembered. And since I haven’t discarded a single sheet, each piece speaks to me as a memory of existence, a record of time, a history. Independently, a torn piece of paper seems like a scrap of trash. But once unified with others, the force is overwhelming. (Catalogue, 2008, p. 18)

Metaphorically, Asante’s art making process and her use of words like thrown, saturated, forgotten and stepped on, mirrors the experiences of those who are marginalized. Her use of fragile material such as tissue paper appropriately is symbolic of the fragility that Black women and other marginalized groups face when confronted with the issues of identity and representation. The theme of memory allows for the research participants and myself to focus on already existing knowledge, and personal experiences as a way to conceptualize our identity and think about it independently as well as collectively in such a way that it becomes more recognizable to how we truly feel about ourselves, as opposed to how we are told to feel about ourselves from certain hegemonic images of Black women.

The third theme “Hegemony and Culture” is deeply explored in the artwork of artist, Erika Ranee. Ranee’s piece “Superstar” (2007), integrates themes of the Black Afro, a symbol of empowerment with her research of the Black woman in rap videos. She finds these images to be contrasts of each other and as it relates to Black women in videos she explains, “I am drawn to how they are exploited and to the complex relationships between these women and their rappers—and fascinated
by the corporate entities that encourage such debased images” (Catalogue, 2008, p. 30). Ranee’s attempt to work through the representation of Black women in hegemonic and cultural spaces is useful to my research because she puts to practice the critical and slowing down process of reading these images, that bombards viewers at such a fast pace. Furthermore, Ranee asks pertinent questions that I address in my study. For example she asks, “How do these images affect young, impressionable (Black) women today? How does this influence the ways in which I’m viewed as a Black woman regarding my body and sex? In short, the negative images of the video girls are encroaching on the powerful Afro (Catalogue, 2008, p. 30). Ranee’s questions and conclusion are developed through the process of self-reflection. In my research study I asked that all participants make an effort to engage in this as well. To be critically reflective is important to the validity of this qualitative research that is seeking thoughtfully constructed narratives from the participants. Visually, Ranee works with the layering of materials that are symbolic of the experiences of the women of the rap videos and those who wear an Afro. She states, “The detritus of the dancing women’s day-to-day toil – such as band-aids, used false eyelashes, and make-up/decals – are locked inside the ooze” (Catalogue, 2008, p. 30). Likewise, I see the representation of Black women caught inside the ooze of a hegemonic culture that supports these denigrating images. This entrapment of Black female representation is actually pedagogical and begs for an examination of the relationship between Black visual culture and Black culture.
How Black Visual Culture teaches about Black Culture

Radio, television, film and the 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, of “us” and “them.” Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil (Dines & Humez, 1995, p. 5).

How can Black Visual Culture teach about Black Culture? This is a pertinent question because Black Culture is not something that can be clearly pinpointed or defined. It has multiple meanings and diverse layers of existence and yet Black Culture is distinctly recognizable in visual culture. The ubiquitous nature of Black Culture is clearly recognizable in visual culture because societies depend on visual culture to re-project their perceptions and social constructs of Black Culture as well as other cultures. Evidence of Black Culture can be found in a variety of media. Newspapers, magazines, television shows, comedy acts, commercials, movies, radio, advertisements, theatre, architecture, fashion, websites, CD covers, and labels are just a few media in which we find Black Culture. Even more significant than all of these areas of Black representation is art. Black art is the one medium of Black Visual culture that has the most stability in chronicling the Black Diaspora. For this reason, the teaching of Black culture through Black visual culture is essential in the field of Art Education.

People who have encountered diverse groups of Black people may understand that Black culture is not homogenous. Blacks are a quintessential example of diversity; a melting pot within a melting pot if you will. Although this statement might be viewed as an essentialist claim it is based on the experiences of colonialism, slavery, miscegenation
and wide embracement of group membership that has taken place within these historical contexts. However, if we are to critically examine the portrayal of Black through Black visual culture both past and present, we get the opposite message. People with a dearth of exposure to Black people buy into the limiting images and messages of Blacks in the media as true representations of all Blacks. The question “How does Black visual culture teach about Black culture?” assumes there is a relationship between Black visual culture and Black culture and that the two do not exist without the other. The question also assumes that there are particular consequences for this symbiotic relationship. These assumptions are true. We (meaning human beings) learn how and what to be through the visual cultural images that we create. The visual cultural images that are created by us give back to us our own cultural identities, understandings and values; as well as our notion of others. As it relates to Black visual culture, not only does it expose how Black people see ourselves but also how others and particularly the dominant white patriarchal Western societies view us. How Black visual culture teaches about Black culture is heavily connected to the notions of blackness, audience, marketing and Impact.

The idea of blackness or rather how it is conceptually perceived varies also but there are some common identifiers that must be explored in order to fully understand the relationship between Black visual culture and Black culture. In an effort to explain why Blacks are so committed to the idea of blackness, Rhett S. Jones explains that:

Blackness is similar to ethnicity in that it marks one group off from another, has a distinct set of cultural traits, and those who share it believe they are related. But blackness is both more narrow and more broad than ethnicity“ (Hutchinson, 1997, p. 49).
The pervasiveness of blackness has contributed to a global community built out of the common experiences of both social inequities and a quest for survival. For this reason, blackness although socially constructed, serves as both a political and economic agenda to answer to those common experiences. Initially blackness was used to categorize and implement social inequities, if we are to believe the argument that “Blackness is rooted in the one drop rule, in the absence of ethnicity among African Americans, and in the slave experience” (Hutchinson, 1997, p. 50). It became necessary for whites in British North American colonies to make the polemic distinction between themselves and other groups. When miscegenation imposed a threat to polluting the socially constructed white race (which before had only identifiable ethnic distinctions) and challenging the economic institution of slavery both in numbers and potential coalitions with poor whites and indentured servants, the usefulness of “blackness” came into play. It only took one drop to be assigned the label Black.

This classification system bares significance not only on how whites see Blacks but also on how Blacks see themselves, both in the past as well as the present. Critical Race Theorist Paul Gilroy (2000) attributes the conceptual longevity of blackness to a survival tactic; he describes how, “They have involved elaborate, improvised constructions that have the primary function of absorbing and deflecting abuse. But they have gone far beyond merely affording protection and reversed the polarities of insult, brutality, and contempt, which are unexpectedly turned into important sources of solidarity, joy, and collective strength” (p. 12). In this description Gilroy doesn’t see that the conceptualization of Black is a utility whose purpose has transgressed over time. Black mediates and agitates; it is ephemeral and yet constant. Michelle Wright (2004)

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argues, “Black identity has been produced in contradiction” (p.1). Yes, Black has within it contradictions and yet is consistent. Black is real and cannot be denied, or ignored. Without Black, whiteness does not exist; it serves an antithetical purpose. Given the contradictions and diversity of Black, one must question why the presentation of Black appears in very formulaic ways that makes it seem more stereotypical and at times homogenous. Perhaps this could be best understood if we look at Black in a global space. Specifically, “Blacks in the Diaspora possess an intimidating array of different historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences. At the same time, despite this range of differences, they are most often identified in the West as simply “Black” and therefore as largely homogenous” (Wright, 2004, p. 2). Wright gives some insight on how visually the representation of Black Culture is limited in its possibilities. It becomes clear that the investigation of Black Culture through Black Visual Culture should be continuous and critical since the two are always evolving.

**Black Visual Culture: the representation of Black**

Black visual culture is the representation of blackness in visual texts. Visual texts are often combined with other elements such as written texts and audio sound and music that only strengthen the meaning making of the visual representation of blackness. Black Visual Culture and Black Culture is a befitting union because blackness is primarily visible (Harris, 2003, p. 1). The significance of locating the high visuality of blackness and labeling it is embedded in the fact that Black Visual Culture is political and has the ability to project a society’s past and present socio-economic and cultural values. It is for this reason that Black Culture is a powerful pedagogical tool; and it is at times a weapon
of mass destruction against the very people it represents. What I am referring to is what in the foreword to Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation, Moyo Okediji describes as a dualistic state of Black representation. This is a binary state that is asymmetrical and he explains that:

The bias of representation is that it only includes the interests of one party and excludes those of the other party. It therefore reduces reality to a partisan struggle between two forces: one good, the other bad. In the specific case of Black representation, Harris demonstrates that the story has been one-sided because the noise of ‘whiteness have largely drowned the voices of “blackness”. (Harris, 2003, p. viii)

The messages about blackness that are disseminated through visual text have historically been used to perpetuate Whiteness as superior. This “noise of whiteness” is deafening to the “noise of blackness primarily because of the access of power and control that whites have had when it comes to the creation of Black images. As stated earlier, Black Visual Culture is political because the “images are laden with political and psychological potential and potency. They help ideological constructions like race take form in the physical world. They construct, confirm, and affirm identity (Harris, 2003, p. 14). No more is this more evident than in the 1915 silent film “Birth of a Nation”, directed by D.W. Griffith:

The film’s melodramatic plot revolves around the intertwined fates of a southern and northern family before and after the Civil War. It openly depicts southern Blacks as vicious and lascivious, their northern white allies as cunning, unscrupulous, and arrogant, and the film’s southern whites as suffering repeated political and sexual indignities at the hands of white northerners and Black southerners before literally being rescued by
the gallant, hooded riders of the Ku Klux Klan. (Center for History and New Media, 2009)

In this film blackness is represented primarily by whites done up in Blackface (with the exception of some phenotypically Black actors portraying the role of union soldiers in a group. Blackness is also represented in denigrating ways:

Griffith presents a series of scenes to illustrate how badly Blacks behaved after passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, when they were freed and given the vote, and after passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, when they were given free access to public facilities. These scenes include large numbers of phenotypically Black actors, along with some in Blackface, aggressively groveling and grimacing. (Wallace, 2003, p. 93)

What I mostly want to draw attention to is that “Hollywood’s first blockbuster” depicted blackness to teach audiences about some of the basic stereotypical characteristics that Blacks continue to be plagued with. Furthermore, these were strategic representations to further a social and political agenda against miscegenation and Reconstruction.

The film “Birth of a Nation” is definitely not the first film to project denigrating images of Blacks but is a film that has rendered severe consequences to people who identify and are identified as Black. Specifically, the film which developed out of two books titled The Clansman, An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan (1905) and The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden, 1865-1900 (1902), and a play, “The Clansman” (1906), all authored

Figure 8 Photo of Lynching from 'Without Sanctuary' website
by Thomas Dixon Jr., is responsible for the mass murder of Blacks and particularly Black men who were considered a threat to white womanhood. Wallace (2003) explains “Lynching was one of the major topics in U.S. news reports at the time of the release of Birth, in 1915. Such episodes were extensively reported on in local newspapers. Particularly around 1915, huge, festive crowds, including women and young children, often turned out to witness these hangings, in which victims were sometimes tortured, slowly burned alive, or castrated, their body parts distributed among the crowds as keepsakes (p. 94). We know to what extent these lynching’s occurred because they were documented in two profound ways. The first being in newspapers, which, only reported on, the event occurring but never on the participants involved. The second documentation is postcards\(^3\) that visually depict these marred swinging bodies. Ironically, unlike the newspapers and gazettes, the images of lynched bodies would also have images of a white audience or rather a lynch mob, posing for the camera as well. The juxtaposition of tarred and lynched Black bodies with White, well, whole bodies only proves that, “There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all Black people” (hooks, 1992, p. 2). “Birth of a Nation” (1915) is one of many visual texts that are responsible for the proliferation of

\(^3\) The website “Without Sanctuary” presents a collection of and postal cards of lynching in America http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/
stereotypical Black images. Before and after its introduction to society, and particularly American society, the accumulation of visual texts that make an effort to represent Blacks have done so in both nuances and dramatic ways. It is because of this that Black Visual Culture has complex contexts. Its position is always in flux as people add to it and deconstruct its parts. It is both challenged and celebrated.

What has not been fully discussed is the transgression of presenting the Black body as an object to a subject and in more positive ways. When it comes to critically discussing Black visual culture we must acknowledge its existing positive features. Yet, discussion must error on the side of caution because a contemporary myth is that denigrating images of Blacks are hardly ever visible in contemporary society. This speaks to the more covert nature in which visual messages about Blacks are present. In chapter three of Gen Doy’s (2000) book Black Visual Culture she explores the importance of subjectivity within the framework of Black visual culture. This chapter specifically seeks to connect the term subjectivity with a reference to “the being of a person, selfhood – a thinking and acting human subject, rather than a passive practice of objectivity that many Black bodies were subjected to. Doy (2000), explains that both the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography led to the representation of Black bodies as specimens of racial types collected and documented for study by European, and later American, scientists (p. 111). Evidence of Black objectivity can be found visually through the production of photographs, anatomical charts (such as the kind used to support Darwinism and other late 19th century scientists) and material culture found in the collection of institutions such as museums and science labs. This historical significance of the use of Black visual culture to objectify Blacks supports the argument that it must
be approached critically in order to meet a critical theoretical goal of not subjugating others with marginalized text. The first step towards critically dealing with the issue is to acknowledge that Black Visual Culture is always shifting with the society and politics of the times. A larger contributor to this shift is the marketing of Black images.

**Marketing: Using Black visual culture to market to Blacks**

There is a strong relationship between Blacks and marketing. David Crockett (2008) explicates that “MARKETING BLACKS INVOLVES advertising and other promotional strategies that incorporate Black representations in the form of signs, which may include Black people or other symbolic and material artifacts of Black cultural life (e.g. speech and phonetic conventions, folklore, style, fashion, music, usage of the body, and the physical form itself)” (p. 245-46). Consequently, African Americans spend more time than any other group consuming media (Mueller, 2008, p. 188). This statement indicates that the discourse on Black Visual Culture and its impact must be explored through marketing strategies. The numbers are clear: Radio reaches 95% of Black adults, newspapers reach 80% of Blacks, 85% of Blacks are magazine readers, 72.8% of Blacks own computers, and 80% of Blacks have access to the internet. The biggest media use, African Americans watch television more than any other group (Mueller, 2008, p. 189). Marketing and advertising agencies reach members of the Black community through the media and in a strategic way. Mueller (2008) further contend, “Much like the general market, African Americans use a variety of media, but, unlike the general market, they embrace Black media. Black media has more credibility than general market media” (p. 188). This means that media specifically geared towards the Black community (Viacom’s
Black Entertainment Television (BET), Comcast owned TV One, and the Black Family Channel) have an optimum opportunity to market to a segmented group via their cultural values.

The connection between marketing and culture can best be defined through the scope of consumerism. First it must be understood that, “Most media makers are in the business of selling a product—their product. They repeat these approaches that they believe audiences want or at least will accept (Cortes, 2000, p.43-44). Second, “Culture influences why we buy. It impacts our attitudes toward consumption and our shopping behavior, what we choose to purchase, and even where we chose to purchase it” (Mueller, 2008, p. 90). If we connect the use of Black Visual Culture as a tool for marketers then it helps in our understanding of the cultural representations that exist as it relates to Black Culture. Geert Hofstede (1990) proposed that there are four basic expressions of culture: symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. These expressions are hierarchal in that symbols represent the most superficial layer of cultural expression, heroes and rituals fall in between, and values represent the deepest manifestations of it (Mueller, 2008, p. 75). Through practices these expressions are intersected and are identifiable in Black Visual Culture productions as well as mainstream visual culture. For this reason, contemporary marketing of Black Culture tends to be more positive approaches that cater to these specific cultural expressions. Blacks are more receptive to positive representations of their community and it is within the best interests of marketers to use this as a strategy to reach Black consumers.

Still, there are some best practices that are not applied when it comes to marketing to Blacks. As it relates to Black consumers and apparel buying behavior, McKinney et
al (2004) explains, “Previous research on Black consumers is conflicting and shows no consensus on the information characterizing Black consumers and their clothing buying behavior patterns. The findings from studies have been generalized to all Black consumers because they have been traditionally viewed by marketers as a homogenous group” (p. 391). Even in marketing, Blacks are often conflated as one homogenous group. This proves that many of the images of Blacks are challenged by a dearth of diversity. Another issue is the lack of segmentation and investment in advertising agencies’ spending on the Black consumer market. Part of the reason why Blacks are getting lost in the shuffle according to Dennis Garrett, associate professor of marketing at Marquette University, is because of the significant growth of the Hispanic population. Also, many Blacks in an American context (African Americans in particular) speak English and it is assumed by marketers that they will respond to general market advertising (Mueller, 2008, p. 182). This assumption could lead to consequential issues of representation that border on the line of erasure in some markets. In an article that focuses on the racial representation of children in advertising, Ellen Seiter (1994) argues:

The perspective of whiteness makes it impossible to see difference within minority groups. Overwhelmingly, advertisers use a single Black to signify “minority,” while whites are portrayed as endlessly varied, individual, even quirky and idiosyncratic. Advertisers utterly fail to register the tremendous range of difference among Hispanics, among Blacks, among Asians, among American Indians.” (p. 100)

Moreover, the single Black that is slipped in to signify “minority is also referred to as ethnic casting and is not compelling to the Black community at best (Mueller, 2008). The inability for white advertisers and marketers to not see difference speaks to the
invisibility of whiteness in which it is not segmented and coded. Whiteness is positioned as normative and when it comes to the representation of minority groups they are subjected to both positive and negative stereotypes that are commonly associated with their group. In relation to stereotypes and African American children, Seiter (1994) has observed “Most commercials which use African American children today feature a rap theme and / or some reference to sports. The presence of African American children in a commercial is used to define the products as “cool,” modern up-to-the minute” (p. 104). The use of Black visual images in market media is strategically used to establish trends and stylishness. Although this lends to an opportunity of visibility it is not without the attachment of cultural stereotypes.

Members of the Black community do have a hand in the representation of their images. The buying power of Blacks and particularly African Americans cannot be ignored. As it relates to Black Visual Culture producers, “There are also more Blacks employed as cultural producers within mainstream media industries (see Cassidy and Katula 1990). With increasing numbers of Black consumers, there are some efforts to produce more culturally authentic imagery of the Black community. Nevertheless, minority-owned advertising agencies must walk a fine line between creating positive imagery out of a sense of community responsibility and securing the bottom line—making money” (Cortese, 1999, p. 84). The share of responsibility in marketing to members of the Black community has even been a topic in Black Visual Culture. Spike Lee’s film “Bamboozled” (2000) focuses on the historical and new practices of minstrelsy:
Satirized network television as a new form of minstrelsy and suggested that the trade in stereotypical images, a burgeoning activity among middle-class Blacks, offered little redemption and many potential risks. One of the subtle ironies of the film is that the main white character is like an uncorked minstrel in his adoption of Black hip hop language and his collection of African art and photographs of Black athletes and heroes. Black becomes affection, a commodified style that anyone can adopt. (Harris, 2003, p. 257)

Although the film mainly focuses on the contemporary collecting of Black memorabilia objects that were typically found in nineteenth century America, the racial stereotypes of these images get transferred in new forms of media that markets specific images about Blacks. The main white character in the film, who is a television executive, explicitly states to the main black character Delacroix, who is a TV producer, “You and I both know Black people set the trend, set the style” (Lee, 2000, Motion Picture). It is exactly this line of thinking that positions Black Culture through Black Visual Culture as a commodity. This also establishes variance in the audience development of Black Visual Culture.

**Who’s That Peeking Through My Window? Black Visual Culture and its audience**

One of the most identifiable forms of Black Culture is hip-hop. On Black Entertainment Television (BET) 2009 Hip Hop music awards, I saw the Hip Hop group Goodie Mob perform one of their top charting singles “Cell Therapy” (1995). The song touches on the issues of social injustices against both white and mostly Black members of impoverished communities. It also speaks against the issues of surveillance and
annihilation of these group members. The hook of the song is “Who’s that peeking in my window? Pow, nobody now”. I mention this song because in actuality as it relates to Black Visual Culture, everyone is peeking through its window. As stated before, Black Visual Culture is on constant display in the form of cinema, television, music video, fashion, animation, CD covers, magazines, posters, visual art and much more. Yet, it doesn’t just stop with peeking. Black Visual Culture is accessible globally and the evidence of this can be seen in how Black Culture has been transmitted, adopted, adapted and replicated on an international level.

In an art education second level writing course that I currently teach. I requested that my students share a song with the class that they personally connected with or that was reflective of their identity. In this course I had seven international students from South Korea. Six out of the seven students uploaded South Korean music videos from a YouTube website. These videos reminded me of the typical music videos that one finds on BET. It was clear to me and other students that the visual and musical characteristics commonly associated with Black Culture and hip-hop was inculcated in popular South Korean Culture. Ian Condry (2007) contends:

Not only are non-American rap groups gaining success in their national markets, hip-hop’s influence is becoming increasingly widespread in the aesthetics of musical production, lyrical skill, fashion, dance styles, and graffiti art, in addition to influencing ideas of beauty in hair and skin. In urban centers throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, Australia, and beyond, hip-hop is performed in clubs and on the streets, prompting some artists and fans to proclaim the emergence of a “global hip-hop nation.” (p. 638)

The existence of a global hip-hop nation shows the pervasiveness of Black Culture.
Furthermore, it is important to note that “What was initially developed as a mode of marginal expression, conceived as a countermeasure to the material and social inequities of American post industrialism, has, in the past several years, become perhaps the most prominent medium by which Black is represented in the U.S. and by which Black and Americanness are represented globally” (Simmonds, 2006, 823). In the second level writing class we saw Korean artists with cornrows, and sometimes braids, dancing a very “Africentric” choreography in hip-hop attire. These Korean hip-hop artist resembled groups like Destiny’s Child and TLC at best. Similarly, as Strausbaugh (2006) suggests, “Japanese girls who [are] ardent fans of hip-hop [begin] to braid their hair in cornrows and even darken their skin, through tanning salons or makeup, in emulation of Black American femininity” (p. 23). Those students who were not international students or familiar with seeing this visual text were captivated and amazed.

Japan, like South Korea is considered to be a racially homogenous country and characteristics of Black Culture can definitely be seen in the production of visual texts as a means to create difference. In a personal communication, “Kreva, of the group Kick the Can Crew, put it succinctly when he explained of the dreads he wore: “First, it’s meant as a sign of respect towards Black Culture, but secondly, I want to stand out” (Condry, 2007, p. 637). In current discourse there are arguments about the misappropriation and misunderstanding of Black Culture and style. Whether or not the display of blackness is a sign of respect or misappropriation, what stands out the most in Kreva’s statement is his use of blackness to standout. This speaks to the visibility of blackness and how this is used to construct new identities and various meanings. Kreva’s decision to standout is predicated on his use of blackness. Consequently, elements of
Black Culture has been able to travel to a whole other continents, and societies both similar and different from its own. It has been used with the intention to communicate particular messages, values and arguably an attitude that perhaps no other culture can. Part of the reason and power behind the global transmission of Black Culture through visual texts is because of its commanding nature to provoke the Gaze.

In order to understand the audience’s relationship between Black Visual Culture and Black Culture we must look at what Lacan describes as looking relations or rather “the gaze”. As an important process in the formation of the subject, and how it forms an identity, how it is looked at is a strong contributor to its development. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) explain how “In common parlance, to gaze is to look or stare, often with eagerness or desire. In much psychoanalytic film criticism, the gaze is not the act of looking itself, but the viewing relationship characteristic of a particular set of social circumstances” (p. 76). The discourse on the gaze and race has often focused on how blackness is subjugated by it. This is described to mostly occur when Blacks comes under the gaze of white eyes.

In “The Fact of Blackness” Fanon discusses the experience of being Black under the white man’s gaze. It is an objectifying experience that causes the “negro” to have triple person awareness. There is an existence through the occupation of space, the existence of the “other” and the experience of disappearance. All of this is caused because of the fact that “the Black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (Fanon, 1967, p. 109). The experience of being Black is described as a burden and a corporeal malediction. It is associated with everything that is negative. Fanon contextualizes this experience on a train ride where on lookers and particularly
that of a child exclaimed, “Dirty nigger! Or “Look, a Negro! From there, Fanon explicitly lets readers know that; “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (Fanon, 1967, p. 112). Fanon is explicit in talking about the process of Black objectivity and becoming a specimen of sorts under the gaze of white eyes. Fanon’s description of Blacks’ experiences with the gaze also suggests that these experiences differ according to the types of audiences that are looking at blackness.

White audiences looking at Blacks operate from a position of privilege. White audiences look at Black Visual Culture for several reasons: to learn about Blacks, to enjoy Blacks, to subjugate Blacks, to fetishized Blacks, and to commodify Blacks. White audiences’ gaze at Blacks can best be described as panoptic. In Michel Foucault’s essay, “Panopticism” (1975) he describes a physical mechanism that has been built as a means of surveillance and to establish power through surveillance. Based on Bentham’s Panopticon, Foucault describes an architectural figure that consists of a tower in the middle of a annular building divided by cells. The tower is positioned in the space from which an observer can view any and all activity in each individual cell. Foucault explains how it is structured:
The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions – to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. (Thomas, 2001, p. 80)

Visibility needs to be a trap in order to subjugate, fetishize and commodify Black. It is through Black visual culture, that Black can be contained and examined under more generalized terms. I want to turn particular position to the issue of commoditization as it relates to culture.

Sturken and Cartwright (2001) examine commodity and culture through the lens of advertising. They first explain that “a consumer culture is a commodity culture and that a culture in which commodities are central to cultural meaning…The concept of commodity culture is intricately allied with the idea that we construct our identities, at least in part, through the consumer” (p. 77). Essentially the argument is that we are what we buy as well as what we do not. In bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation, she indicates that cultural commodification involves "eating the other". It is an attempt for the mainstream white dominant culture to live out their fantasies and longings of not only being with the Other (non-whites) but also as a means to acquire experience and be changed. Specifically, “the commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (hooks, 1992, p. 21). Through cultural commodification people are given the opportunity to consume the other. hooks (1992),
explores this notion specifically through sexual experiences with the Other and expounds on the fact that:

Commodity culture in the United States exploits conventional thinking about race, gender, and sexual desire by “working” both the idea that racial difference marks one as Other and the assumption that sexual agency expressed within the context of racialized sexual encounter is a conversion experience that alters one’s place and participation in contemporary cultural politics. (p. 22)

In relation to Black Visual Culture’s mainstream audience, they initially and most often can participate in these racialized sexual encounters of blackness through visual images.

In his book Representing Black Culture, Richard Merelman (1995) examines the nature of white audience reception to Black images in film. He argues “The more counter-hegemonic the content of a film—and the more it contests racial ideologies held by many whites—the more reason whites have to avoid or to distort the message…the more ambitious the content of Black cultural projection, the less penetrative or the more polarizing may be its effects on whites. By contrast, the less challenging its content, the more penetration it may have… (p. 98). White audience development for Black Visual Culture often does so in search of substantiating the racial ideology that they are invested in as it pertains to Blacks. I am not arguing that all white audiences of Black Visual Culture are coming from a position of racism; but rather they are coming with racially specific ideas about Blacks and are looking to have those represented visually.

The attention to white audience development is significant to the discourse of Black Visual Culture because ultimately the images of Black Culture are created as a
counter representation of white mainstream hegemonic culture. There is a dialogic response between Black cultural producers and mainstream audiences that supports three main categories of cultural projection. Merelman (1995) identifies that these three categories are: White hegemony, polarization and counter-hegemonic cultural projection. White hegemonic cultural projections are able to persist when the attitude of Blacks and whites toward racial discrimination against Blacks is that it doesn’t exist and that there is no need for Black empowerment. Polarization of cultural projection takes place when whites deny the discrimination that Blacks assert; and Blacks demand more power. Under these polarizing conditions Blacks and whites resist each other’s cultural projections. Counter-hegemonic cultural projection succeeds when racial groups come to agree that white discrimination against Blacks is strong and that Blacks need more power. This is one important goal of Black cultural projection (Merelman, 1995, p. 119). Counter-hegemonic discourse also provides understanding to some of the differences in Black audience development of Black visual culture when compared to the mainstream audience.

Black audience development of Black Visual Culture has been essentially described to exist for the purpose of not only searching for counter-hegemonic narratives or more accurate depictions of Blacks, yet, Black audiences are also thought to be in search of pleasure, joy and identity development. Gina Dent suggests, “Joy is about the potential for our coexistence within another sphere of knowledge. Alluding to this potential forces us to question what the practices might be within that alternative space and to examine what current conflicts prevent us from entering its realm” (as cited in Wallace, 1998, p. 2). From a Black audience’s perspective, Black Visual Culture
provides an opportunity to depict new possibilities for Blacks that are often times challenged or fall short of visibility in mainstream visual culture. Black audiences are also using Black Visual Culture as a pedagogical tool and field for individual and collective discovery. Stuart Hall writes:

…Popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is profoundly mythic…It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time.” (as cited in Wallace, 1998, p. 3)

The relationship that Black audiences have with the visual depiction of blackness can best be described by what Lacan (1959) calls Jouissance, where there is pleasure in pain (Miller, Porter & Leavy, 1996). The pain that is associated with Black Visual Culture, centers on what some Black audiences might perceive as its shortcomings. Shortcomings occur when Black Visual Culture, presents stereotypes of Black people, or images that might be seen as damaging for Blacks. Still, often these same images can provide pleasure to Black audiences who find themselves, laughing and enjoying the overall presentation of visual images that present blackness. Perhaps the ability to find pleasure in even the negative stereotypes of Blacks stems from an understanding that these images are not a true representation of the group as a whole.
Chapter Conclusion: The Implications for using the lens of Black Visual Culture as a pedagogical tool

Throughout this literature review I have set up numerous examples of how Black Visual Culture is instructive. It is instructive of the concepts of Black Culture, mainstream culture, audience development and socio-economic impact as it relates to marketing. And yet it teaches so much more. Black Visual Culture teaches us how to see beauty, violence, various dichotomies such as right and wrong. It presents us with narratives of what’s “cool” and what’s “whack” (a colloquial term for something not cool) and we look to these narratives to develop an understanding of our world and difference. Consequently, we must look at Black Visual Culture as a pedagogical tool. It is a part of so many personal and community narratives. This is why visual culture educators must also investigate it through a critical lens to see where there are misrepresentations and issues of marginalization.

I find the literature on Black Visual Culture and particularly its depiction of Black women insufficient in providing a voice for the everyday Black woman that it represents. Conversations about the images of Black women have been discussed in the academe but how Black women in general perceive these images needs to be considered more. The Black woman’s gaze at herself and representations of herself provides a different perspective from the discourse on the female Black body that typically centers on scopophilia. Black women who provide narratives of contemporary forms of the gaze of Black women and visual culture will provide a more inclusive and well rounded approach to dealing with the issue of race gender and representation. The visual texts that are examined in this research are fixed and moving images that are immersed in racial
narratives. I believe that they continue to represent or critique what Fanon describes as encountered difficulties in the development of Black bodily schema and also the fact that consciousness of the Black body is solely a negative activity (Fanon, 1967). Our understanding of visual and Black Visual Culture pedagogy exposes the need to critically look at the images of Black women so that they can be systematically deconstructed. Deconstructing what we see also implies the need for socially responsible producers (hooks 1996; Bell 1995; Lipsitz, 1998). Discourse on Black Visual Culture is an earnest attempt to bring race and gender to the forefront of visual pedagogical discourse.
CHAPTER 3: THEORIZING IMAGES OF BLACK FEMALE BODY

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the theories that inform this research on the images of the Black female body. It is through the lenses of critical theory (Macy, 2000; Simon 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), critical race theory (Delgado, 1995; bell et al, 1988) and critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2000; Giroux, 1999; Freire, 1994, 1993, 1970) that this research finds value in developing counter-narratives and using personal testimony as a means of addressing the social inequities that are often associated with depictions of Black women in popular visual culture and fine arts. The use of Western canons of thought at first might seem like a recapitulation of repressive ideologies of race and gender that have been mentioned in previous chapters. However, I find value in these theories’ goals to improve the social fabric of societies through the advocacy of critically examining various forms of knowledge and empowering those who are marginalized.

Critical Theory

Critical theory according to Macey (2000) is a term that, “can be used quite loosely, as in the present dictionary, to refer to a whole range of theories which take a critical view of society and the human sciences or which seek to explain the emergence of their objects of knowledge” (p. 74). This approach to examining the world was first
established in the Frankfurt School and in the writings of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. The Frankfurt School development of critical theory provided a means to “give social agents a critical purchase on what is normally taken for granted and that promotes the development of a free and self-determining society by dispelling the illusions of IDEOLOGY” (Macey, 2000, 75). Contextually, critical theory was established during the 1930’s Germany when fascism and Nazism was on the rise. Members of the Frankfurt School were of Jewish decent and it was during the height of Nazism that they relocated to the United States and further established critical theory within context of capitalism; before it was contextually used to address conservative Marxism and fascism. Simons (2004) describes how critical theory establishes itself from traditional theory in that, “critical theory denied the value-free character of positivist social science that was developing in the West. The neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School regarded such un-reflexive social science as one of the many ideologies that masked oppressive power relations” He further establishes that “Critical theory thus claimed to evaluate as well as explain and describe social reality” (p. 2). In order to effectively establish what exactly it does it must be acknowledged that there are two distinctive categories of critical theory.

Critical theory has two different meanings with different origins. It exists in two categories, critical literary theory and critical social theory. Both theories are from the 18th century but serve two distinctly different purposes. Critical literary theory involves the analysis and understanding of literary texts. Unlike critical social theory, it is not seeking social change or an analysis of society but rather it seeks the understanding of literature in search for truth. In contrast, critical social theory is oriented toward a critical
knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection and [takes] psychoanalysis as the paradigm of critical knowledge (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_theory). It is the epistemological aspect of self-reflection which will be adopted in this research and which gives an understanding to other theories being used in the research that derive from Critical Theory. Specifically, the research focuses on tenets from Critical Race Theory and Critical Pedagogy.

Critical Race Theory

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explicate that, “Critical Race Theory is both an outgrowth of and a separate entity from an earlier legal movement called Critical Legal Studies (CLS)” (p. 263). Critical Legal Studies developed as a liberal legal movement, which challenges the notion that “the civil rights struggle represents a long, steady march toward social transformation” (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1334 as cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Critical Legal Studies scholars acknowledge that the legal systems have internal and external inconsistencies that help to support various social inequities within the United States. Specifically, Critical Legal Studies challenges the “meritocracy of the United States but falls short in its failure to include racism in its critique. According to Delgado (1995), Critical Race Theory (CRT) arose in the 1970’s through the works of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman who both distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States. They argue that the traditional approaches of filing amicus briefs, conducting protests and marches, and appealing to the moral sensibilities of progressive citizens were no longer producing the gains of times past. Matsuda explains that CRT on the other hand, “focuses directly on the effects of race and racism, while simultaneously
addressing the hegemonic system of White supremacy on the “meritocratic” system” (as cited in Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, 1999, p. 11). Its distinction from CLS also involves its goal to bring about change that will implement social justice.

Only recently has CRT been used outside of legal discourse. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) began their discussion on CRT as it relates to education. There “[they] argue that, “race continues to be salient in U.S. society; that the nation was premised on property rights, not human rights; and that the intersection of race and property could serve as a powerful analytic tool for explaining social and educational inequities” (DeCuir and Dixson, 2000, p. 265). The explanation of social and educational inequities can be further extended to issues of representation in visual culture if we are to understand one of the tenets of CRT. CRT specifically involves the following tenets: 1. counter-storytelling; 2. permanence of racism; 3. Interest convergence and; 4. critique of liberalism (Crenshaw, bell, et.al. 1988; 1992, & 1995).

For the purposes of this study I employ the use of counter-storytelling or narratives as a means to bring from the periphery the voices of Black women that are seldom heard as it relates to their images. Billings and Tate (1995) explain that CRT is emerging as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework within educational research. I use the tenet of counter-storytelling to further suggest that its use as pedagogical activity in art education can further extend the understanding of looking at images as it pertains to race, gender and representation critically. Counter-storytelling challenges narratives of dominance. Delgado and Stefani (2001) define counter-storytelling as a method of telling a story that “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths especially ones held by the majority” (p.141). This definition helps to define the goals of
this research and establishes why the participation of Black women through their development of narratives is critical in both challenging the current dialogue about the images of Black women and in developing new discourse in higher education. The participation of these women and the development of their own personal narratives create a particular consciousness that is advocated in critical pedagogy theory and its goal to obtain social justice.

**Critical pedagogy**

According to Henry Giroux (1999) “Critical Pedagogy argues that school practices need to be informed by a public philosophy that addresses how to construct ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of students becomes the defining feature of schooling” (What is Critical Pedagogy section, Para. 1). This goal is based on the premises that education can be a transformative process and that it should not be looked at as a neutral or apolitical activity. Although this definition of critical pedagogy is explicitly talking about school practices and settings, I extend the conversation of critical pedagogy to learning both inside and outside the classroom as it relates to visual culture and to images that are socially and politically instructive. This notion of critical pedagogy is supported by the argument that “Critical Pedagogy also has a political agenda; it views education as a means to achieve social justice and change (Teaching Professor, 2008, 22.3, p.1). It is the everyday confrontation of images that teaches viewers about the issues of gender and race and many other social constructs. Christopher Fletcher (2008) further establishes that, “radical historians know that our perspectives and narratives contend with many
other understandings of history and the past, derived not just from what is taught in school or college but also from a far wider milieu of popular culture and politics” (p. 28), As it relates to this research critical pedagogy is the leading theory that I refer to in order to see how the transformative process that leads to empowerment takes place through the investigation of the images of Black women. This research operates under the assumption that Black women are often oppressed or challenged by prescriptive visual images of the female Black body. The focus group’s participation with these images as well as their interpretation of them are fully investigated. Paulo Freire (1999,1993,1970) expresses the necessary participation of the oppressed in their liberation when he writes:

To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one, which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. But the struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation. Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle. (p. 29)

Black women going through a process of critical recognition or awareness about the visual narratives that depict them has great potential for us to participate in transformative action, which then allow us to create new situations or rather new narratives about Black women. Giroux (1999) provide information on how this transformative process can be established by explaining the tenets of critical pedagogy. The tenets of critical pedagogy are listed here:
1. Create new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on breaking down disciplines and creating interdisciplinary knowledge.

2. Raise questions about the relationships between the margins and centers of power in schools and is concerned about how to provide a way of reading history as part of a larger project of reclaiming power and identity, particularly as these are shaped around the categories of race, gender, class, and ethnicity.

3. Reject the distinction between high and popular culture so as to make curriculum knowledge responsive to the everyday knowledge that constitutes peoples' lived histories differently.

4. Illuminate the primacy of the ethical in defining the language that teachers and others use to produce particular cultural practices."

There is relevance of all four tenets as it relates to this research:

- The first tenet, which consist of new knowledge making and creating an interdisciplinary approach, is established when the focus group deconstructed the images of Black women and when they merge writing and art making to construct new narratives about Black women.

- The second tenet of critical pedagogy, raising questions about the relationship between the margins and centers of power and reclaiming power and identity, emerged in the focus group through discussions and collective brainstorming. Here, participants had an opportunity to establish and confront the issues that are connected with the images of Black women.

- From there this research merges the images from the visual artists with popular culture visual images of Black women in order to meet the third tenet of critical pedagogy. Having the focus group critically look at popular culture images through the lens of visual artists is an effective way of blurring the line between high and popular culture.

- The fourth tenet of critical pedagogy is explored through my own narrative responses to the research process. As an educator and researcher it is important that my research addresses the responsibility of educators who are involved in the process of using racially charged images as pedagogical tools. Liz Jackson (2008) substantiates the critical role of the educator when she writes:
To appreciate the structural nature of social and educational injustice, it is both necessary and fair, I think, to view dialogical pedagogy with some degree of criticality, while trying to hold on at the same time to what possibilities it does provide students as individuals in educational contexts. For instance, there are clearly circumstances in which we should recognize minority cultural groups—consciously, not formally—and allow them relative autonomy in perspective or behavior within certain classroom settings…(p. 144)

From a critical pedagogical perspective, my role as an educator to my research participants is instructive of how all educators and particularly those in art education and visual culture studies, who dealing with the critical assessment of visual images, should engage students and especially cultural minority groups. Because of my position as a Black female instructor, one of the major questions in critical pedagogy that I confront is “How do we de-center authority when we are working to gain authority”’” as might be the case with new teachers, especially persons of color or women in male-dominated fields” (The Teaching Professor, 2008,22,3,1 p. 1). Also, understanding that educators have an unequal power over students, I adopt the perspective that “Critical Pedagogy, which interrogates dominant or received understandings and can encompass teaching and learning in a variety of settings, is as important as ever” (Fletcher, 2008, p. 23). My use of Critical Pedagogy closely associated with Freire’s praxis model:
This model provides a series of steps that both educators and students can follow in order to confront hegemonic ideologies about the images of Black women that will lead to social transformation and change. It also supports Geetha Narayanan’s (2006) contention that, “the challenge for a critical educator is to introduce new literacies in a manner that empowers individuals (students, teachers, and groups traditionally excluded from education) and that simultaneously creates platforms for the critique of existing power and knowledge structures” (p.1).

Critical pedagogy theorist Peter McLaren (2009) personal statement about critical pedagogy is as follows:

The critical pedagogy, which I support and practice advocates non-violent dissent, the development of a philosophy of praxis guided by a Marxist humanism, the study of revolutionary social movements and thought, and the struggle for socialist democracy. It is opposed to liberal democracy, which only serves to facilitate the reproduction of capital. It advocates a multiracial and anti-imperialist social movement dedicated to opposing racism, capitalism (both in private property and state property forms), sexism, heterosexism, hierarchies based on social class, as well as other forms of oppression. (Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy, para. 1)
McLaren’s take on critical pedagogy is deeply embedded in socialism, and so politically oriented; his approach to a more egalitarian world is one that challenges the political and social structures that western nations are invested in such as capitalism and a particular take on “democracy”. Also, it should be acknowledged that a lot of Freire’s work has been focused within third-world scenarios. However McLaren (2000) does establish that the philosophical approaches that were inspired by imperialist and colonized spaces and social structures have further had an influence even in North America. He states, “Freire’s work has unarguably been the driving force behind North American efforts to develop critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social material relations of the wider community” (p. 10). What McLaren is describing are North American educators’ attempts to challenge and eliminate inequalities that take place in education and to influence attitudes within these spaces to be antiracist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic.

What is most interesting is McLaren’s (2000) argument that much of the critical pedagogy that is practiced in North America is “domesticated and reduced to student-directed learning approaches devoid of social critique” (p. 12). This is largely to do with the fact that critical pedagogy in North America is used as a tool to just interpret productions of relations of exploitations. This was not the end goal for Freire and his liberatory education. Instead, it was his intent for oppressed people to put to practice a critical educational approach that developed a conscious understanding of their oppression as a means to transform and essentially provoke a real social change.
McLaren’s scholarship exposes the differences of critical pedagogy within particular contexts, acknowledging that there are various approaches and defining goals for those who want to put it to practice. Because of this there are differences between the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy or rather its ideology are very much different than its methodological approaches that are employed. Because of these contrasts it is important to acknowledge what are some of the criticisms of critical pedagogy since I base this research on some of its tenants.

Specifically, I self identify as a feminist and visual cultural educator and I deem it important to consider what critics from both disciplines have to say about the use of critical pedagogy in research.

**Feminist critiques of critical pedagogy**

In order to fully understand feminists’ critiques of critical pedagogy one must first understand their politics and position within education. Feminist educator Kimberly Kay Gunter declares that feminist teachers do not position themselves as all-knowing bearers of truth and knowledge but instead as individuals grounded in a particular positionality. Furthermore, feminist teachers seek to distribute power and authority among students (McLaren, 2000). This approach to education gives insight to the fact that feminist scholars have a problem with hierarchical authority and the concept of empowerment. This is especially the case in institutionalized spaces such as the classroom.

As a researcher I am attracted to the idea of education being a liberating experience full of enlightening moments for both students and teachers. However, as I have explored the criticisms of critical pedagogy I have learned that many feminists find the theories of
critical pedagogy problematic when it comes to praxis. In her essay “Why Doesn’t this Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy”, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) argues that the definition of critical pedagogy operates at a high level of abstraction. Concepts of critical pedagogy consistently strip discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political position. And it is useful for philosophical debates but not in actual practice (p. 92). Ellsworth goes on further to explain how no literature on critical pedagogy attempts to explore whether or how the practices it prescribes actually alter specific power relations outside or inside schools. Also, educational researchers advocating critical pedagogy fail to provide a clear statement of their political agendas…(p.93). Ellsworth’s criticism calls into question whether or not critical pedagogy actually does what it says it does and if in fact it actually reestablishes social inequities that students are suppose to be liberated from. Lather’s (1991), understanding of Ellsworth critique is that she is “problematizing the concepts of empowerment, student voice, dialogue and the term “critical” itself, [Ellsworth] asks which interpretations and ‘sense making’ these discourses facilitate, which do they silence and marginalize, and what interests do they serve?” (p. 123). Lather then foregrounds the conflict between critical pedagogy and the practice of deconstruction. She defines critical pedagogy as a theory “positioned as that which attends to practices of teaching/learning intended to interrupt particular historical, situated systems of oppression (Lather, 1992, p. 122). Lather (1991) then argues that “…too often, such pedagogies have failed to probe the degree to which “empowerment” becomes something done “by” liberated pedagogies “to” or “for” the as-yet-unliberated “Other”, the object upon which is directed the “emancipatory” actions…” (p. 122). It is presumed within the
scope of her research that critical pedagogy perpetuates the relations of dominance and she offers a new approach to teaching called “post-critical pedagogies”.

Post-critical pedagogies deconstruct the notion of “critical” by acknowledging that there are no subjects exempt from becoming oppressive to others...any group—any position—can move into the oppressor role’...‘everyone is someone else’s “Other”’...“everyone is someone else’s “Other”” (Minh-ha and Gentile, respectively, quoted in Ellsworth, 1989, p. 114). The complexities of critical scholarship through a post-critical perspective is always readjusting the margins of power and using deconstructive self-reflexivity to pinpoint where individuals’ biases and privileges might come into play in our interpretation of socio-political situations. Lather (1991) establishes that “this postmodern re-positioning of critical intellectuals has to do with struggling to decolonize the space of academic discourse that is accessed by our privilege, to open that space up in a way that contributes to the production of a politics of difference...who speaks is more important that what is said” (p. 132). Putting into context what voice(s) we are listening too and how it is formed with a particular understanding and from a specific experience allows for the kind of checks and balances that puts educators and students in continuous critical assessment of their educational process.

Jennifer Gore’s (1993) critique of critical pedagogy is directed at the concept of the agent of empowerment. Within education, teachers usually see themselves as agents of empowerment in both feminist and critical pedagogies. For Gore, this is problematic because, “while its specific meanings must be identified within discourses, the term “empowerment” often does, more generally, presuppose (1) an agent of empowerment, (2) a notion of power as property, and (3) some kind of vision or desirable end state...It is
[her] contention that discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy construct empowerment in ways consistent with these underlying presuppositions (p. 56). Educators operating from this point of view of empowerment present a problem of empowerment being dichotomous, “us/them” and there are missed opportunities in looking at the historical and contextual issues that influence empowerment. Gore (1993) reminds readers that, “In the (well-intentioned) focus on empowering others there is a danger of overlooking the reflexivity which, rhetorically, is considered integral to critical practice” (p. 62). She goes on to suggest a Foucauldian way of looking at empowerment or rather “power relationships as an exercise of power that has unforeseeable and contradictory effects that go beyond the control of critical and feminist pedagogues intentions. This acknowledgement calls for educators to be more “humble and reflexive in our claims that we are empowering students” (p. 62).

Examining specifically the way in which feminist scholars problematize the advocacy of empowerment in critical pedagogy and the teacher/student dynamic in learning spaces as it relates to authority and meaning, calls for me to be critical and reflexive of my approach to research with young Black women. As I have stated earlier, this research provides its participants an opportunity to be empowered through dialogue and specific pedagogical activities that are intended to help these women establish a voice on the issues of collective representations of Black women. I take into account both the proponents and opponents of the issue of empowerment and critical pedagogy. I find it equally necessary to consider how visual cultural theorists have criticized the use of critical pedagogy within the fields of popular culture and art education since my research is centered on looking at the socio-political implications of particular visual images.
Visual culture theorists’ critiques of critical pedagogy

Critique against critical pedagogy as it relates to the interpretation of visual cultural texts are largely centered on critical pedagogues imposing their interpretations of these texts and not privileging the particular readings that individuals may read texts that differs from their interpretations. This critique calls into question a hegemonic and authoritative approach to constructed meanings that challenges the notion of critical pedagogy as a theory of empowerment. One way of addressing this issue is to look at the ways in which people both as individuals and collectively use their social position and localized power to read texts and construct multiple meanings. Through a survey study that focused on young people’s interpretations of various media, Buckingham & Sefton-Green (1994) concluded that “making sense of the media is a process in which individual and collective identities are defined and negotiated” (p. 38). Their surveys measured young people’s (age 14) access and response to various media and from there it was established that the way in which people interact and interpret visual cultural texts is through a social reading that contributes to their development of identity. Furthermore, the survey responses revealed that different readers make sense of one and the same text in quite different ways and that these readings change over time. If we are to believe that reading text is subjective and connected to both individual and collective positions then there is a lot at stake when it comes to working with visual cultural texts in an attempt for socio-political change. It also, challenges pedagogical assumptions that “young people are subject to a process over which they have no control: they need to be trained to make choices and judgments because they are seen to be incapable of doing this for
themselves‖ (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 17). Individuals’ and young students’ in particular, reading of texts is not homogenous but rather it varies depending on the social group and even within the social group. This definitely makes the imposition of one particular reading difficult and could even be seen as combative. What is most interesting is Buckingham & Sefton-Green explanation of how reading becomes a social process through dialogue. They explain that the social process of reading has two main dimensions:

Firstly, it involves recognition that the ‘meaning’ of a text is not established by the reader in isolation…meanings are defined in and through social interaction, and particularly through talk…Reading is thus inevitably a process of dialogue. Secondly, looking as it were in the opposite direction, talk about popular media also serves functions involved in constructing and negotiating social relationships…In considering how individuals use and talk about what they read, therefore, we are effectively examining the ways in which they socialize themselves into group membership and thereby construct their own cultural identities. (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 29)

Conducting a dialogue about visual cultural texts allows for the social process of reading to take shape and yet to always be changing and negotiating new and different readings. Ultimately, there is a power relationship between the readers and the text. They both bring to the relationship a particular context that dictates how visual cultural images are to be received. With so much going in the social reading process, critics of critical pedagogy find it problematic for educators to approach a visual cultural text in ways that do not acknowledge or dismiss various interpretive meanings.

David Trend (1992) discusses the political implications of the use of critical pedagogy to establish textual meaning. Consequently, “This establishes a hierarchy that identifies writers, teachers, artists, and scientists as “experts” to whom “ordinary” people
must always look for knowledge, insight, or inspiration. Intellectual products pass from institutionally certified senders to commonplace receivers in a manner that translates very well into the economic metaphors of modern capitalism” (p. 52). This outlook on pedagogical approach to visual cultural text implies a support of existing powers rather than challenging them. The personal agency that critical pedagogy is said to encourage is in fact displaced by authoritatively determined knowledge that Trend argues is politically implicated. Specifically, “What this view of culture does is to support existing power structures and forms of authority by discouraging inquiry, criticism, or change” (Trend, 1992, p. 52). These discouragements are definitely seen as antithetical to what critical pedagogy promises to provide in the educational process.

Likewise, Weaver and Daspit (1999) see the ways in which critical pedagogues engage in popular culture and the creation of meaning as problematic. Their critique of critical pedagogy is that theoretically it “addresses the potential for multiple readings of popular cultural texts, the contradictory and shifting meanings of texts, and the shifting power struggles over control of texts” (p. xiv). Despite this recognition, a shift from critical pedagogical theory to practice shows “the primary focus is placed on the meanings power blocs inscribe upon popular culture texts and how critical theorists read these inscriptions…placing critical theorists in a precarious position of privileging their reading while ignoring the ways individuals use their localizing powers to interpret popular culture texts to construct multiple readings (Daspit & Weaver, 1999, p. xvi). Essentially what Daspit and Weaver are charging against the practice of critical pedagogy is the little to no space it provides for the development of alternative meanings and thus inhibiting a catalyst for agency.
Chapter Conclusion: using the tenet “personal testimony” in critical pedagogy

One of the tenants of critical pedagogy that’s employed in this research is the use of “personal experience” or testimony. Critical pedagogy theorists have pointed to the ways in which experience can be used to locate oneself in larger systems of power and oppression and to de-center authority within the classroom. Many feminist theorists have critiqued critical pedagogy for being a theory that helps to perpetuate existing systems of hegemonic dominance, particularly because it is founded in a patriarchal viewpoint (Ellsworth, 1989, Gore, 1990; Lather, 1992). However it is the use of personal experience that the two have in common; In large part because “women’s voices are often silenced in traditional classrooms” (Boartwright and Sinacore, 119), feminist pedagogy has intentionally included and valued women’s personal experience and the experiences of other non-dominant groups. With the guidance of critical pedagogy I will now discuss a mixed methods approach through the use of a quantitative survey and a participatory action research based focus group. These methods were employed to put the concept of critical pedagogy into praxis.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the contemporary ways in which stereotypes and meta-narratives about Black women are presented in popular visual culture. This study was particularly interested in the perspective of Black undergraduate women, and their interpretation of these visual images. There is also a focus on comparing the self-esteem and saliency of race and ethnicity of the participants with their interpretations of particular images. My study also sought to develop relevant research questions about race and gender for visual culture curriculum and to provide an opportunity to construct counter-narratives under the tenet of Critical Race Theory that are theme specific and empowering for those who went through the process of constructing these narratives. These purposes and activities align this mixed methods study within the domain of participatory action research.

Design of Study

A mixed methods approach was utilized to collect data through the development of both a focus group and use of a quantitative survey. The use of mixed methods is a paradigmatic position that sees compatibility between qualitative and quantitative methods (Howe, 1988; Reichardt & Rallis, 1994; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Specifically, “Mixed method studies are those that combine the qualitative and
quantitative approaches into the research methodology of a single study or multi-phased
study.” These methods are subdivided into the five specific types of design…” According
to Creswell, 1995 the design for this study is classified as a Dominant-less dominant
study in which, ““The researcher conducts the study “within a single dominant paradigm
with a small component of the overall study drawn from an alternative design”” (as cited
in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 18). The majority of this research relies on qualitative
methods with a small emphasis of quantitative methods through the use of a survey.

A qualitative design was used to holistically approach this study. Mason (2005) assert
that:

Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of
the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the
understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants,
the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships
work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate. (p. 1)

Qualitatively, the design of this study was constructed to utilize focus group
methodologies and borrows methods from the basic tenets of participatory action
research. Through the process of focus group research (April –June 2010) the design of
this study emerged as primarily an action research study. As determined by my field
work, the process of recording, brainstorming to obtain general background information
about the topic, transcribing verbal communication, analyzing visual material,
constructing counter-narratives and videotaping the oral readings of these narratives, was
an experience that brought significant context to the understanding of various images and
their socio-political, historical and cultural meanings; These activities are the ratification
of a focus group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Morgan, 1997).
Focus groups are useful in gaining knowledge from disenfranchised or marginalized groups (Black women) because, “Focus group interviews produce what is referred to as a “happening” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 199). A happening is a conversation that, while prearranged and “focused” by the researcher, remains a dynamic narrative process. Within the context, group members communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences on their own” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007, p.173). The happenings that occurred in this research support the quest for authenticity as it relates to dialogic responses and creative developments of visual and written narratives. The focus group was self contained in structure; meaning, it served as the primary means of collecting qualitative data, and there was a careful matching of the goals of the research with the data that the focus groups produced to meet these goals (Morgan, 1997, p. 3). During the workshops, participants were a part of a collaborative process for generating knowledge and interpretations of the mediated representations of Black women. They did this primarily through the identification of various narratives and labels ascribed to the Black female body and also through the development of research questions and counter-narratives. Consequently, the design of this study centers on the research methodology of participatory action research (PAR) and underpinnings of critical race theory (CRT).

PAR was beneficial to the critical analysis of the images of Black women and how it was exercised in this research. The following literature informs my understanding of participatory action research: Handbook of Qualitative Research, Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, “Participatory action research” Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Participatory action research, McIntyre, 2008; Participatory Action Research: Origins, approaches and methods, Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007) and Participatory Action Research and Critical
Race Theory: Fueling Spaces for Nos-ostras to Research, Torre, 2009).

Various methods were employed to carry out my research. These approaches enhance my understanding of the diverse perceptions and concerns of the Black women in visual culture as it relates to other Black women. The primary methods used were an initial survey about body image and self-esteem that is based on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (1965), collecting and viewing visual images (both still images and video), semi-structured and conversational group discussions, and brainstorming exercise that I call “body mapping”, group development of research questions, writing counter-narratives under the guidance of narrative inquiry and performing counter-narratives on videotape.

Description of workshops

The participatory action research (PAR) paradigm establishes that:

The researcher’s function is to serve as a resource to those being studied—typically, disadvantaged groups—as an opportunity for them to act effectively in their own interest. The disadvantaged participants define their problems, define the remedies desired, and take the lead in designing the research that will help them realize their aims.” (Rubin & Babbie, 2008, 2005, p. 422)

Preliminary data was collected in the form of a quantitative survey that was distributed among a group of Black women associated with The Ohio State University campus. On April 16, 2010, the 5th annual Black Women’s Retreat was held at the Mohican Resort in Perrysville, Ohio. The purpose of the retreat was for Black women on the Ohio State University campus to come together for fellowship, networking, and for an opportunity to address the unique issues that Black women face collectively on a university
campus where they are a minority in representation. The underlying notion is that many of the unique experiences and issues that Black women face at the University are not formally addressed and that there are few opportunities and resources that are culturally specific in addressing these experiences (Jeter, personal communication, 2010). Appropriately, this year’s theme was: “Sister to Sister: Solidarity Breeds Strength”. The chair organizer of the Women’s Retreat, Gisell Jeter, is familiar with my research. She and I are members of the Black Graduate and Professional Student Caucus and have similar interest in the issue of representation of Black women in visual culture. She asked me if I would participate in the retreat by conducting a workshop that reflected my research interest. I saw this as a prime opportunity not only to share my interest and knowledge but also to get informed on other Black women’s interests and knowledge as it relates to Black women’s visual representation. The retreat was well attended with approximately 70 women who were undergraduates, graduates and professional Black women attending the University. The majority of these women were Black with the exception of one woman who identifies as Latina and another woman who identifies as multi-racial but not Black. The workshop that I conducted was titled, “Body Image, Self Esteem, the Black Female Body and Black Female Empowerment.” The description of the workshop read as follows, “This forum is an opportunity for all of us to explore the different ways the Black female body is represented and interpreted both by us and by others. At the same time, we will explore the meaning of Black female empowerment through open dialogue and art.” I began the workshop by introducing myself, introducing my research and introducing the purpose for conducting the workshop. I then provided the women with an opportunity to participate in the survey study of my research if they were interested. Those who were interested signed an IRB approved permission slip and conducted the survey. After the survey portion was finished I then continued with the rest of the workshop by introducing historic and contemporary information that contextualize the issues of Black women and visual representation. This information consisted mostly of
a comparative analysis of the visual images of Sarah Bartmann, and Josephine Baker and contemporary images of Beyonce Knowles, Serena Williams and music video models. Afterwards, a lively discussion that was semi-structured by questions that I asked while in the role of a facilitator took place. What I observed is that the general consensus among this particular group of Black women is that a lot of the contemporary images of Black women in visual culture are stereotypical and problematic as a whole but that there are also a lot of positive representations of Black women today in comparison to the past. What was most interesting was the perception of graduate women versus undergraduate women. When a controversial image of a Black woman was displayed for view (on a power point slide), these images were usually provocative in nature. Graduate and professional women found these images of Black women to be more problematic than undergraduate women. There were some undergraduate women who viewed the controversial images as “just entertainment” whereas a lot of the graduate women and professional women protested this notion with historic information about stereotypes as supporting evidence. It is my observation that the more informed a participant was about the history of race, gender and stereotypes then the more concerns they expressed about the images of Black women being a misrepresentation or underrepresentation of Black women collectively. As a result of my observations, I found it necessary to conduct a qualitative study in the form of a focus group and PAR that looked specifically at the perceptions of Black undergraduate women. I wanted to know what exactly they know about the issues of race and gender representation at this point in their education and I believed that this particular demographic of women would provide an opportunity to lend understanding and context to the social and cultural significance of these images.

The data collected for this study was based primarily on workshops conducted over a six-week period from May to June of 2010. The Frank W. Hale Jr. Black Cultural Center was the site for my study. Over the span of six-weeks a focus group of 5 women met for workshops in which they
participated in a series of activities. The size of this focus group falls in line with the preference of some professionals in the qualitative research industry who prefer to work with a mini-group, this is a focus group conducted among 4 to 6 people (Greenbaum, 2000). Furthermore, my role as a researcher was to conduct the workshops and facilitate discussions. I advertised the workshop on The Ohio State University campus in the form of fliers and via an e-mail listserv. I specifically advertised in areas on campus that are heavily trafficked by Black women and on the Frank W. Hale Jr. Black Cultural Center listserv. I did this because I knew I had a better chance of recruiting interested participants that would fit this study’s desired demographics, which are: Black, undergraduates, 18 or older, and female. From there, potential participants expressed interest via e-mail and signed up for a specific orientation date. The orientation addressed what type of research and activities I as a researcher was interested in exploring and from there, I had another sign up sheet for anyone who was interested in participating in the study.

**Location of Study**

The Frank W. Hale Jr. Black Cultural Center, more commonly referred to as “The Hale center” was chosen as both a site for recruitment and for the facilitation of this study’s workshops. There are many reasons for choosing this location, the first being a reflexive one. In research reflexivity, “refers to the ability of the researcher to stand outside the research process and critically reflect on the process” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 11). Through reflexivity I considered my choice in choosing the Hale Center and recognize that it is strongly connected to my own personal experiences in this space. Throughout my undergraduate and graduate education at The Ohio State University, I have spent a significant amount of social, cultural, professional and academic time in this space. For four years I worked as a work study student at the Hale center. My job description spanned from a greeter to a program developer and an art
curator for the center’s art galleries. After my work study appointment ended, I continued and still continue to utilize the center as an appropriate and preferable space for the above mentioned areas. Currently, I teach a class in the department of Art Education that meets in one of the Hale center’s classrooms two times a week. The reason why this location has become a significant part of my personal, professional and academic experiences is primarily based on the unique nature of the facility and the type of environment that is promoted in its space. Structurally, “the Hale Center is considered one of the few Centers in the country if not the only Center, that has an academic side and a cultural side” (www.http://oma.osu.edu). Centrally located on the south side of campus across from the University’s welcome center, the Hale Center has 28 classroom facilities, a computer lab, a research and reading room, a tutorial lab, 2 art galleries and one of the largest collections of national and international African and African American art. For this research, the Hale Center made accessible all the technological equipment, such as a smart classroom and physical space that was needed to conduct this research. Furthermore, its mission and vision is one that coincides with the goals of this research. The Center’s website (2010) explains this clearly:

The Center’s mission coincides with the larger mission of The Ohio State University and the Office of Minority Affairs. Specifically, the Frank W. Hale Jr. Center develops and maintains supportive programs and activities for the development and advancement of all students and particularly African American students. Additionally, it serves as an instrument of orientation and instruction to the larger community on issues of race, politics, economics, community, art and culture. Further, the Center serves as an instrument to stimulate the documentation of the contribution of Blacks to the world of Arts, Letters and Science. (para 2)

So then, the Hale Center was the sole location for this research because it is a space that the participants and myself identify as welcoming, familiar and supportive to the initiative of investigating the issues of
representation and the Black female body. The Hale Center was the most supportive space for this particular focus group and served as an appropriate environment that has the sociopolitical ambience of the research project (Morgan, 1993; Shamdasani, 1990). Both the participants and me have strong ties to this space through the experiences and development of relationships with its staff and others that help make the Center what it is to various communities.

Participants

As mentioned before, fliers posted in the Hale Center, and e-mails sent out on the Hale Center’s listserv was the primary methods of recruiting undergraduate participants for this study. There was a response of more than thirty women who were interested in participating in the study. This type of sampling in what O’Leary (2004) describes as “volunteer sampling” because the process of selecting a sample is simply by asking for volunteers. What should be noted about volunteer sampling is that it is a method of sampling that is highly convenient but not necessarily representative. That is, “within any given population, the characteristics of those who volunteers are likely to be quite distinct from those who don’t (O’Leary, 2004; Krueger & King, 1998). For the purposes of this research and in using PAR methodology, representativeness is not the goal. I legitimate my sampling selection process with this line of thinking, “Many researchers who collect qualitative data in order to understand populations are not looking for representativeness. Their goal is often rich understanding that may come from a few, rather than the many. Applicability comes from the ‘lessons learned’, that might – depending on the context – be applicable in alternative or broader populations” (O’Leary, 2004, p.104). Utilizing qualitative inquiry methods and a process of elimination based on schedule availability, a purposeful sample of 5 undergraduate Black women was selected to participate in the focus group. Since the majority of the women that this research was interested in sampling are students, accessibility was a key
factor in who was able to participate and their level of consistency. After getting a large response of interests, I was invited to present my research at the 2010 spring quarter work study meeting. Mr. Larry Williamson, the Center’s director and Graduate Administrative Assistants, gave me a platform to address the work study students during this time because the majority of the respondents work for the Center and they were present at this meeting. There were approximately, 60 Black students, male and female. The majority of these work study students were female. After introducing my research and sign up sheet, I got a real sense of who could participate based on scheduling (the focus group time had to work around my teaching and consulting schedule at the University; it was held on Tuesdays from 6pm to 8pm) and also who was genuinely interested.

**Surveys as a research method**

Through the guidance of a statistical consultation services consultant (a service provided in the University’s Statistics department), I developed a survey instrument that measures the self-esteem of participants. The measurement is based on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (1965), which is used in most social science studies. The survey also asked questions that help to indicate the various ways in which participants identify by race. From there, there were a series of questions that asked participants to rate the level of significance as it relates to race, class, gender, community and religion. This question served the purpose of establishing which one of these categories is the most salient among Black women. Furthermore, since the study is interested in various forms of visual media that present images of Black women, there was a question that asked participants to indicate which types of media they are usually engaged with. The next portion of the survey asked questions about body image and perception of self-worth. Following this were 15 images of women of different skin tones, ages, and body types. Participants were asked to rate the attractiveness, appeal, and likability of a woman in each of these
images. They were also asked to indicate what race the women in these images belong. This was a minimal statistical analysis because of the small size in respondents and this type of statistical analysis was used to support the qualitative data. Minimal statistical analysis generally needs a minimum of about 30 respondents (O’Leary, 2004, p. 105). Overall I received a total of 52 responses to this survey.

**Visual Culture Body Mapping, Big Ideas, Key concepts and Essential questions as a Research Method**

During the first and second weeks of the workshops, brainstorming was an essential research method in the focus group. This process made clear what the participants knew about the representation of the Black female body and what they cared to know more about. The value in brainstorming is in its design to facilitate the generation of new ideas and to encourage creative expression. It is an exploratory process in which focus group members can build on each other’s ideas and generate a large quantity of ideas (Shandasani, 1990; Morgan 1993). This is exactly what took place when I introduced to the focus group an activity I call “visual culture body mapping”. As a researcher, I knew that before I could introduce various discourses, visual materials, and the concept of counter-narratives to the participants, it would be imperative to learn what they already knew on the subject matter. I initially planned to just draw on a large piece of paper the words “The Black Woman” with a circle around it and extended lines coming outward; essentially what I am describing is a bubble chart. Then after contemplating the focus of this research I felt that it was necessary to incorporate the visual representation of the Black female body even in the brainstorming process. Subsequently, I bought a large roll of Black and white foam paper. I then drew the outline of a woman’s body with a large emphasized butt (as if to suggest that this was the outline of a Black woman’s body) on the Black foam paper. I then cut out this silhouette and glued it on unrolled white foam paper. Next, I cut out the words “The Black Female Body” from the
remainder of the Black foam paper and glued this in the top left corner of the white foam sheet. I created what I now call a “visual body map”. Reminiscent of the large silhouettes created by the artist Kara Walker, I call this a visual culture body map because the silhouette of the female body was created to be a landscape in which the participants could post labels on that are commonly ascribed to the Black female body in art and popular visual culture. In music discourse the term body mapping is used to describe a process in which a somatic (mind-body) discipline based upon the scientific fact that the brain contains neural maps of bodily functions and structures governs our body usage. When our physical self-representation is adequate and accurate, then our movement is effective and safe. Conceptually, the visual culture body map activity that I introduced to participants was an opportunity for the participants to brainstorm the ways in which the Black female body functions, is structured and governed within the realm of visual culture. The silhouette served as a landscape in which they wrote names, labels, stereotypes and narratives that generally get ascribed to the Black female body in visual culture on post its. From there, they stuck these post its on the silhouette. What took place was a creative process and dialogue about the issues of representation and misrepresentation of Black women. As each woman wrote a label on the post it they explained the significance of the term and their perception of its visual nature and messages. Each participant built on each other’s ideas. Some added to already mentioned narratives while others were reminded of never before mentioned labels and narratives through the course of a lively discussion. This brainstorming process allowed the group to transition into the next activities of the focus group, which were to look at visual materials of Black women in the forms of print and video and to develop essential research questions.
During the third week of the focus group, the women watched film clips from the movie “Ethnic Notions”, “The Boondocks” and music videos on YouTube. Participants also looked at photographed images of Black female subjects in the works of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson. The group then had a discussion about the images that were viewed. This discussion then led to the development of essential research questions about the representation of Black women in art and popular visual culture. This was an integral part of the study. In the next chapter I will explain the pedagogical significance of having the focus group develop research questions and how this process can guide educators and students in a critical investigation of race and gender representation in visual culture. Before doing this I must explain the method that was used to develop these questions. Specifically, I introduced the framework of “understanding by design” (UBD) in which 10 major design principles were developed to synthesize the best practices and research-driven design principles associated with teaching and assessing for understanding. Wiggins and McTighe (1999, 2004) assert that students learn actively and not passively…one of the key principles from UBD that was adopted by this research was Big Ideas, Key Concepts, and Essential Questions. This principle establishes that, “Students benefit from a curriculum that cues them into big ideas, enduring understandings, and essential questions” (Brown & Wiggins, 2004, p. 16). This framework has also been adopted in planning integrated curriculum (Jacobs 1989). The participants in this study were given a worksheet that was divided into three categories. The first category was titled “Big Idea”. The big idea was already determined to be Black women in visual culture. From there, participants worked individually on the second category, “Key Concepts”, which asked them to list what they know about the big idea. Daniel, Stuhr and Ballengee-Morris (2006) explain, “Key concepts get students to ask questions about the world and about themselves. And they call for an understanding of more than one point of view. The key concepts should be relevant to the students lives and reflect issues and experiences that are important to them.” (p. 5). After the
participants listed their key concepts on individual sheets of paper, they then shared their key concepts with the group and I recorded them on a bigger sheet of presentation paper. From there, the participants and I collectively developed essential research questions that they believe can guide future research on Black women and visual culture. This was also recorded on a large sheet of presentation paper.

Visual Documents: Excavating visual data as a research method

When it comes to using visual methods in qualitative research a distinction is made between how the visual images are used. Mason (2005) explains, “There has also been some confusion about whether, when we talk about using visual data, we are referring to visual data sources (phenomena which occur or are located in the visual or spatial, rather than in words or text), or visual research methods (visual ways of researching), or visual data products (visual ways of recording or presenting data) (p. 104). These distinctions aid in the understanding of how visual data was used in this study. The excavation of visual images from magazines, the internet, films, TV, art books and various other sources, were visual resources used to ontologically pinpoint what we see as meaningful in our social world and to epistemologically pinpoint how we think we can know them. The fourth week of this study consisted of the researcher, bringing a variety of visual texts that display Black women (specifically, I brought in pictures of art works by Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson and various movies). The participants also brought images that they wanted to investigate. Together we examined images based on the categories of: authorship of images, where these images can be found (positionality and space) and the authentic representation of Black women. From there we developed a dialogue about these images and collectively decided what themes these visual documents are portraying about Black women; and whether or not they are problematic or positive issues. Next, the participants were introduced to various texts authored by Black women. Examples of some of the texts include Sojourner Truth’s speech, “Ain’t
I a Woman” (1851) and Mya Angelou’s poem “Phenomenal Woman” (1978). Each of these works served as examples of how Black women have developed narratives that specifically focus on Black women within a particular rhetorical context. Following this introduction, the participants discussed the significance of these writings and the different genres and reasons in which Black women can communicate ideas about the Black woman through text. From there, I introduced the concept of counter-narratives to the focus group and asked them to consider posing a narrative to share with the group for the following workshop.

**Counter-narratives, Video Recordings and DALN: Generating visual data as a research method**

Like diaries, written accounts, and stories, non-text-based forms of visual data can be generated for or through the research process. This especially is the case when the researcher’s focus moves beyond the capabilities or technological production of images but rather what exactly is visible. The significance of generating visual data in research can best be understood by acknowledging the creative limitations of research without it:

> The idea that everything we are interested in exists in language or text, or is expressible in those ways, and that we can explore it using words or reading text, can be a rather limited and uncreative one.” (Mason, 2005, p. 104)

The ultimate goal of this study was for the focus group participants to create a narrative work that explores, examines, interrogates and interrupts already existing narratives and images. This is how the participants developed counter visual narratives about Black women.
During the fifth week of the study, participants developed counter-narratives in response to the meta-narratives of Black women that already exist. The meta-narratives were determined by the focus group’s recognition of consistent themes of representation in images explored in the visual culture body mapping workshop. Each participant picked a theme that they wanted to focus on. They then were asked to compose writing in any genre about their theme. They were also asked to collect visual images (these could be print images or moving images on film and TV) that were representative of the theme and that coincided with their written narratives. On the sixth week of this study the participants brought their visual images and written narratives with them for the purposes of recording. With the help of a videographer, the participants sat in front of a tripod flip video camera recorder. Some of them read their narratives while moving visual images ran in the background on a flat TV screen. Other participants read their narratives while being recorded and gave the images to the videographer with the expectation that the videographer would embed the images that they brought into their film. They gave the videographer instructions about the order the images should be presented in the video but none of the participants had a preference for the layout of the images. Once the videos were edited, they were each burned on CD’s along with the word document of the narrative that corresponded with the recording. The following week, the participants received their own CD’s and put them on the Digital Archive Literacy Narrative (DALN) website.

Posting narratives on the DALN was a voluntary act and three out of the five participants decided to do this. The DALN served as a platform for participants of this study to share their voice to a broader audience in a vastly accessible way. The website aided in this accomplishment:

The Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives (DALN) is a publicly available archive of personal literacy narratives in a variety of formats (text, video, audio) that together provide a historical record of the literacy practices and values of contributors, as those practices and values change.
The DALN invites people of all ages, races, communities, backgrounds, and interests to contribute stories about how — and in what circumstances — they read, write, and compose meaning, and how they learned to do so (or helped others learn). (Retrieved, May 26, 2010, www.daln.osu.edu)

It is important to mention that the DALN is IRB approved. Those participants who volunteered to post their narratives on the website relinquished their rights to anonymity. They also gave approval for their narratives to be used as data for research. The site provided participants with different options to license their work so that it would not be altered but used based on their own preferences. The construction and recording of narratives in this research is supported by Laurel Richardson’s (1995) argument that, “the narrative form tells a story that “reflect[s] the universal human experience of time and link[s] the past, present and future” (as cited in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007, p. 345). Linking the past, present and future has huge implications for an in depth and critical look at the visual images of Black women since, many of the historic gendered stereotype images of Black women have mutated into contemporary versions of their old selves (Shorter-Gooden and Jones, 2003, p. 3). Furthermore, the methods we used expand the knowledge and pedagogical approaches of art educators. Written and visual narrative compilations in this research is supported by the posit that, “teachers and students should learn to look at their own cultural traditions, as well as the cultural construction of others from a critical perspective with the understanding that what has been socially learned can also be unlearned or changed by individuals within the group, if it is deemed necessary to do so” (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001, p. 6). Working with visual images and writing allowed for a discursive approach to confronting the representation of Black women.
Method of data collection and analysis

For the qualitative portion of this study I used field notes and semi-structured group interviews as a primary method of data collection. Hand written notes were taken on a 6” x 8 ½” notebook. The research questions and body mapping materials that were produced in workshop one and two of this study was collected by typing these materials in a word document and also by taking photos of the group work material with a digital camera. Audio recorded group interviews were recorded on a digital recorder for the purposes of note taking. The audio recordings were downloaded to a MacBook Pro laptop and excerpts of relevant audio were transcribed into the Word document. Audio-recorded conversations were labeled by date, subject matter, location and time. The Word documents were also saved in an electronic file folder.

A digital Sony flip camera was used for the video recorded counter-narratives. Each participant introduced their narrative theme, and purpose of interest through the guidance of loosely constructed interview questions that they read before recording. Afterwards, the participants read the counter narratives that they wrote for this study. Once the recordings were done, the participants downloaded the digital images that they collected and their Word document counter-narratives onto a MacBook Pro laptop. These materials were organized, labeled and saved in individual digital file folders, which were labeled by each participants study ID number. From there, the video materials that were provided were downloaded into I-Movie software and the digital images were embedded into the narrative recording through the software’s editing program. Once each video was complete it was then saved on a Maxell CD-R 80min/ 700MB recordable disk along with their Microsoft Word counter-narrative document; participants received a CD with their counter-narrative materials. Once the participants received a CD they uploaded their work on the Digital Archive Literacy Narrative website (daln.osu.edu) under the program folder titled “Defining Us”. This completed the group interview and
counter-narrative data collection for this study.

I specifically used qualitative group interviews and rhetorical analysis of the counter-narratives to look for patterns, and themes and to address specific research questions. I employed semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews, or rather a conversation with a purpose operates from the perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual. It is constructed rather than excavated (Mason, 2002; Kvale, 1996). The knowledge that was constructed in this study was developed from the interaction between the participants and myself, the researcher.

The quantitative surveys were distributed on paper and each survey was assigned an ID number. The total sample size was 52. For participants who participated in the study’s focus group, their survey responses were made anonymous through the assigning of an ID number also. Once the surveys were collected, each question was coded on a PASW (Predictive Analytic Software) program for statistical analysis. The data from each survey was inputted by hand. Finally, a series of data correlations, or regressions, ran through the system. Overall, the data from the survey was used to measure the self-esteem and body image of the participants as it relates to the independent variables, or age, class, education, and saliency of race and ethnicity.
I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense. My response then, is directed to those who write what I read and to those who read what I read...(Christian 2005, p.357-58)

As a means to live and feel alive, Barbara Christian expresses the necessity of carefully inscribing ones existence through a particular language and to engage in a dialogical framework with other people who are invested in the project. These methods both secure the language of Black women and their Black feminist creativity, which is routinely gagged and then disappears (Wright 2004, p. 136). Peter Trudgill (1995) also sees language as a transformative tool when he explains that, The Strategic use of language speaks to its ability to affect a society by influencing or even controlling the world-view of its speakers” (p. 13). What bonds language and identity is the fact that language is an expression of thought and thought is an aspect of being. “Rather than
having to view our world as subordinate to others, or rather than having to work as if we were hybrids, we can pursue ourselves as subjects”, (Christian 2005, p. 357). Both Christian and Trudgill’s stance on language informs this research, yet, As a researcher I take it one step further by considering the strategic use of visual images as a vehicle of affectively controlling worldviews. Images themselves are a particular type of communicative tool that heavily influences Black female subjectivity. From this standpoint, investigating the Black female’s subjectivity through writing and visual culture should be a part of the national discourse and an invested goal for all who are concerned with her disappearance or misrepresentation. But this should be done with caution, acknowledging that Black women are diverse and not homogenous.

One of the major objectives of this study is to let multiple voices be heard about Black women and their visual representation. Particularly, it is the perspectives of other Black women through the development of written narratives that meets this objective. According to Hill-Collins, (1991), and Afshar and Maynard, (1994), this approach to research is supported by Black feminist standpoint theory that argues that Black women need to take up a central position in (re)naming and (re)defining their own lives” (as cited in May, 2002, p. 301). As it relates to this research, focus group participants used narrative inquiry as a method to explore the conceptualization of the data that was collected. Three of the focus group participants developed narratives that addressed specific themes that they perceive to be ascribed to the Black female body and character in visual culture and fine arts. After choosing a particular theme, these women individually collected images that exhibit the visual representation of these themes and wrote counter-narratives in response to those images and the messages that they convey.
As it relates to the study, the images were collected for dialogic purposes and are in fact arbitrarily significant. The goal of this research was not to critically analyze the images themselves, but rather to develop and analyze the written narratives that were developed in response to these collected images. Analysis of the narratives was conducted by myself, the researcher and occurs through the use of rhetorical analysis. In the preceding sections I will define narrative inquiry, content analysis and rhetorical analysis and explain my use of these methods in the study. The use of these methods is a qualitative attempt to bring significance to the meaning-making process that can occurs in arts-based research and also to not reify stereotypes and justify relations of oppression. Qualitative methods of this study is simply focused on critically looking at young Black women’s stories for key insight on how certain visual images and meta-narratives about Black women fit within their ontological and epistemological views of Black womanhood.

**Qualitative Methods: Narrative Analysis, Content Analysis and Rhetorical Criticism**

Through participatory action research, the women in this study first went through a process of collecting data. As mentioned before, we brainstormed, had group discussions, about still and moving images that represented Black women. We also wrote in response to loosely constructed writing prompts that were used to facilitate further discussion. These writings, conversations, collecting of images and brainstorming exercises (i.e. body mapping) are data that the participants of this study used to construct their individual narrative analysis about Black women in visual culture. I rely on Leavy’s
(2009) definition of the narrative method to best articulate what took place in this focus group:

Building on the tenets of ethnography, oral history, and qualitative interview, the narrative method or narrative inquiry attempts to collaboratively access participants’ life experiences and engage in a process of storying and restorying in order to reveal multidimensional meanings and present an authentic and compelling rendering of the data. In other words, narratives are constructed out of the data through a reflexive, participatory, and aesthetic process. Research based on narrative inquiry produces arts-based writings. Narrative inquiry often relies on small sample sizes but produces rich case studies. (p. 27-28)

Leavy’s description of the narrative method process is exactly what took place during this study. The arts-based counter-narratives produced by participants authentically reflect the discursive and non-discursive communication that occurred. From there, it is important for me as a researcher to critically work with these narratives to look for significant themes that could give insight to the significance of this research process for visual culture education; I do this by first evaluating the themes that were established in the body mapping exercise; I employ elements of content analysis to label and quantify a total of 13 themes. I then rely on an element of rhetorical criticism, cluster analysis, to analyze participants’ counter-narratives.

Content analysis according to Walter, 2010; and 2002, involves using qualitative material in an effort to produce meaning and it is done so by identifying patterns or themes. Specifically, content analysis “is a research method that detects, records and analyses the presence of specified words or concepts in a sample of forms of communication” (Walter, 2010, p. 324). I specifically use content analysis to explicitly code for the visible, easily identified content of the categories that were created during
the body mapping exercise. Furthermore, the concepts and themes identified through the
process of explicit coding provides a context from how the women of this study used
research data to choose their particular theme to address through narrative inquiry.

Rhetorical criticism according to Foss (2009), “is the process of systematically
investigating and explaining symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding
rhetorical processes…most critics use the tangible product as the basis for criticism—a
speech text, a building, a sculpture, a recorded song…” (p. 7). Rhetorical criticism is an
appropriate method for analyzing these particular narrative inquiries because the
influences in constructing these narratives are multi-text; they consist of writings, images
and a recorded delivery, which all influence the analysis of the overall counter-narrative.
As a researcher I use rhetorical analysis to engage in the process of thinking about
symbols, language and images, and how each participant used these forms of
communication to tell a particular story about Black women in visual culture. My use of a
rhetorical analysis method is the way I choose to participate in the narrative inquiry of
this research. Here I have an opportunity to provide my own perspective on how the
materials, and discussions from the research activities have been used to develop
narratives. For some, this brings in to question the validity of rhetorical criticism. Foss
(1996) provides an explanation that supports its use in research:

The critic’s task, in reporting the findings, is not to provide the one correct
interpretation of the artifact or to uncover the truth about it. The artifact
does not constitute a reality that can be known or proved—the critic never
can know what the artifact “really” is. Objectivity and impartiality also are
impossible in reporting the findings because the critic can know the
artifact only through a personal interpretation of it…The critic’s task is
simply to offer one perspective on the artifact—one possible way of viewing the artifact and what is happening rhetorically in it (p. 18).

Rhetorical criticism fits well in analyzing the narratives in this study because these narratives are not meant to be representative perceptions of all Black women. My analysis then, is another layering of interpretation that provides thick description of each participant’s narrative. What is structured and systematic is the way I employ a rhetorical analysis of these works. For each narrative I follow the process of (1) formulating a research question and selecting an artifact (the research questions are the ones established at the beginning of this study and the artifacts are the narratives that participants constructed from the focus group study); (2) selecting a unit of analysis (I am using cluster analysis for each narrative); (3) analyzing the artifact; and (4) writing the critical essay (Foss, 1996, p. 11).

**Body Mapping and Content Analysis**

*Reliability and validity*

In order conduct content analysis properly researchers must consider reliability and validity. Douglas Ezzy defines reliability as “the consistency of our data or results. He asks us to consider, “If we repeated the data collection or analysis, will we consistently get the same results?” Furthermore, validity is “the extent to which our data or results measure what we intended them to measure” (Walter, 2010, p. 71). The conceptualizations of reliability and validity have been taken into consideration when performing content analysis because this is a quantitative attempt to analyze qualitative
content. In this study emphasis was on the overall body mapping terms that were listed during the activity.

*Intercoder Reliability*

Intercoder reliability is the level of agreement between one or more coders using the same coding instrument (Walter, 2010). The participants and myself compiled the labels into thirteen categories listed below. We then quantified the frequency of the terms in each category. After coding was complete, the categories hypersexuality and confrontational had the highest frequencies of eleven and thirteen. The categories welfare queen, low self-esteem and educated received the lowest frequencies of two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequency of terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hypersexuality</td>
<td>1. (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Big Booty Judy/The Butt</td>
<td>2. (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mammy/Nurturers</td>
<td>3. (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Welfare Queen/Lazy</td>
<td>4. (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sapphire/Overly opinionated</td>
<td>5. (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Unintelligent</td>
<td>6. (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Low Self-esteem</td>
<td>7. (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Unattractive</td>
<td>8. (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Clownish/Comedic</td>
<td>10. (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Educated</td>
<td>11. (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Materialistic</td>
<td>12. (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Confrontational</td>
<td>13. (13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Body Mapping Categories
(Me)Telling: Rhetorically analyzing three counter-narratives about the images of Black women

The following is a prompt that was given to the focus group participants to guide their development of counter-narratives:

**Literacy Narrative Prompt**

*Pick a visual image that represents the theme/stereotype of Black women that you have chosen to explore. Now compose a written narrative in response to the image. This can be a creative work (i.e. poem, short story, essay, song, etc).

You might want to focus on the best memory you have of the stereotype and image(s) that associated with it, the worst memory you have of the stereotype and image(s), or the first memory you have of the stereotype and image(s) of it.

The type of narrative you write is totally up to you and should incorporate your stance on this specific type of representation of Black women.

Here are some questions that I would like you to consider when crafting your literacy narrative. These are questions that have been explored in previous workshops:

1. How do you define ___(The theme you are exploring)____?
2. How is this term represented visually in popular culture?
3. Do you think Black women are positively or negatively associated with this term?
4. How are Black women represented in relation to this term? Where are you most likely to find this representation? Where are you least likely?
5. Does this term relate to you personally? If so how?
6. Please describe a visual image used in today’s discussion and explain its relationship with today’s term. (Please indicate the number tag of the item____).
This writing prompt was developed out of conversations and group interviewing that took place in previous focus group activities. There are three research questions that also guide this data analysis process:

1. In what ways do Black women identify with commercial images of Black women?
2. How can the convergence of the images of Black women and personal written narratives be used to interrogate the concepts of race, gender and identity?
3. From these personal written narratives what understanding can we get about Black women’s perception of: empowerment and disempowerment, beauty and sexuality, and their various roles in society?

The answers to these questions will be discussed in the data analysis and the overall conclusion of this dissertation. In fact, I find it less comprehensible to separate analysis from discussion because each narrative has distinctively different themes that they address and only two of the three narratives are composed in the same genre of text, poetry, whereas the other narrative is an autobiographical narrative account. These differences alone will be discussed and are pertinent to the process of analysis. What I do find occurring in all three narratives are four implicitly coded concepts:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Identity</strong>: How participants identify with image data</th>
<th>This is coded for either positive or negative relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instances of <strong>empowerment</strong> and disempowerment</td>
<td>Terms associated with this concept will be coded for their direction of relationship (e.g. does one concept influence, precede the other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Desirability</strong></td>
<td>This concept is coded for its direction of relationship, in particular contexts, behavioral responses. I include these variants under the same count: beauty, hypersexuality and objectification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-esteem</strong></td>
<td>This concept is implicitly coded to determine psychological or emotional states of the author.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Implicit Narrative Concepts

The concepts: Identity, empowerment, desirability and self-esteem have been emergent throughout the entire focus group experience. These concepts inform researchers of how Black women process with visual representations of themselves and will be explored in the concluding section of this chapter. Now I will work through my own process of understanding the significant relationship between visual culture and Black women by doing a rhetorical analysis of the narrative inquiries that were produced as a result of this research.

**Narrative # 1**

**Introduction**

The relationship that Black women have with their hair has been a popular topic in recent visual culture media. In producer Chris Rock’s film “Good Hair” (2009), the comedian goes on a quest to find out why hair industry is a multi-billion industry that is
disproportionately supported by Black female consumers. What inspired this docu-comedy (a film that has combined elements of a documentary and comedy) is when Chris Rock’s youngest daughter asked, “Daddy why don’t I have good hair?” (Good, Hair, 2009). This question alone gives great insight as to why some Black women with particular hair types invest in an array of products and services that alters the natural texture, and appearance of their hair. I should explained that, not all Black women have a disdain for their hair nor are they the only consumers to buy products and services that changes the texture, color, length or appearance of their natural hair. Still, Black women overwhelmingly represent a high percentage of the women and men that do. Bronner Brother’s President and Ceo explains, “Black people are 12% of the population and buy 80% of hair. All I know is we spend a lot of money on hair. No matter what we’re gonna look good (Good hair, 2009). Celebrity Nia Long explains, “the lighter, the brighter, the better, and that’s the thing that causes great dissention within the Black community and with Black women. Following this explanation is comedian Tracie Thomas describes her decision to go “natural” a term used to describe Black women who do not put relaxers or other chemicals that alters the genetic structure of kinky or tightly coiled hair to be straight. She states, “I look in the Black hair books and all the hair is straight it was a hard decision to be like, no I’m gonna be strong against all the forces and I’m gonna try to give up straightening my hair! (Good Hair, 2009). Historically, Byrd and Tharps (2001) posit that the birth of the Black hair-care boom is associated with the African American community’s overall quest to emancipate themselves economically, and socially:
Most African Americans entered the twentieth century with considerably less. As the century progressed, the creation of a Black consumer market, an obvious outgrowth of a rising middle class, was to have a major impact on the role of Black hair and the significance attached to it. With disposable income, more Blacks had the means to purchase cosmetics, namely bleaching creams and hair-straightening products. With the attainment and use of these goods, they were able to work toward achieving the respectable look of the New Negro.” (p. 31)

The key word in this passage is “respectable” the notion that wearing straight hair is a step in the direction of respectability is a narrative that has socially influenced the Black community because of straight hair’s association with whiteness and white standards of beauty. Consequently, the concept of Black hair looking acceptable has often times been when it’s straightened, still this notion and the narrative of kinky hair being “bad hair” has changed over time depending on the social fabric of American society; in the 1960’s and 1970’s the Black Power Movement advocated for the wearing of Afros and natural hair as a sign of beauty and empowerment. Yet, like all movements and fashion statements, this didn’t last and many African American women reverted back to putting chemicals in their hair. Now in the 21st century, you can find Black women wearing either natural or chemically treated hair and also wigs, or weaves (fake hair sowed or glued into the scalp). Straightened hair and natural hair in the Black community are connected to polemic narratives and experiences and these dichotomies are explored in the focus group participant Evone’s narrative on natural or nappy hair.
Description of the artifact and its context

The following narrative focuses on the theme “natural hair” and it is an autobiographical account about a participants experience with making a transition from chemically relaxed hair to natural hair. This theme was inspired by a scene in producer Spike Lee’s film “School Daze” (1988) in which two types of Black women wannabes and jigaboos discredit each others beauty and worth based on the physical appearance of their hair.

Evone explains the significance of this scene and its connection to her counter-narrative:

*Stereotypes about the Black female body has always been an interest to me because it’s something that serves as a history lesson and something that I feel like I can learn from my own past. So a topic that really stood out to me is nappy hair; because as you can see I have natural hair and the visual subject that I chose today was as you can see playing behind me is uh Spike Lee’s movie School Daze. And the scene that’s showing is between the wannabes and the jigaboos. The wannabes are the wannabe white girls with relaxers or perms and the jigaboos are supposed to be ugly and dark skin with natural hair. And this clip really stood out to me because less than a year ago I went on the journey of getting natural hair and it almost served as something negative because it made me feel like, why is something that I think is beautiful, somebody

Figure 11 Image of Wannabees in "School Daze"
else feels like is negative? So I don’t know that’s just something that stood 
out to me and I wrote a narrative about it that I entitle, “Happy to be 
Nappy” (Transcription, May 30, 2010).

Evone contextualizes her autobiographical counter-narrative with the musical scene in 
School Daze (1988) and within the historical context of what straight and kinky hair has 
come to symbolize in the Black community; they 
take on god and devil terminologies such as good 
and bad. This makes Her narrative significant to 
this study because it reveals the behavioral 
responses and emotional connections to the 
narratives of Black women and their hair.

Figure 12 Image of Jigaboos in 
"School Daze"

Description of the unit of analysis

The unit of analysis that is used to examine this narrative is “cluster analysis”. 
Cluster analysis is a method that appropriately can be used to examine written works.

According to rhetorical theorists Wayne Booth (1961) and Kenneth Burke (1941), “the 
proposition that poetic works may function rhetorically is generally accepted. Foss (1996) 
describes cluster analysis.

Cluster analysis is a method developed by Burke to help the critic discover 
a rhetor’s worldview. In this method, the meanings that key symbols have 
for the rhetor are discovered by charting the symbols that cluster around 
those key symbols in the rhetorical artifact…In other words, the task of 
the critic using this method is to note “what subjects cluster about other 
subjects (what images b, c, d the poet [rhetor] introduces whenever he 
talks with engrossment of subject a). (p. 64)
I use cluster analysis as a method because it sufficiently guides me in a close analysis of implicit and relational meanings that are embedded in narratives. Examining the implicit meaning of the content of this text and the cluster associations between key terms are particularly significant because, “Autobiographical narratives also create an opportunity for us to construct ourselves and our research in ways that may be of methodological and political interest to others struggling with alternate forms of representation of the lives of marginalized people” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 73). Now let’s look at the actual cluster associations within Evone’s narrative.

Associational clusters in “Happy to be Nappy”

Below is the narrative in its entirety. It is important to read the full narrative before I report the findings of the analysis in order to provide context to the clusters:

*Happy To Be Nappy*

I got my first relaxer when I was about 12 years old. I never really learned how to do my hair until I was in high school because I ALWAYS had braids so I never noticed how unhealthy a relaxer could be. I was happy when I first got a relaxer because my hair never lay down so easily and looked so good when it was styled. My junior year in high school, I noticed that my hair was getting thinner and I decided I would never get another relaxer. Unfortunately, that feeling did not stay with me because after about 4 months, I returned to the creamy cracking. Because I had taken
time off from relaxers, it was thicker and healthier when I finally got another one so I thought that everything was ok. Once I got to college, I began to see very few women with natural hair and I loved the way it looked but I did not think it was for me. By the end of my junior year in college, I began to battle with the topic again. I asked different people how they felt about natural hair. Some said they loved it and others were not so sure.

Since I was not sure how people would react, I almost decided not to do it. Then I considered the fact that it is my hair and my decision and I should not let others opinions keep me from finding another part of Evone. On Friday, September 4th, I went to the beauty salon and before I knew it, all of my hair was on the floor. I thought I would be emotional but all I could do was smile because I felt that I was making the right decision. I also gave myself time to get used to it so that when I returned to school, I would be comfortable with the new me.

At school, mostly everyone was supportive of my decision. There were some of my own sorors who told me that I should get weave or kinky twists so that it would grow faster. I took that as an insult because I knew that my hair was extremely short and there was only one way to style it but it is MY hair. I just ignored it because they would not have understood where I was coming from even if I would have tried to explain. I knew that I was proud of my natural hair and that I do not need weave or make-up or any other materialistic items to be beautiful. I’ve learned to pride
myself on being naturally beautiful and I love myself no matter what anyone else may think.

What has been discovered from the application of cluster analysis of this narrative is that the two most significant key terms are relaxer and natural. These two terms are in opposition to each other and this “suggest[s] a conflict or tension in the rhetor’s worldview that must be solved” (Foss, 1996, p. 66). As a result, an agon analysis that examines the opposing terms and the opposing terms that clusters around the terms relaxer and natural. These implicit cluster associations are: Identity, ambivalence, empowerment and beauty.

The terms relaxer and natural have both positive and negative connotations when applied to the context of Black women’s hair. In the narrative Evone makes a negative association with the term relaxer when she states, “I never noticed how unhealthy a relaxer could be.” She also writes, “My junior year in high school, I noticed my hair was getting thinner and I decided I would never get another relaxer.” and “I returned to the creamy crack”. When Evone talks about her relaxer she uses terminology such as “unhealthy”, “getting thinner”, and “creamy crack”. These cluster terms reveals a negative connotation that the author associates with the term relaxer. Readers learn that her experiences with the relaxer caused her hair to thin and breakage and yet it is comparatively addictive as crack despite her negative experiences with the chemical. Although there is a negative association being made with relaxers, there are also positive clusters terms associated with the term as well. Evone also explains that, “I was happy when I first got my relaxer because my hair never lay down so easily and looked so good
when it was styled”. Cluster terms such as “happy”, “lay down”, “easily”, and “looked so good” show the positive benefits that are experienced when African American hair is relaxed. Since the author of this narrative provides both positive and negative relationships with the term relaxer it is obvious that she is ambivalent about the term. Ambivalence about relaxers is expressed here, “I decided I would never get another relaxer. Unfortunately, that feeling did not stay with me”, “I returned”, “I had taken time off”, “I thought everything was ok”, “began to battle with the topic again”. These statements exemplify Foss’s (1996) argument that there is often a tension in the rhetor’s worldview when opposing terms are found in text. The statements of ambivalence convey this tension and support the significant role that hair plays in the lives of Black women. Evone’s ambivalence takes place both psychologically and behaviorally. This is implied in her narrative when she discusses decision-making and battling with topics, asking for others opinions, actually going through the process of getting a relaxer based on her mental processing of what a relaxer symbolizes. As the narrative shows, sometimes the positive symbols win over the negative symbols and vice versa. Depending on which clusters is most influencing at a particular time, Evone’s behavior and emotional state is influenced.

In this narrative positive and negative clusters are found in association with the term natural. When discussing natural hair, these words and phrases can be found “few” “I loved the way it looked”, “thicker”, “healthier” and “extremely short”. The narrative conveys that natural hair has the positive benefits of being thicker and healthier. This is opposite to the relaxed hair, which is negatively associated with words like “unhealthy and thinner”. Despite these positive attributes, natural hair is also found among “few”
Black women, according to Evone’s experience and interactions in college. This suggests that it is not favorable among other members of her community and the shortness associated with natural hair is a negative cluster term because this appearance is less desirable. Historically, short hair has not been a good attribute for African American women because it is the exact opposite to white women’s hair, which is often longer, straighter and associated with the concept of beauty.

The term beauty is a cluster association in this narrative and can be found in these statements, “I do not need weave or make-up or any other materialistic items to be beautiful” and “I’ve learned to pride myself on being naturally beautiful”. Explicitly Evone uses the word beautiful, which is a variant of beauty. Implicitly, she associates beauty with being natural. Not needing “weave”, “make-up” suggests that these terms are not associated with Evone’s new found concept of beauty and so cosmetic enhancement plays an oppositional role to her new found notion of beauty. For this reason, priding herself on being “naturally” beautiful places the key term natural as the overcoming term of relaxer at the end of the narrative and Evone leaves her readers with an emotional state of self acceptance and empowerment.

Self-acceptance and empowerment clusters around the key terms of natural and relaxer in this narrative. The author conveys moments of self-acceptance when she writes, “At school, mostly everyone was supportive of my decision.” and also in the statement, “I just ignored [suggestions to get a weave or kinky twist] because they would not have understood where I was coming from…” Despite positive and negative receptions of Evone’s natural hair this did not deter her from her decision to stay natural. Evone goes on to write, “I was proud of my natural hair” and “I love myself no matter
what anyone else may think”. Pride, and loving one’s self are significant cluster words and concepts that exhibit an emotional state of self-acceptance. The concept of self-acceptance is significant especially when it challenges the approval of other Black women in the community. From this, a sense of empowerment is determined to also be present in this narrative. Evone expresses an emotional state of empowerment in these clusters: “it’s my hair and my decision and I should not let others opinions keep me from finding another part of Evone”, “I gave myself time”, and “it is MY hair”. Making a decision to be natural, finding one’s self and giving one’s self time to adjust and adapt to a new visual representation of the self are all empowering acts that Evone shares in this narrative and that are positively associated with the term natural and negatively associated with the term relaxer. From this and all the other cluster associations mentioned, we get incredible insight on how a counter-narrative about hair can provide insight to the significance of Black women and visual culture representation.

**Narrative #2**

*Introduction*

Narrative # 2 is a poem that questions the acceptability of representing hypersexual Black women in the media. The author wants to investigate why members of the Black community and the overall community at large have allowed for this type of imagery to be so prevalent in visual culture. This text aids in specifically answering the question “How can the convergence of the images of Black women and personal written narratives be used to interrogate the concepts of race, gender and identity?” This poem also provides knowledge of how the rhetorical process can be used to convey the perception
that a Black woman might have about the consequences these images have on members of the Black community. Let me reiterate, the image of the hypersexual Black woman is historically known as “Jezebel”. Jewel (1993) posits, “The bad-Black girl reinforces cultural stereotypes regarding the hypersexuality of the African American female, who yearns for sexual encounters.” She also explains that, “This image has appeared on television as well as in movies” (p. 46). This narrative about Black women is so pervasive that it has been long standing; In the United States, it first started in slavery as a means to justify sexual relationships between Black women and white men. According to Pilgrim (2002), what was usually a case of rape, was not acknowledged as so because, Black women were depicted for having a strong appetite for white men. They were blamed for seducing and provoking the slave owners (Ferris State University, ¶ 6).

**Description of the artifact and its context**

The following narrative concentrates on the theme “hypersexuality”. This counter-narrative is actually a poem that questions the acceptability of pervasively presenting hypersexual Black women in visual culture. The author, Rasheeda, describes images of women scantly displayed and objectified for corporate profit and entertainment. This economic relationship also has an effect on Black women who are not participants in the entertainment industry and this is shown through the author’s memory of personal adolescent experiences. In the introduction of Rasheeda’s taping, she explains how the exposure of hyper-sexual images of Black women, and personal experiences has been influential to her self-esteem, and consequently is the reason why she chose this theme to explore:
Hello my name is Rasheeda Donaldson. I am from Youngstown, Ohio and I’m a graduating senior here at Ohio State. My major is health communications with an African American and African Studies minor. My interest in Black female stereotypes portrayal in the media specifically ties from my childhood and development as a female in today’s society and my dilemmas with self-esteem issues. And the theme I’ve chosen is hypersexuality and it made me question a lot of things about myself and why these repetitive images occur and my narrative I have chosen to write, a poem, and it is title “Acceptable”.

Rasheeda’s choice to write a counter-narrative in the form of poetry is according to Hirshfield (1997) “is a form of representation that relies on the word and lyrical invocation, this merging the two vehicles of expression (as cited in Leavy, 2009, p. 64). Another significant factor in this choice of genre is “with respect to social research, poems offer an alternative way of presenting data such as those from in-depth interviews or oral history transcripts” (Leavy, 2009, p. 64). The poem “Acceptable” not only provides an alternative way of presenting data but vivid imagery that coincides with the bold presentation and sensual images of Black women that informs its construction.

Description of the unit of analysis

The unit of analysis that is used to examine this narrative is “cluster analysis”. Cluster analysis is a method that appropriately can be used to examine written works. According to rhetorical theorists Wayne Booth (1961) and Kenneth Burke (1941), “the proposition that poetic works may function rhetorically is generally accepted. Foss (1996) describes cluster analysis:

Cluster analysis is a method developed by Burke to help the critic discover a rhetor’s worldview. In this method, the meanings that key symbols have for the rhetor are discovered by charting the symbols that cluster around those key symbols in the rhetorical artifact…In other words, the task of
the critic using this method is to note “what subjects cluster about other subjects (what images b, c, d the poet [rhetor] introduces whenever he talks with engrossment of subject a) (p. 64).

I use cluster analysis as a method because it sufficiently guides me in a close analysis of implicit and relational meanings that are embedded in poems. Examining the implicit meaning of the content of this text and the cluster associations between key terms are particularly significant because, “Investigative poetry, as described by Hartnett (2003), combines critical ethnography, autobiography, and political underpinnings in service of social justice-oriented goals” (Leavy, 2009, p. 67). Now lets look at the actual cluster associations within Rasheeda’s poem.

Associated clusters in “Acceptable”

Below is the poem “Acceptable” in its entirety. It is important to read the poem before reporting the findings of the analysis; this provides context to the clusters.

Acceptable

Why do we allow our own to be turned into sultry stone idols adorned by the powerful pervs that run the world? Twisted, poked, pricked, and prodded until their souls unfurl.

Surrounded by plastic, Barbie dolls, weave, moans, and giggles it makes me wonder why my little sisters are so confused. How many times a day does our world tell us it’s alright to be used?
I remember booty shaking contests and never realized how the boys became obsessed. Then when I was a teen it was cooler to show your breasts... but why?

Since when was it cool to spread your legs for the camera and pose slurping on a lollipop? Oh, but wait. That right there determines a better shot.

“Boost your record sales, get the most perks for your flicks.” What does this say to your sister coming up behind you? Legalized prostitution?

Maybe... You just have to be real slick.

Why is this acceptable?

After examining this poem I have determined that the key terms are “why” and “acceptable”. The term why is significant because of its frequency in the poem. It is the most frequent term and appears four times in the poem. Its primary significance is that it provides insight into the poets thought process. The reader has a lot of questions about the hypersexual representation of Black women. The word “why” is clustered with these terms: allow, acceptable, confused and phrases such as “show your breast”. These clusters convey that Rasheeda really wants to know what purpose does the images of “sultry stone idols”, and overtly sexual Black women have in visual culture? The poet’s line of questioning is rhetorical and is meant to provoke audiences to see how images of Black women “twisted”, “poked”, “pricked” and “prodded” are in fact harmful to Black women and especially young Black girls. The author expresses her concern for the next generation of Black women in this line, “it makes me wonder why my little sisters are so confused.” The terms “twisted”, “poked”, “pricked” and “prodded” along with “plastic”,
“weave”, “Barbie dolls”, “moans” and “giggles” are all negative cluster associations that express disapproval of the hypersexual imagery of Black women. These terms also establish the imagery of objectification and artificiality. Like cattle, Black women are posed salaciously in front of cameras because the message in society is that it is “cool to spread your legs”. Yet, before audiences see these images in the media, Rasheeda suggests that the process of objectification starts early. Her own personal experience of seeing and possibly participating in “booty shaking contests” and telling readers how “it was cooler to show your breast” by the time she was a teenager supports this claim. These activities occur under the gaze of young boys who are obsessed with the hypersexual performance and imagery of Black girls. Although most of the poem is questioning the hegemonic and offensive imagery of hypersexual Black women there is a turning point in the poem in which the writer provides a clear answer to her questions. In the beginning of the poem the first line alludes to a group of people, “powerful pervs” that “run the world”. Like Jewell (1993), Rasheeda alludes to the ideology that there is a hegemonic culture or group that are invested in sexual imagery of Black women. These pervs developed and control the ideology of hypersexual Black women in visual culture and “when an ideology becomes hegemonic in a culture, certain interests or groups are served by it more than others” (Foss, 1996, p. 294). The author establishes this argument again in this line of the poem,

[Image of Nikki Minaj: Black Woman Slurping on a Lollipop]
“Boost your record sales, get the most perks for your flicks”. The powerful pervs are now connected to entertainment industries like the music industry that acquire economic gain from images of Black women “spreading their legs and slurping on a lollipop.” The writer establishes this exchange of representation for money as covert or “legalized prostitution” and ends the poem by asking, readers to consider “why is this acceptable?” Readers are left with a very intense image of the Black woman and this image of a salacious Black woman is supported by various still photos of Black women provocatively dressed and posed; these images were collected submitted with the poem to be edited into the recorded reading of the poem. They are images of real Black women, models and entertainers, who were found on the Internet. Why are these images acceptable?

Narrative # 3

Introduction

At the 2010 French Open Venus Williams stepped out on the court wearing a Black and red lace corset with flesh-colored shorts underneath. This caused a lot of controversy because it gave the illusion she was showing her bare buttocks. Venus explained to reporters “It’s really all about the illusion”. William’s tennis outfit and its illusionary display of her butt provoke audiences to imagine what’s underneath. Her attire at the French Open is significant for two reasons. First, it is significant and ironic that once again on a French stage a Black woman with a well-developed butt became the center of attention. Like Sarah Bartman who was displayed in front of a Parisian audience because she had an abnormally large butt, Venus has positioned herself in a similar space. The reactions toward both these women were fascination, surprise and
disgust. Although for Venus Williams the context is much different. In 2010 Williams can assume an agency that Bartmann in 1815 never possessed. The tennis outfit that Williams wore is something that comes from her clothing line. This tennis outfit promotes both Williams celebrity and economic independence. Second, and most significant is the emotional state, and attitude that Venus Williams conveys about the Black female butt. Williams tells reporters “The illusion of having bare skin is definitely for me, a lot more beautiful.” Furthermore, Venus brags about her posterior telling reporters “It just so happens that I have a very well-developed one. It’s all genetic” (Hill, May 28, 2010, ¶ 15). These comments reveal that Williams sees her butt as a gift and other Black women today celebrate their butt also. It has become a symbol for beauty and power. Yet, it continues to come under the hegemonic gaze and can also be a burden for Black women and young Black girls. Often, this symbol of beauty and power gets reduced and subjected to other labels. The symbol of beauty is traded in for grotesque, and the concept of being well-developed changes to evidence that the Black female body is abnormally developed. This happens when images of Black women’s butt are displayed in a sexual context in the media. For the purposes of this study, focus group participant Jackie explores the contentious relationship that Black women and she personally experiences as it relates to their butts. Her poem “Synecdoche” gives great rhetorical insight on these experiences.

Description of the artifact and its context
The following poem focuses on the theme “the butt”. Women and Black women in particular with big butts are commonly referred to as bootylicious or “big booty Judy”.
This counter-narrative talks about experiences and objectification that go along with these labels. The author Jackie lyrically incorporates her own personal experiences of existing with a large butt and couples it with imagery of Black women in visual culture with this same trait. The overall purpose of this poem is for the author to disassociate with the negative connotations that are connected to “the butt” and to assert her own identity. In the introduction of Jackie’s taping she explains her intentional meanings behind the poem more clearly:

*Hi I’m Jackie B. I’m with the, I’m participating in the Defining Us study. Umm I was researching the perception of Black women in the, visual culture, umm my study of research was the donk or uh, the behind, the ass, whatever you want to call it that the media is seems so fixated on concerning the Black woman’s body. And I wrote a poem about it entitled “Synecdoche”.*

Jackie’s poem is lyrical and this works well in conveying her message. Laurel Richardson (1997) argues “lyric poetry, emphasizes moments of emotion and is less concerned with relaying a “story” per se…this poetry extends our understanding of “giving voice” to our research collaborators” (Leavy, 2010, p. 66). Hearing Jackie’s voice is what is most important in this poem and is an overall goal in this research project.

*Description of the unit of analysis*

The unit of analysis that is used to examine this narrative is “cluster analysis”. Cluster analysis is a method that appropriately can be used to examine written works. According to rhetorical theorists Wayne Booth (1961) and Kenneth Burke (1941), “the
proposition that poetic works may function rhetorically is generally accepted. Foss (1996) describes cluster analysis:

Cluster analysis is a method developed by Burke to help the critic discover a rhetor’s worldview. In this method, the meanings that key symbols have for the rhetor are discovered by charting the symbols that cluster around those key symbols in the rhetorical artifact…In other words, the task of the critic using this method is to note “what subjects cluster about other subjects (what images b, c, d the poet [rhetor] introduces whenever he talks with engrossment of subject a). (p. 64)

I use cluster analysis as a method because it sufficiently guides me in a close analysis of implicit and relational meanings that are embedded in poems. Examining the implicit meaning of the content of this text and the cluster associations between key terms are particularly significant because, “…there are many genres of poetry that researchers use, each suited to different epistemological views about the research process as well as other kinds of research questions and objectives” (Leavy, 2009, p. 65). Now lets look at the actual cluster associations within Jackie’s poem.

Associated clusters in “Synecdoche”

Below is the poem “Synecdoche” in its entirety. Reading the poem before giving an analysis provides context to the clusters.

**Synecdoche**

*By Jackie Berry*

*I accept the fact that when I walk down the street*
My backpack bounces up and down,
Rebounding off the switching of my hips.
I accept that when I go to parties
I lead with said hips,
Moving to rhythms
With swishes and dips,
Trying to get that guy in the corner to notice me
Just enough to want the next dance.
I accept that at times I use it for advance.
I accept that it’s attached to me;
Can’t leave it at home,
It’s a part of me,
This synecdoche,
That makes that guy I don’t know
On the street
Whistle at me
When I’m late for AFAM four eight five dot zero three.
It’s a part of me,
This synecdoche,
That many have reached directly for
To the beats of Ne-Yo, Common,
Soulja or Shakur
Who praise this part,
Praise the natural art
God has attached as curves.
I accept the nerve
Of some people
Running out to show it
In proximity to lyrical poets
Merely for the purpose of bouncing,
Gyrating,
Flouncing what is claimed to be a talent.
I accept that some feel the need
To adjust,
Puff it up like some do with the bust,
Fill it ‘til it jiggles like Jell-O and, trust, it does.
In that unique sense;
That sense that she might feel like she’s always sitting
On a waterbed.
That sense that when she sits,
She’s taller by a head.
That sense that people actually want to
Test old jokes on her, bouncing coins off it
As drinks are set on top.
Running credit cards down the cleft
And seeing if and where it stops.
Bending it over,

Shaking it faster,

Clapping an applause

To no other talent than the ability to slip into

A bikini.

I accept the synecdoche, but

I accept that it’s beneath me.

I accept these things,

But I don’t do that.

It’s a part of me

But not as that synecdoche

I refuse to let be my representative.

So don’t ask me to wiggle it,

Jiggle it,

Roll it,

Pop it, drop it, hydraulic it!

I only want to

Sit. On. It!

After examining this poem I have determined that “Synecdoche” rhetorically answers the preceding poem “Acceptable.” It gives a response to what is acceptable about Black women’s representation in visual culture and how the author does not identify with some of these images. The key phrase in Jackie’s poem is “I accept”. This
phrase occurs in the poem nine times and it is clustered around the concepts of identity, sexuality, and empowerment. The frequent use of the phrase “I accept” reveals that the author has come to terms with the fact that certain stereotypes are associated with the Black woman’s butt. The cluster association of sexuality and Black women’s butts is heavily explored in this poem and is represented by adjectives and phrases such as: bounces, swishes, dips, use for advance, gyrating, show it, bouncing, flouncing, adjust, fill it ‘til it jiggles, set on top, bending it over, shaking it faster, clapping, slip into, pop it, drop it and hydraulic it. These words paint a picture of the butt actively engaged in movements that are sexual in nature. These descriptions are supported by the performance of entertainers in music videos and models like “Buffy the Body” who are known for having a large butt and the ability to make their butts move and perform tricks. What is most vivid is the reference Jackie makes to the rapper Nelly’s video “Tip Drill”. Jackie not only accepts that these activities are connected with Black women’s behinds but she also engages inadvertently in some of these activities herself. She can’t help that she leads with said hips or that her book bag rebounds off the switching of her hips and she reminds readers that, “It’s a part of me”. These lines in the poem express empowerment, and connection that Jackie has with her butt and identity. Jackie explicitly explains, “I accept that it’s attached to me; Can’t leave it at home, It’s a part of me”. Jackie can’t separate herself physically from her butt because it is attached to her and this also means that she can’t detach herself from everything else it represents. She can’t separate from the synecdoche of the butt. The
overall significance of the Black woman’s butt is that it serves as a synecdoche for the hypersexuality of Black women. Descriptions of the “donk” paint a vivid image of the meta-narrative of Black women as lascivious, over-developed and over-sexed beings in society. Despite this imagery, Jackie disassociates herself from it and this is evident in the poem. The turning point in this counter-narrative occurs when she writes, “I accept the synecdoche, but I accept that it’s beneath me. I accept these things but I don’t do that”. Jackie accepts the fact that these images and connotations about the lewd Black woman exist but this has nothing to do with who she is, her identity. She blatantly rejects this meta-narrative and states, “I refuse to let it be my representative”. This turning point shows Jackie’s empowerment and even in her recorded performance audience can feel that she is empowered because the tone and tempo of the remainder of the poem speeds up and gets louder in an effort to emphasize her rejection of negative representations of Black women. The rhetorical elements of this poem cause audiences to consider that perhaps many of the stereotypical representations of Black women in visual culture are actually unacceptable to some Black women. This is a narrative or concept that is scarcely present in visual culture.

**Discussing the overall contribution of cluster analyzing counter-narratives.**

The themes, key terms, and cluster associations that were found in these counter-narratives are strongly related to the representation of Black women in visual culture. Through the process of body mapping the women of this study established thirteen themes or stereotypes that are ascribed to Black women in visual culture. Collectively the participants and myself categorized these labels and through content analysis we
calculated the frequency of each category. Media stereotypes of Black women with hypersexual and confrontational characteristics received the highest frequencies of thirteen and eleven. This data supports the literature presented in chapter one that addresses historic stereotypes of the Black woman (Jewell, 1993). Furthermore, the perceptions that there are negative representations of Black women in visual culture were addressed in participants’ counter-narratives. This evidence gives significant insight to the longevity of social and cultural meta-narratives in visual culture. Even in its most covert form, the presence of hegemonic images is still identifiable and harmful. These counter-narratives also allow me to answer these research questions, (1.) In what ways do Black women identify with commercial images of Black women? (2.) From these personal written narratives what understanding can we get about Black women’s perception of: empowerment and disempowerment, beauty and sexuality, and their various roles in society?

The Black women in this study addressed their sentiments toward the commercial images of Black women through a personal and collective point of view. Through rhetorical analysis I found evidence of the approval and yet disapproval of particular images of Black women. There were certain instances in the narrative when the author was empowered as well disempowered. There were also times when the author could clearly identify with an image and yet times when they explicitly said that they didn’t. Also, each writer mentioned instances when the images and theme had a direct impact on their community. These memories were intertwined in personal experiences. Consequently, there is a certain level of ambivalence towards the representation of Black women and it is only when certain images are present in certain contexts that a
participant’s stance as well as my own was concretely established. This analysis lends to my understanding that Black women’s issues with the representation of Black women are complex and relative. In an effort to address the second question, I consider my efforts to conduct rhetorical analysis of the participants’ counter-narratives and it supports the argument that, “narrative analysis seeks complex patterns and descriptions of identity, knowledge, and social relations from specific cultural points of view” (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004, p. xii). Initially a researcher might think that it is impossible to pinpoint a collective perspective among Black women on the issues of their representation. However, as Bamberg & Moissinac, 2003; Bruner, 1990; Donald, 1991; and Fivush & Haden, 2003 suggest, “Narratives serve as a storehouse of shared knowledge and beliefs in human societies and as an essential source of cultural learning” (as cited in Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004, p.87). This shared knowledge and beliefs were most evident when each narrative addressed similar perceptions about the issues of identity, empowerment, beauty, and desire. There is a collective perspective and equally important individual perspectives that adds richness to the discourse of visual culture, and the representation of race and gender. In support of the qualitative findings that establish that these participants have a perception of themselves that rises above disempowering visual narratives I now will discuss the quantitative analysis of Black women and self-esteem.
Quantitative Methods: Assessing Black women’s self-esteem and body image

Introduction

The Quad-City Times reported the passing of a woman name Martha Davis in their obituary November 22, 2009. Residents, who live in Davenport Iowa, knew this lady; she was an icon in the area but for those who don’t here is the reason why:

She was known not by her name, but by her face. For 50 years she was “the powder puff lady,” or “the clown woman,” or more starkly, the woman who always wore a white face.
She puzzled most everyone, but was a gentle friend to many. However and whatever, she was the Quad-Cities’ most unique personality.
Now, Martha Davis of Davenport is dead at 90.
True to her wishes, she was laid to rest Saturday with her face in white makeup.
She was an enigma. Martha was a Black woman who chose to cover her face in heavy white makeup. It was so thick that it often looked like white pancake batter was spread over her face. She would not bare her hands. Always, even on the hottest summer days, she wore white gloves. Why? Why? (Bill Wundrum, 2009).

The life of Martha Davis who lived a life in white face bares significance to the inquiries of African Americans and self esteem. Wundrum’s double question “Why?” is one that many researchers investigating the identity construction and self-esteem of African Americans have been theorizing about for years. Although Wundrum does not provide an answer in his article it was interesting to read some of the posted comments of neighbors and friends who speculated the reason why a Black woman would live a public life in white face. Some believed it was because Davis loved angels and wanted to look like one. Others expressed that she was eccentric or just plain crazy. The few comments that standout for my research interests are firsthand

Figure 15 pics of Martha Davis
accounts that Davis wore white face in order to get back the love of her life. One person explains, “Innocently I asked her why and she said it was because her husband ran off with a white woman” (Quad-City Times, November 22, 2009). Whatever, the rationale behind her actions, one thing is clearly communicated, Davis did not want her natural skin tone to be seen in public.

According to Bond and Cash 1992; Chambers et al. 1994; Porter 1971; T. L. Robinson and Ward (1995), “Black women expect to be judged by their skin tone. No doubt messages from peers, the media, and family show a preference for lighter skin tones. Several studies cited in the literature review point out that Black women of all ages tend to prefer lighter skin tones and believe that lighter hues are perceived as most attractive by their Black male counterparts (as cited in Thompson and Keith, 2001, p. 352). Perhaps the message of attractiveness and skin tone along with personal circumstances is what influenced Davis to paint her face white. Looking beyond the rationale of her actions, Davis’s public appearance can also be read as a commentary on society’s devaluation of Black. Moreover, Davis white face appearance supports the argument that, “Images of Blacks by whites reveal far more about whites than about Blacks, but the realities of power cause then to affect Blacks harmfully when they are derogatory, which necessitates subversive strategies to resist them” (Harris, 2003, p. 37). The harmful affect that Harris supposes has to deal with issues of self-esteem. As it relates to my study on the representation of Black women in art and visual culture, and their responses to these images, it is important to consider how the presentation of Black women has an effect on participants if it does at all. Specifically, I am considering the relationship between self-esteem, ethnic identity and the representation of that ethnicity.
Results

In the past Blacks and particularly African Americans were thought to have lower self esteem than their white counterparts. This perception is based on the argument that self esteem is correlated with group identity or membership and how society might negatively view that group. As it relates to characteristics of Blacks in the minds of whites, “High sensitivity to racial classifications often yields negative emotions, especially anger or resentment toward Blacks as a group, and fear or anxiety about being close to Black individuals” (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 20). Blacks that are aware of these emotions or the perception of mainstream America, could internalize them as measurements of their group identity. Consequently, these negative emotions towards Blacks have often been the rationale behind research in the past that suggests they have low self esteem. Supporting this rationale is Tajfel (1981) who explains, “if [Blacks] are viewed negatively by society, they may view themselves negatively”. Furthermore, “This idea is in accord with early writings on self esteem among ethnic group members, which assumed that membership in a disadvantaged or lower status group would result in lower self esteem (Phinney, Cantu & Kurtz, 1997, p. 166). In contrast, an increasing body of research suggests that Blacks and other minorities do not suffer from low self esteem because of group membership.
There is a body of research to support the argument that Blacks do not have comparatively lower self esteem to whites (Bowler et al., 1986; Crocker and Major, 1989; Hughes and Demo, 1989; Porter and Washington, 1993; Richman et al., 1985; Rosenberg and Simmons, 1972; Tashakkori, 1992). In the research that measured the self esteem of adolescents from various ethnic groups “There is strong evidence that African American adolescents either do not differ from, or score higher than white adolescents on measures of self-esteem” (Phinney et al., 1997, p. 167). Their findings suggest that the self esteem of ethnic group members of a lower social hierarchy is not affected by this status. Furthermore they challenge the claims that Blacks have lower self esteem in comparison to whites. Theoretically, “the social identity perspective postulates that when individuals identify with a particular social group, they try to obtain a sense of positive self esteem from that identity. Consequently, when those individuals construct representations of the in-group than of the salient out-groups, dimensions of comparison are chosen which produce more favourable representations of the in-group than of the out-groups…the positive distinctiveness which is ascribed to the in-group over the out-groups produces positive self esteem” (Davis, Leman, and Barrett, 2007, p. 516). As it relates to this discussion the in-group is Black women and the out-group applies to whites or any other group that is not Black. The social identity perspective negates the argument that a lower social status influences Blacks’ self esteem and establishes that Blacks have a higher regard of the approval and valuations of other Blacks.

However, when socioeconomic status is taken into consideration there is some debate as to whether this influences Blacks’ self-esteem. Phinney et al. (1997) report studies that show evidence that socioeconomic status (SES) is a domain for lower status Blacks’ self-
esteem. When comparing Black and white high school students, Richman et al. (1985) found that low SES students had lower self-esteem scores than middle or high SES students”. Also, “A study by Hughes and Demo (1989) with Black adults found a low but significant correlation between social class and self esteem” (p. 170). These studies suggest that groups that are disadvantaged socially and especially those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged may in fact suffer from an unhealthy self and group identity perception. These findings as it relates to the representation of Blacks in visual culture supports the position that stereotypical imagery and negative messages that associate Blacks with poverty do in fact have harmful effects on its group members. Still, other studies like Ockerman (1979) found no relationship between self esteem and social class in a sample of African Americans, Hispanics and White adolescents” (Phinney et al., 1997, p. 170). The research discussed so far is limiting because it has a narrow focus on SES and adolescents. A more longitudinal study over time might perhaps show negative effects on the self esteem of Blacks that are part of a lower social status. These findings on social status then, are inconclusive and were not a part of the study of Black female images and popular visual culture. However, since there is an interest in specific gender representation in visual culture, another factor considered is the comparative difference in Black women and men’s self esteem.

The difference in self esteem as it relates to gender is critical for visual culture research that focuses on the impact of images on women. Black women in general are thought to have a negative self esteem because they are marginalized in three ways: by race, by gender and by socio-economics. Comparatively, Phinney et al. (1997) found that there are significant differences between the self esteem of white adolescent women and
white and Black adolescent men. According to this study white women have a notably lower self esteem. However when the study measured the self esteem of Black adolescent women they found that Black females showed relatively high self esteem and that Black males and females did not differ in self esteem (p. 170). These results on the self esteem of Black adolescent females calls for a closer analysis and questions if in fact there is a drastic issue of low self esteem for Black women as a group. Insight is provided as to why there may not be a comparative difference in self esteem among Black men and women. Specifically, “Black women’s participation in the labor force and gains in education have resulted in their near socioeconomic parity with Black men…In this sense, Black women’s achievement outcomes in education and income, and their role as primary provider for their families, positively contributes to their global self esteem” (as cited in Patterson, 2004, p. 312). Supporting evidence that Black women and men have equal levels of self esteem and socioeconomic parity does not discount the fact that denigrating racial messages jeopardize their self esteem. Rather what should be considered are the different factors that negatively challenge the self esteem of Black women and men.

In a study that compared the gender difference in mediated effects of perceived support on depression and anxiety, Gaylord-Harlen et al. (2007) establish, “ethnic identity was a more salient mediator for perceived support on males’ depression; whereas, self esteem was a more salient mediator for perceived supports’ effects on depression in females” (p. 84). The rationale for these findings are based on perception that females are more closely monitored and protected from some of the more negative experiences that would initiate the awareness of ethnic identity. This implies that the Black female’s self esteem
may not be as low as the Black male’s when it comes to negative ethnic identity experiences. Still, we should pay close attention to Black females’ self esteem and note how it may be affected by having a lack of support from other Black females and family members that they are closely associated with. Patterson (2004) notes:

The more recent findings substantiate what Black scholars had long contended. African American women’s primary sources of self-esteem are family, friends, church, and community, all of which are composed mostly of other Blacks (Eugene, 1995; Miller, 1992; Myers, 1975, 1980; Scott, 1991). In addition, Myers (1980) found that other Black women are the primary source of Black women’s self esteem because it is their evaluations that are most important for their own self-assessments. Eugene affirms that other Black women validate the experience, perspective, and feelings of African American women that mainstream society attempts to invalidate. Positive reinforcement by others like themselves enables these women to not internalize societal views (Eugene, 1995; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996).

Valuing the opinions of other Black women and their affirmations provides significant insight on how some Black women are able to buffer the exclusion from a society that discriminates them because of race and gender. However, we cannot assume that because a Black woman has strong or influential relationships with other Black women that she is not totally effected by negative imagery about Black women. This study challenges this notion by working with a community of Black women and exposing their issues and
concerns with images despite the access they may have to other Black women’s perceptions on the topic. Now let’s look at the results.

**Self-Esteem**

In the first regression age, education, ethnic identity, body shape, and body satisfaction were the five variables entered into the regression to determine whether they were significant predictors of a Black woman’s self-esteem (see Table 4.1). The multiple regression analysis revealed that the stronger a woman’s Black ethnic identity the more positive her self-esteem ($R^2$ change = .11, $F (1, 41) = 4.69, p = .03$).

**Body Satisfaction**

In the second regression age, education, ethnic identity, body shape, and were the four variables entered into the regression to determine whether they were significant predictors of a Black woman’s body satisfaction. The multiple regression analysis revealed that education, and body shape were significant predictors of a Black woman’s body satisfaction (see Table 4.2). Specifically, the older a Black woman the more satisfaction they have with their body ($R^2$ change = .06, $F (1, 40) = 2.50, p = .05$). Also, the smaller a woman’s body shape the more satisfied they were with their body ($R^2$ change = .12, $F (1, 36) = 5.78, p = .02$).

**Perception of Plus Size White Woman**

In the third regression age, education, ethnic identity, body shape, and self-esteem were the five variables entered into the regression to determine whether they were significant
predictors of a Black woman’s attitude towards a picture of a plus size White woman. The multiple regression analysis revealed that ethnic identity, body shape, and body satisfaction were significant predictors of a Black woman’s attitude towards a plus size White woman (see Table 4.3). Specifically, the stronger a woman’s ethnic identity the more positive their attitude is towards a picture of a plus size white woman ($R^2$ change = .14, $F(1, 38) = 6.37, p = .02$). Also, the bigger a woman’s body shape the more positive attitude she has toward a picture of a plus size White woman ($R^2$ change = .04, $F(1, 36) = 2.73, p = .09$). Lastly, the more satisfied a Black woman was concerning her body the more positive their attitude she had towards a picture of a plus size White woman ($R^2$ change = .09, $F(1, 36) = 4.52, p = .04$).

**Perception of Plus Size Black Woman**

In the fourth regression age, education, ethnic identity, body shape, and self-esteem were the five variables entered into the regression to determine whether they were significant predictors of a Black woman’s attitude towards a picture of a plus size Black woman. The multiple regression analysis revealed that ethnic identity, body shape, and body satisfaction were significant predictors of a Black woman’s attitude towards a plus size Black woman (see Table 4.3). Specifically, the stronger a woman’s ethnic identity the more negative their attitude is towards a picture of a plus size white woman ($R^2$ change = .18, $F(1, 38) = 6.35, p = .05$). Also, the bigger a woman’s body shape the more positive attitude she has toward a picture of a plus size Black woman ($R^2$ change = .07, $F(1, 37) = 1.50, p < .05$). Lastly, the more satisfied a Black woman was concerning her body the
more positive their attitude she had towards a picture of a plus size Black woman ($R^2$ change = .10, $F$ (1, 35) = 8.27, $p = .008$).

**Discussion**

Self esteem is a highly researched construct that has been explored in two areas, group self-esteem and personal self-esteem. “According to Porter and Washington (1979, 1993), *group self esteem* focuses on one’s feelings about being a member of a racial or ethnic group. Furthermore, “personal self esteem involves a comprehensive assessment of one’s self, including feelings of intrinsic worth, competence, and self-approval” (Phelps, Taylor & Gerard, 2001, p. 210). Rosenberg (1965, 1989) defines self esteem as positive or negative attitudes towards the self and the overall evaluation of one’s worth or value. (as cited in Yuh, 2005, p. 112). Furthermore, Harter (1993) establishes that there is a global self esteem that he defines as “the level of global regard that one has for the self as a person” (as cited in Phinney et al, 1997, p. 166). All of these definitions of self esteem lends to the understanding that self-esteem is a conceptualized evaluation that one has for their identity. Often, this conceptualization is based on social interactions with others.

As it relates to Blacks, there are two opposing viewpoints on self esteem (Horowitz, 1939; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951; & Steele & Aronson, 1995). Scholars establish that, “much of the research produced by mainstream psychology suggests that African Americans who identify strongly with being Black may be at psychological risk as a result of stigma associated with the identity (as cited in Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998, p. 715). This argument is predicated on the assumption that African
Americans have negative self images because of how they are negatively perceived by others in society. Early research in racial identity based their findings of African Americans and low self esteem on their preference for White stimuli. Specifically, the study conducted by “Clark and Clark (1947), in which African American children demonstrated a preference for playing with White dolls, were interpreted as evidence that African American children hated themselves for being Black and wish they were White” (Rowley et al., 1998, p. 715). Furthermore, when looking at the area of the study that measures racial preference, the study reports, “It is clear from Table 5 that the majority of these Negro children prefer the white doll and reject the colored doll” (Newcomb and Hartley, 1947, p. 175). This viewpoint on the self esteem of African Americans produced erroneous and harmful literature on African Americans in fields of social science. African Americans were perceived as victims susceptible to issues of poor Mental Health. Brand et al., 1974; McAdoo, 1970; and Porter & Washington, 1979, “astutely noted that the early work on African American racial identity erroneously assumed that reference group orientation (preference for same race stimuli) was related to, if not synonymous with self-concept (as cited in Rowley, et al., p. 715, 1998). Their rationale is that if Blacks had a preference for non-Black stimuli then clearly this is an indication of self-hatred and or a low regard for their racial identity group.

In contrast, researchers have challenged the conceptual and methodological grounds of these early studies and an opposing argument that African Americans’ actually have high self-esteem became a part of the discourse in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. These findings were a result of directly measuring the self-esteem of African Americans, and can be explained by “The insulating hypothesis and resilience models:
The insulation hypothesis argues that because of racial segregation in the United States, the majority of African Americans compare themselves not with members of the broader society, but with other African Americans. As a result, African Americans are insulated from the broader society’s negative perceptions of their racial group, and their personal self-esteem is protected (Broman et al., 1989; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1971). [Furthermore], “A number of African American researchers have focused on the resilient strengths of African American experiences (Banks, 1970; Burlew & Smith, 1991; Cross, 1971; Kambon, 1992; Millones, 1980)…models of resilience argue that identification with one’s race should result in more positive mental health outcomes such as high self-esteem…” (Rowley et al., p. 716, 1998)

Unlike the earlier studies on African Americans, researchers who focused on the strengths of the African American experience were able to get positive results on the mental health of participants. However, as Rowley et al. (1998) suggests, these findings in the research on racial identity and self esteem are inconclusive and there is a gap in the literature because “researchers have failed to explicate the mechanisms by which a strong racial identity should result in higher levels of self-esteem…” (p. 716). Most of Rowley et al. research posits that researchers should take into consideration the significance of racial identity; and whether or not it is salient to a participant’s identity. Consequentially, if racial identity proves to be one of the significant domains for a participant’s personally affirmed identities then racial identity is thought to have a strong relationship with self-esteem. Understanding the two opposing viewpoints on African Americans’ self-esteem adds value to visual culture research that investigates the reception of Black female images among Black females. The results of the survey data establish whether or not race is a salient factor for each participant’s identity domain. The role in which race plays in a participant’s personal identity is consequential to how they respond to racialized imagery.
Likewise, it is also important to consider the overall significance of Blacks’ self esteem and body image and how it contributes to their individual and group identity.

**Discussing the overall contribution of assessing the self esteem and body image of Black women**

Research that looks at the impact of Black female images on group identity and self esteem along with collective responses to these images is a better approach to understanding what impact these images might have on the group. Especially, since research argues that Black female in-group opinions are heavily influential on individuals within that group. Furthermore, looking at how Black women engage with visual imagery of the Black female body and the messages from these images provided insight on what messages are accepted and rejected as it relates to their group identity and attempts to preserve self esteem.

As it relates to this research of Black women and visual culture, paying close attention to issues of self esteem provides insight on the impact of Black female images. Taking into consideration the historical and contemporary social experiences of these particular demographic through this lens aids in the contextualization of not only the images being examined but also their reception. From there, an understanding of how Black women operate in collective situations gives the research a more developed narrative of how Black female participants engage with their imagery.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The visual impact of Black women in visual culture

So far the research provides an illustration on the kinds of stereotypes and meta-narratives that have defined Black women. This study also brings race to the forefront of visual pedagogical discourse through the exploration of the visual impact images of Black women have on Black women. In her book Visual Impact: The power of Visual Persuasion, Susan B. Barnes (2009) defines visual impact as “the use of imagery to stir feelings and influence human actions.” Furthermore she establishes that, “Visual influence can occur on conscious and unconscious levels of awareness…visual messages can have an impact on a viewer on a number of levels that are not always understood” (p.1). The conversations that occurred during the focus group meetings exposed the conscious levels of awareness that the participants and myself have about the representation of Black women. Our perceptions of self were a central factor in our interpretation of images. As we engaged in activities like body mapping, BKE, and narrative inquiry more of our unconscious levels of awareness were exposed. For instance, the data collected during the BKE activity allowed participants to develop their own research questions pertaining to Black women and visual culture representation:
1. Why are historic information about minorities and particularly Black women, not a part of k-12 curriculum?

2. What is the most effective approach to develop a collective voice of concern about the issues of misrepresenting Black women

3. Whose responsibility is it to break sustaining images of harmful stereotypes?

4. How can visual culture be used as a vehicle to challenge and overcome attitudes and perceptions about Black women and other marginalized groups that leads to their social inequity

After going through the process of developing research questions the participants agreed that these questions were comprehensive of their own personal feelings about the issue. Many of the women felt they learned about gender, race and representation too late in an educational setting and that this did not coincide with the personal and communal experiences that exposed them to these issues much earlier. The Black women in this study proved that they have an inverted consciousness that allows them to navigate in a world that challenges their identity. Certain images of Black women are ubiquitous in visual culture whereas other images or representations are far and distant. The goal of this study is to introduce an alternative narrative voice. The counter-narratives produced during this study are telling voices that talk about the negative and positive experiences with past and current Black women images and yet they authentically point to a different consciousness that is informative for art and visual culture educators.
Reflections: What’s significant about what we’ve done?

Our engagement with the images of Black women is a collaborative effort that
gives these students the opportunity to ascertain and explore their own stories. Also,
participants apply their exploration to an infinite number of images they are confronted
with. The participatory action research process makes them infinitely familiar with their
own lens. As a result, this study demonstrates what happens in the realm of critical
looking. Often times when visual scholars discuss critical looking it is under the guidance
of Roland Barthes (1977) interpretive practices with semiotics, connotation and
denotation. In his article “Interpreting Visual Culture” Terry Barrett (2003) discusses the
interpretive outcomes when art teachers apply the signifying practices of denotation and
connotation to a variety of visual and material culture. One of the images analyzed is a
Rolling Stone cover featuring the R&B group “Destiny’s Child”. The student teachers
interpreted the image of these three Black women to be “sexually ambiguous”, “sexually
aggressive” and “emotionally shallow” (p. 10). However, what is most useful in this
article is Barrett’s acknowledgement that “codes are open to some and closed to others
because of culture, age, gender, and familiarity with current and past events” (Barrett,
2003, p.10). Recognizing the limitations of an outsider’s reading of images because of
their unfamiliarity with the group represented has huge implications; this privileges the
interpretations and perceptions of the represented group. The ability to interpret images
and to connote their narratives is limited to a person’s background and experiences.
When race and gender are factors of a visual narrative the combination of stereotypes and
visual images assigned to Black women usually have a negative predominance. Looking
at Black women’s counter-narratives provides content for a broad audience that would
not necessary be a part of visual culture discourse. The process of narrative inquiry has the potential to move Black women involved with visual culture to a position of agency while simultaneously providing a useful resource and body of knowledge to other people engaged in the process.

Implementing narrative inquiry in art education curriculum is an effective pedagogical tool that addresses social inequity. It is also a good way to introduce emancipatory research. Emancipatory research is actually resistance research that pushes the edges of academic acceptability as a means to transform it (Brown & Strega, 2005). When underrepresented groups are given an opportunity to share their narratives in an academic setting then this becomes an opportunity to promote social uplift and empowerment for the marginalized. There is evidence of this in the study when we look at the cluster analysis of language used in the counter-narratives. The language provided in these narratives tells readers that the women in this study see disjunction between their identity and some of the meta-narratives about Black women. These participants used the process of creating a counter-narrative to show this disconnect and to foster narratives that used empowering language or inquisitive language for the means of creating an awareness of inequity and to socially uplift themselves as well as other Black women. Their stories and poems tell how images of Black women have been defined in the community. The counter-narratives in this study also reflect that participants have a consciousness of history that they rely on in order to creative these counter-narratives. This is a powerful practice that is also implemented in the practices of Black women artists who create counter-hegemonic art.
Recommendations: Looking to Black women artists as an example of how to use counter-narratives in visual culture discourse

Learners need to be given the opportunities and strategies to decipher the many messages circulating in the images and objects of visual culture. The risk of not critically looking at and effectively interpreting these images and their messages is that “we will be unwittingly buying, wearing, promoting, and otherwise consuming opinions with which we may or may not agree” (Barrett, 2003, p. 12). So far I have discussed how instructors and students who engage visual culture and fine art should talk about the issues of representation, race and gender. In another study this material and practice of developing counter-narratives could be approached through the exploration of Black women artists. In the literature review of this study, I provide examples of how contemporary Black women artist produce hegemonic art when I elaborate on the Arlington Art Center 2008 exhibit “She’s So Articulate: Black Women Artists Reclaim the Narrative”. Now I would like to look specifically to two renowned Black female artists to revisit the importance of this kind of work and to address the fifth research question “What opportunities do the works of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson present to art educators and students involved a critical discourse on matters of race and gender representation in visual culture?”
Looking to the works of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson for counter-narrative instruction.

Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson are Black women artists whose photography focuses on the images of Black subjects in general and Black women in particular spaces. In a teaching setting their work is instructive of how visual scholars can create counter-narratives. It is through Weems and Simpson’s work that a series of questions about the way in which Black women are presented and represented in a visual sphere is addressed. Their work demonstrates how instructors and students should talk about the issues of representation. These Black women artist use stereotypes to create a new consciousness about Black women. Yet the question on the table is how does their art convey meaning? bell hooks (1995) presumes, “They fulfill longings that are oftentimes not yet articulated in words: the longing to look at Black in ways that resist and go beyond the stereotype” (p. 96-97). Essentially, Weems and Simpson’s work is good art. “Diane Mack explains that, “good art is not necessarily pleasing. It is, however, disciplined…and good art must communicate something comprehensibly worthwhile, something worthy of contemplation” (Silverman & Rader, 2009, p. 215). I find this to be true in Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson’s work. Often, the images in their photos are not pleasant and can be rather uncomfortable for people who have not broken the hold of colonizing representations. Their photos aim to break this hold. Both Weems’ and Simpson’s artistic approach to examining the images of Black women suggests that (1) historical presentations of Black women have been both stereotypical and problematic. (2) The representation of Black women is always political and serves the purpose of sustaining the dominant cultures belief and investment in its superiority. And (3) the
images of Black women are pedagogical in that they teach viewers about society’s overall value and overall notions of what it means to be a Black woman. These defining images also inform each new generation of Black women of their position in society and from there, instructs their decisions about how they should engage the world. Their artistic approaches are exemplar of why and how we should engage images of marginalized people.

One of Weems’ pieces in particular titled, “Not Manet’s Type” (1997), is a gelatin silver print (Black and white) with the image of the artist setting herself up for a pose. Viewers see this image through the reflection of a bedroom dresser mirror that is also a part of the photograph. Coinciding with the image is the text “STANDING ON SHAKEY GROUND I POSE MYSELF FOR CRITICAL STUDY BUT WAS NO LONGER CERTAIN OF THE QUESTION TO ASK”. It is the combination of text and images of Black women in Weems’s work that is instructive to me as a researcher and to others who are looking at art for a particular message or critical reading. The same can be said about Simpson’s work. In Simpson’s (1986) photo titled, “Water Bearer”, the image of a Black woman in a white dress stands with her back facing the lens of the camera. In her left hand she appears to be pouring water out a silver pitcher. In her right hand she is pouring water out of a plastic milk jug. Below is the text, “SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER, THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,

Figure 16 "Not Manet's Type" (1997)

Figure 17 "Waterbearer" (1986)
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY”. Like Weems’ photo, Simpson’s photo can be viewed as a critical critique of Black women and how they are discredited. From both the image and the text comes social commentary about the position of Black women in a particular society and how there are issues of marginalization, misrepresentation, and a lack of agency or voice.

The narrative composition of these images along with many others from these artists has the language that educators need to develop in their teaching. Employing the works of Black women artists in visual culture curricula is a pedagogical strategy that allows for an enriching dialogue that is focused on producing perceptions and not assumptions. Assumptions are stereotypes and perceptions are new ideas. When it comes to teaching visual culture and art about Black women we have to first look at all the assumptions made and then create a new language by which the teaching of these images and narratives about the Black female body is celebratory; this gives ideas about Black women a new perception.
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