THE FATTENING HOUSE: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE
BIG, BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL BODY SUBJECTIVITY CONSTITUTED
ON LARGE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the ways in which the binaries of a constitutive subjectivity and social reality constrain the identities of large African American women. This constitutive subjectivity is called the Big, Black and Beautiful Body (B4) narrative. The B4 narrative positions large African American women as having high body esteem regardless of current social messages that promote thin body image standards. To explain the operation and power of the B4 narrative, the fattening house, an old Nigerian custom, is used as a metaphor to demonstrate the house's roots to past racist stereotypes. This dissertation employs narrative analysis to critically access twenty in-depth interviews of large African American women and situate their lived experiences within the metaphorical fattening house. Findings reveal these women simultaneously resist and accept the B4 subjectivity and struggle between the binary of the B4 and their social reality. As such, the constitutive B4 subjectivity constrains their lives through four prominent narratives presented here as rooms within the fattening house. This study suggests large African American females constantly negotiate their identity to fit within the B4 subjectivity, although their social reality is not the same. It offers insight into how the large African American female subjectivity is overlooked and the B4 narrative functions to uphold past racist conceptions of black womanhood.

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
William Shakespeare

This is dedicated to my participants, thank you all for sharing your lives with me. I hope you continue on the journey of self love, self acceptance and a healthy lifestyle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

All Old Narratives are New Again

The creation and re-creation of racist and sexist narratives surrounding the stereotypical icons of Hottentot Venus, Mammy and Jezebel help sustain and reinforce the oppression of large African American women. As a result of these structural pressures aligned against individual agency, large African American women must choose which features of their fractured identity to emphasize and/or to deny (Ault, 1996). Their choice is between the binary oppositional structures of either historical stereotype (i.e., the Hottentot, Mammy, and Jezebel) or social reality, which is their lived experience. Critical cultural communication researchers and body image scholars agree that these constitutive subjectivities are based upon dominant race, gender, and class ideologies the media perpetuate (hooks, 1996; Hudson, 1998; Jewell, 1993; Kellner, 2003; Williamson, 1998). Not only have these images been re-created and sustained over time, but they constrain and limit the identities of large African American women.

The big, black and beautiful body (B4) myth has become a present day re-creation of old stereotypes, restricting ways in which large African American females can see themselves. This ideology has created a master cultural narrative that says large African American women: 1) are not affected by thin ideal body images in the media like their white counterparts, 2) do not have the cultural pressure of being thin within the black community, 3) and are proud of this excessive shape and size (Poran, 2006). The master narratives in U.S. society camouflage and deny experiences that do not conform to the B4's constitutive subjectivity. These narratives, whether representations on television or critiqued by theorists, are the very fabric of the large African

American female identity, one that she relies on for guidance even though these narratives simultaneously constrain and define her agency (Bamberg, 2004; Hudson, 1998).

My dissertation uses narrative analysis of interviews as a way to understand and uncover how large African American female subjectivities are constrained within the B4 subjectivity. In addition, the aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate how, focusing on media representations of race, weight and sex, the individual and collective experiences of these women are erased by ignoring one subjectivity and producing another. The following excerpt from one participant serves as testament to the experiences unexamined by critical cultural theorists and body image experts. The name of each woman in this study has been changed to an alias in order to preserve confidentiality.

Marty is in her early thirties, a young professional who has earned a master's degree in Education. She has medium brown skin, long braids and stands about 5'10", with weight proportionate to height. Her office has loose papers scattered about with just a few pictures on the wall. She allowed me to interview her during lunch. We conducted an in-depth interview, during which I asked her to tell me about her top three life stories in which her weight was a primary factor:

> Marty: Okay, I, uhm, throughout my life I have been up and down with my
> weight. I've always been, you know, considered like a big girl or, you know,
> hefty when I was younger or whatever. I used to wear the junior plus clothes.
> Uhm, when I was younger, you know, I was kinda okay, but I really, it really
> wasn't until I had gotten into high school that I wasn't quote unquote okay. And,
> then I also had like…

ADP: What made you find out in high school that you were not okay?

Marty: 'Cause I was around other people that, you know, that had, you know, that were slimmer than I was or was deemed what was considered pretty. But then I also would have my dad saying unfortunately, you know, the kind of negative things that I still battle with, you know, in my [*inaudible*] about, you know, you big this, you know.

ADP: What would he say?

Marty: Uhm. [*big sigh. silence*]

The moment Marty avoided the question a sense of pain emerged. She continued by talking about her family, friends and peers who had a negative impact on her body esteem. After several minutes into the interview she finally opened up about her father.

Marty: But, a lot of my self concept I -- I believe the negative part of it came from hearing some of those things from my dad. And because, you know, your father's supposed to love and embrace you and *even if he thought different things* [*her emphasis*] I don't think he should have necessarily said it, unless he can give me a solution, you know, or provide, okay. Now, you know, I kinda see this as a concern or perhaps a potential issue, and this is what I also think a good solution would be. 'Cause see, I used to have to come in the summer times with my dad. And so one time, one summer, he called himself putting us on a, me and my sisters on a diet. So all he allowed us…

ADP: How old were you?

Marty: I was around about 11 or 12, and all we were able to eat was like, maybe

like a half a can of tuna, like salad, lettuce, you know, with a little bit of salad

dressing and and something else, I don't even remember what that last thing was,

but we ended up losing weight, but it was a method about how my dad did it. I

mean, now I am 31, and I still remember that, and it was like I was 11 or 12? So I

just, in hindsight I kinda understand what my dad did; he just wanted us to be

healthy and not to be overweight, but my dad has always had, it's like he has a fat

phobia. You know, like a problem with heavier people. And, you know, I, I feel

like, you know, I'm okay.

At this point she tried to break the mood with a nervous laugh, but the crack in her voice, the

frailty in her tone and the anguish in her eyes, almost brought both of us to tears. It was difficult

for me to make sense of my emotions at this point. We both shared a sense of sadness for the

little girl, but also for the adults that we had become. I thought to myself, "You're the researcher.

You're the researcher. You're the researcher! You can not cry! Snap out of it!" These were the

scolding thoughts going through my mind trying to calm my sense of sadness and fight back the

tears. I told myself that crying was not appropriate for the researcher; it was unprofessional and a

sign of weakness and lack of self-control. I managed to pull myself together, and so did she.

How did Marty make sense of this experience within the B4 master narrative? How does

the treatment by her father and his "fat phobia" support the theory that large black women do not

have the pressure to be thin? My respondent, for all intents and purposes, looks like the type of

woman portrayed in the B4 ideology. She fits the description, but her story does not. These kinds

of stories can be explained or written off as anomalies in research that seek to report generalities,

altogether ignoring the lived experiences of women who exist in the margins. These scholarly averages are a primary reason that we do not hear about the mistreatment played out on the large African American female body in society. Instead, we are bombarded with the recreated identity narratives (B4) based on historical imagery of large black women. Large African American women, as I will argue within this dissertation, are asked to consititute a subjectivity within the context of the B4 master narrative that sustains and recreates racist stereotypes.

Current cultural perceptions of the B4 are tied to historical stereotypes of African American women and sustain common themes of black womanhood. For example, *Amos 'n' Andy's* character "Sapphire" Stevens was a re-creation of the Mammy and Jezebel imagery (Hudson, 1998). In the same way, I suggest that the B4 cultural narrative is a recycled conception of the Hottentot's overweight figure, the Mammy's nurturing and self sacrificing nature and the Jezebel's insatiable sexuality. These are now images for modern day consumption in that it is about consumable black female bodies by mass culture. In other words, the B4 body figure is shaped much like that of the Hottentot Venus, but her sassiness and man hunger are carried over from Jezebel or Sapphire. Thus, the B4 cultural stories are able to reinforce the spectacle and excess so intertwined with the Hottentot Venus while still making her appear to have sexual agency. As such, the large black body is othered while ignoring the mechanism of her othering; racism is reproduced while the acts of racism are obscured; objectification is naturalized through hidden racism and sexism.

Body image researchers focus on media constitution (Botta, 2000; Frisby, 2004; Holmstrom, 2004). However, they use questionnaires in order to understand how media affect the lives of women. Consequently, they are more concerned with the differences between black

and white women than with the black women themselves. This white/black binary re-establishes the inferior/superior one by casting the black body as deviant and unable to live up to white standards. As such, these overwhelmingly quantitative studies use survey tools that are built from the same stereotypically constituted stereotypes that constrain the lives of black women. Hypothetically speaking, if an African American woman is given a survey tool that asks her to judge how she feels in comparison to a white model on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being "not affected at all," and she circles a 5, the generalization is tremendous. These kinds of studies do not ask why she feels that way or to understand the idiosyncratic nature of her person. As a result, the individual lives of everyday large African American women are either unexamined or their voices are included in studies of "women" generally.

Similarly, the preoccupation cultural studies has with past stereotypes not only erases certain experiences but also sustains racist stereotypes and re-creates subjectivities based on "new" evidence drawn and generalized from survey results, leading to the big, black and beautiful bodies master narratives (Hottentot-Mammy-Jezebel). Women who live within these subjectivities are then justifiably objectified by those in society who deem them deviant, sassy and unconcerned with weight and thus unworthy of human kindness. These separate research traditions of critical cultural and body image scholarship continue to critique various ways in which images of black womanhood function in society. My dissertation contributes by highlighting how historical stories, directly rooted in the lives of black women as individuals and not through white comparisons, continue to shape present day understandings of body image.

This dissertation seeks to examine multiple stories of large African American women who are camouflaged and erased by the B4 master narrative in U.S. culture. To challenge this, I

conducted 20 interviews of large African American women to gather their stories of how they have experienced weight. Such work resists the problems found in both critical cultural scholars' attention to representation and body image researchers' focus on generalities. By speaking to women and allowing them to voice their own lives, this gap between self reports and critically disembodied analysis will be addressed. What this study adds to the body of research surrounding issues of weight and race is how historical stories continue to shape the present understanding of body image. By adding context, this dissertation uncovers racist logic embedded in women's stories of their lives, their bodies, and their everyday understandings.

As such, these narratives are significant. First, they reveal the ways in which racist ideologies about black womanhood continue to be re-created from past imagery. This dissertation shows the common themes and patterns in narratives surrounding large African American female bodies, an area ignored by previous research. Second, these stories reveal the complex ways in which the large African American females' identities are constrained by the B4 myth, as linked to the historical media narratives of black femininity. Finally, they reveal the ways in which narrative analysis can function to uncover the B4 as an oppressive master narrative and bring to light multiple truths for individual large African American females in society. As such, the research questions are as follows:

1. How do large African American women perceive the relationship between their bodies and society? Further, how can this relationship be identified in and through their own narratives?

2. How do these perceptions of self (and their relation to larger society) build, sustain, or reinvent common themes from history's construction of black females?

That is, what constraints, historical in nature, are placed on women when they

seek to name their experiences, their bodies and senses of self?

The narratives of the past are found in the narratives of today, as my analysis will demonstrate.

The importance of this work can be summed up in the sigh and silence of Marty's first refusal to talk to me about her dad. The sigh can represent many things: grief, sadness or just the mere fact that she is talking to a stranger about something that is very personal and painful. The silence can represent a point in which her "knowing" the answer to the question simultaneously makes her grapple with things that her father said. This demonstrates how present narratives that suggest big, black and beautiful body subjectivity among large African American women erase her pain and her voice. Large African American women re-write our own narratives to sustain "positive stereotypes," as one participant calls it, of the B4, the stereotype of a woman who is proud of her heritage, a heritage that carries a lot of weight literally and figuratively. Marty exemplifies the idea that in changing our stories to meet expectations, a violent erasure takes place. This study seeks to make present those stories—to name the pain.

There are several implications of this study that all lead to the emancipation of large African American women and call out the oppressive forces that subordinate them. By bringing to light this constitutive subject position (B4) for the large African American female body, I also call out the hegemonic structure that created it through narratives based on past racist ideologies. By naming the oppression, those who sustain the oppressive force, like Marty's father, for instance, must work to create a just world for all bodies. As Marty suggested, her father was trying to do what he thought was best for his daughters because he loved them. Her father, like all of us, is affected by the narratives concerning body image. It is safe to assume all parents

want to raise their children to be healthy individuals mentally, emotionally and physically.

Unless we teach parents and others in our lives about our pain, our oppression, our struggle with

body image, things will never change. As such, exposing multiple narratives like Marty's brings

attention not only to the media systems that perpetuate the dehumanization of the large African

American female body, but also to researchers and individuals who knowingly or unknowingly

participate. In the words of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970):

> Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen,
>
> but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the
>
> vocation of becoming more fully human. . . .This is the great humanistic and
>
> historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors . . .
>
> .Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance
>
> of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the
>
> oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of libertation? (p. 28)

My personal experience as a large African American woman undergirds the political nature of

this narrative analysis. Our stories have not been told, and this dissertation is a vehicle of

liberation for Marty and the other women in this study and all who live within and outside of the

B4 master narrative. By giving voice to these women, we can begin to realize our humanity as

individuals. To suggest our only representation should come from the people that enslaved us

centuries ago is inhumane.

Chapter Descriptions

The literaure review in chapter 2 will summarize communication and critical cultural theory as well as the research in body image as it relates to concepts of media, race and weight. My thesis is that hegemonic forces, such as print and visual media, help create and sustain problematic cultural idenitities (Dines & Humez, 2003; Duke, 2000; hooks, 1992, 1996; Mapp, 1975). Moreover, chapter 2 highlights the idea that the use of the body mass index tool as a way to determine weight contributes to false comparisons and generalizations about the nature of body image within the lives of large black females (Botta, 2000; Gluck & Gliebter, 2002; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998).

The methods section in chapter 3 will focus on Walter Fisher's (1987) narrative theory as a critical/qualitative tool and approach to understanding how stories shape our worldview and impact our everyday lives. To demonstrate how narratives function in individual and social lives, this chapter will go over the rudiments of narrative theory. The primary aim of this section is to explain how master narratives are created and reinforced as oppressive agents in society. In addition, chapter 3 will lay out the data gathering procedures of this study.

Chapter 4 consists of my interpretation of results, based on 20 in-depth interviews of large African American women. An overview is provided of how master narratives are a result of forced diasporas: because black folks were forcibly displaced from a "home land," they are often narrated, rather than narrating, subjects. As such, because the narratives that large Black women live by have been constructed by others, narrative analysis will identify patterns in their expressed self-stories to reiterate narrow and racist themes from history, stories that reinforce black women's marginalization. This analysis provides examples of various elements of the B4

myth in the lives of participants and shows how the cultural and historical master narrative builds

and sustains the very structure of these women's experiences. Tenets of narrative analysis

suggest we make decisions and see the world through narrative; as such, I will show, in the

narratives embedded in these women's words, how they reproduce the past and how it continues

to influence their decisions.

Chapter 5 will be a discussion of the concrete ways the B4 narrative manifests in the

everyday lives of large African American women. Implications for my participants, including

loneliness, diet and deprivation, reveal suggestions that African American women are not

affected by media are nonsensical, particularly since the narratives about them suggest an

oppressive subjectivity in which they try to exist. I recommend that we reconsider how we

conceptualize the large African American female body in culture by continuing studies such as

these. Future studies should seek to understand the importance of family and body image instead

of race.

The goal of feminist and cultural studies theory is to uncover the constraints that limit the

freedom and choices of all individuals. Recently, the lives of large African American women

have been guided by a master narrative that insists they are proud of their big, black and

beautiful body (B4). This study examines the roots and effects of these narratives in the lives of

the women in question. Narrative theory is one way to uncover how cultural power guides and

constrains these women. We need to explore perceptions of large African American females

through the narratives of overweight, obese and morbidly obese African American women of all

backgrounds to see how embedded logic guides their actions and choices. This study adds to the

body of research surrounding issues of weight and race and will provide access to the lives of

women who have traditionally been overlooked.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Narratives Out of Focus

In chapter 2, my aim is to demonstrate how critical cultural studies and media scholars have analyzed the ways in which race and the body functions in society. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate how both qualitative and quantitative traditions have narrowly, though differently, focused on race and the body. This occurs when researchers either exclude or have very few large African American women in their study or when they overanalyze their mediated representations to the exclusion of the voices of the women themselves. Consequently, both traditions produce results that erase these women's everyday lived experiences or voices.

This chapter is divided into two sections. First, I provide a general overview of critical cultural studies, including feminist theory, and examine how such work articulates the large African American female body. In addition, I trace body image studies as they relate to media and race, with an emphasis on the large African American female body. Together, these areas show a gap in the literature concerning how large African American women as a group have been excluded or overlooked to narrate their own experiences. In both sections, I use the word "focus" as a way to point out what happens when media and race are highlighted throughout these bodies of literature. That is, they inevitably sustain, reinforce and then constitute subjectivities of the large African American female body, based on past racist imageries.

Focus on Communication and Critical Cultural Studies

The University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies responded to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s by analyzing how communication could be used to oppress certain groups in society vis-à-vis the representations and ideologies of race and

ethnicity, class, gender and nationality in cultural artifacts (Kellner, 2003). These theorists

revealed the unequal and complex relationships in society through the examination of mass

media, ideology, systems of meaning and identity (Mumby, 1997). The purpose was to examine

how those who have power to exert control over cultural artifacts also control the social

construction of a particular set of ideas (Hall, 1997). As such, critical cultural scholars seek to

uncover the ways in which culture is produced and to reveal the contradictions within society

through counter-hegemonic interpretations (Hall, 1997; Kellner, 2003).

Hegemony can typically be defined as the domination or influence over another by

intellectual, political or moral leadership either with or without force, through the dissemination

of certain cultural beliefs, values and practices. These beliefs, values and practices are submersed

in discursive strategies throughout cultural institutions (school books, church, media, and so on)

that produce coherent ideologies that favor one group of ideas but exclude others. Counter-

hegemonic interpretations, then, favor ideas that are often ignored. As such, the researchers are

also activists in that they aim to affect societal change by helping citizens understand

mechanisms of power and domination. Such knowledge can be emancipatory and allow

resistance from these dominant forces and opportunities for self-actualization (Hall, 1997; hooks,

1997; Kellner, 1995). Foucault (1991) explains this form of power as a *technique*:

> This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes
>
> the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own
>
> identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others
>
> have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.
>
> (p. 306)

Whether one is subject by someone else's control and dependence or tied to one's own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge, both are forms of power that subjugate and produce subjects (Foucault, 1991).

There are three types of social struggles that exist within these power structures as cited by Foucault (1991): struggles "against forms of ethnic, social and religious domination, against forms of exploitation that separate individuals from what they produced or against forms of subjectivity and submission (ideological structures)" (p. 306).

Contemporary critical cultural scholars claim dominant ideologies perpetuated in the media contribute to the marginalization of particular social groups and are one of the primary reasons that economic and other resources, advantages and privileges are distributed inequitably (Gorham, 1999). Further, they argue, media shape our worldview and set cultural values or norms by providing symbols, myths, and resources through which we obtain a common culture (Kellner, 1995). To that end, media products help create our perceptions of social reality and influence how we understand the world in which we live and inform how we react to others within it (Gorham, 1999).

Media specifically represent aspects of the social reality that are the constructs of race, gender, class and other marginalizing factors. Representations of people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts (Chandler, 2002) are not the thing itself but rather a "reimagined and reinvented, imitation of life" reflecting the ideology of those who produce the image (hooks, 1996). Given this understanding, one can see media products often lead to stereotypical representations and other misrepresentations of the experience of marginalized others (Kellner, 1995).

Because society largely remains a white male-centered world, contemporary feminist debates engage the best way of questioning gender and race, as these are two systems often divergent in activist circles. However, bell hooks, an African American woman and feminist scholar, believes that the primary site of struggle for all Americans is the fight against sexism (hooks, 2002). hooks argues that sexism is the primary agent of oppression because it is so deeply embedded in society that all of us are affected by it, either as the perpetrator or victim (hooks, 2002). Accordingly, sexism is socially constructed and embedded as a normalized part of society. hooks asserts that "to be feminist in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression" (hooks, 2002, p. 274).

Historically, the feminist movement has been linked to critiques of ideologies surrounding the female body (Bordo, 1993). The ideological preference of the female body has changed over the years, from pleasantly plump, to thin, then to voluptuous, back to thin, to todays thin with muscle tone (Gray & Phillips, 1998). However, one thing has remained consistent, and that's the woman's desire to fit the beauty ideal of her time in history, whatever form that may be. Contemporary women who do not fit this ideal "thin with muscle tone" body are vulnerable to ridicule by those who strive to conform (Banet-Weiser, 1999). The large female is under attack as she suffers overt weight prejudices from those in society who deem her compulsive, self-indulgent, sick, lazy and willing to avoid intimate relationships (Bordo, 1993; Goodman, 1995). The intersection of race and gender merely complicates the nature of body image for women.

African American women and body image create a quandary because the ideal of thin is based on the thin white female prototype. hooks (1992) suggests the African American woman typically does not conform to the beauty ideal because of the shape of her lips, her thick nose and her more curvaceous body (i.e., large buttocks and breasts), and her blackness is seen as a mark of shame. Critical scholars suggest that her large buttocks are a primary source of objectification, stemming from the discourse of the Hottentot Venus, which deems black women as part animal and highly sexual. In contemporary culture, there are ways in which the big buttocks and claim of highly sexual behavior sustain the Hottentot mythology and transfer it to current day conceptions of the large African American female (Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

The imagery of the Hottentot, the independent and sexually sassy nature of Mammy and the sexual allure of Jezebel are fruitful sites of critique. As suggested in the following sections, these past racist ideologies are the conditions by which mainstream American culture have set up a negative, easily digestible discourse about the large black woman and weight. In other words, remnants of the Hottentot, Mammy and Jezebel imagery have re-created ideologies of black womanhood as big, black and beautiful body or B4 subjectivity. This constituted subjectivity for the large black woman is noted as a sassy, independent woman who loves her curves and is not ashamed to say it; she's not only starved for food, but for a man as well; and, she is strong enough to take him by force. While this B4 subjectivity is central to this dissertation, understanding how it plays out on individual bodies in today's society is my main concern, but the available research focuses on media representations' production of ideologies without much attention to the actual women affected by them.

Focus on Race, Class and Gender in the Media

Although writing about ideology, these scholars fail to appreciate the very essence

of ideology—what makes them so *ideological*—is the fact they are riddled with

contradictions and marked by continuous conflicts and struggles over meaning.

(Magubane, 2001, p. 825)

While it is crucial that critical cultural scholars continue to uncover the ways in which

ideology is culturally produced and revealed through hegemonic discourse, as Magubane (2001)

points out, to only examine the ideological construct can be counterproductive. In other words,

as long as we are obsessed with the image without understanding how the mechanism affects

individuals in society within that specific historical moment, we are caught up in the exact

system of meaning that we argue against. As such, focusing on print and visual media, which

remains prevalent in scholarship on ideological debates, has produced a gap in the literature by

ignoring the everyday lives of individuals that live within these structures.

Focus on Print Media

Prominent scholars have provided useful oppositional gazes that focus on the African

American female bodies in culture and media and trace the history of negative representations,

including the Hottentot Venus, Mammy and Jezebel (hooks, 1996; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1995;

White, 1985). For example, the Hottentot Venus, or Saartjie Baartman (Sara), is often cited as

one of the first images that dehumanizes the (large) African American woman as highly sexual

(Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Sara was born in 1790, and her public display preceded film, so

print media was the dominant form of representation, including posters that advertised her "freak

show" (Hobson, 2003).

In any case, while Sara was real, the explanations and representations of her were still ideological in nature because of those who controlled her public image. After all, three leading French scholars, Geffroy St. Hillaire, Henri de Blainville and Baron Georges Cuvier (surgeon general for Napoleon Bonaparte), conducted a scientific examination "proving" that black women were more primitive and sexually ardent than their white female counterparts (Hobson, 2003). As a result, Cuvier's autopsy report (Cuvier, n.d.) was the source of several papers, using her genitalia and other body parts as evidence of black inferiority to the white race. He described these parts, saying that there was "something brusque and capricious about them that recalled those of a monkey's" and that "one was struck at first by the enormous width of her hips, which were more than 18 inches." (p. 3)

While Sara's ideology was produced from her objectified body, books like *The Clansman* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped cultivate the Mammy and Jezebel ideologies (Pilgram, 2005). In other words, while *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was hailed as one of the greatest anti-slavery books of its era--unlike *The Clansman,* which was pro slavery and pro segregation--both books reproduced certain cultural stereotypes. These antebellum mythologies were ways to justify the enslavement and rape of African American women, which led to monetary gain for their masters (Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

The Mammy prototype suggests these female slaves were happy with their status in the kitchen and as surrogate mothers. The Mammy was "black, fat with huge breasts, and head covered with a kerchief to hide her nappy hair, strong, kind, loyal, sexless, religious and superstitious" (Pilgrim, 2005, p. 1). Her imagery spawned cultural artifacts in various forms such as "ashtrays souvenirs, postcards, fishing lures, detergent, artistic prints, toys, candles, and

kitchenware" (p. 1). This commercial Mammy was used to sell a variety of household products. Aunt Jemima has been around since 1889 as one of the most successful versions of commercial Mammies still seen today (Pilgram, 2005).

On the other hand, the Jezebel was in stark contrast to the Mammy and can typically be defined as worldly, open, innately promiscuous, alluring or predatory, beguiling, tempting and lewd. These falsehoods were ways to justify the rape of these women and their use as chattel to bear more children for the economic needs of the master (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The modern day Jezebel is recast and labeled as the tragic mulatto (although she comes in all shades). In addition the labels of Sapphire, "freak" or "hoochie" surfaced and all share in the reputation of being sexually open or dominant (Collins, 2000). In *'Ar'n't I a Woman?'* White (1985) puts the Mammy and Jezebel in their historical and contemporary contexts with the African American female:

> Jezebel emasculated men by stripping them of their ability to resist her
>
> temptations, and thus manipulating them. Sapphire emasculates men by the
>
> aggressive usurpation of their role. Her assertive demeanor identifies her with
>
> Mammy, but unlike Mammy she is devoid of maternal compassion and
>
> understanding. . . . History is supposed to give people a sense of identity, a feeling
>
> for who they were, who they are, and how far they have come. . . . The myths
>
> have put black women in a position where they must, as Sojourner Truth did in
>
> 1858, *prove* their womanhood. (p. 166).

Therefore, the types of images of black womanhood were stereotypical instead of true representations of who they were in everyday life. These first print representations of Hottentot

Venus, Mammy and Jezebel have long been and demonstrate how new stereotypes emerge from historical ones. These negative representations, as White (1985) asserted, put African American women in the position to prove their womanhood as being separate from racist conceptions of them.

My thesis here is that the same kinds of systems of and power of domination, or *techniques*, as Foucault (1991) calls them, also produced the Jezebel and Mammy ideologies. Print representation of Sara's body deemed her as animalistic and suggested that her buttocks were evidence of the heightened sexual nature of the black woman. The difference is that these ideologies were based on the lives of slaves in the U.S. and narrated by racist writers of books like *The Clansman*.

Contemporary print media present a more complicated problem for the black female body because overtly racist representations of African Americans are politically incorrect. However, researchers complained that negative stereotypes were replaced with "affluent, successful images that were as far removed from reality as the negative portrayals of the past" (Wilson & Gutierrez, 2003, p. 285). This suggested that print media still struggled with accurate representations of African Americans. In the case of African American women, their images were traditionally seen integrated as models with white women into mainstream magazines (Wilson & Gutierrez, 2003). However, their features were also integrated, meaning, they looked like white-washed versions of black women. According to hooks (1992), "their features are often distorted, their bodies contorted into strange and bizarre postures that makes the images appear monstrous or grotesque" (p. 71). Therefore, while contemporary media do not present racist stereotypes, they often present questionable images of black women.

As noted in this section, print media represent the African American female body in three primary ways--the spectacle of the Hottentot Venus, the nurturing and jolly Mammy figure, and the sexually alluring Jezebel. As such, these miscellanies are the ways in which the same system has remanufactured today's cultural ideology of the B4 or Big, Black, and Beautiful Body ideology. Consequently, they have successfully continued to justify the mistreatment and subjugation of black women, particularly large black women. The ideological nature of these images was born and circulated by those who had the means of production to do so. With the advent of film and the television industries, the critique of these representations continued, which presents a more complex problem with African American female-authored scholarship that challenges these dominant representations.

Focus on visual media

Studies that focus on film and television imagery of African American women, as seen through a Hottentot, Mammy and Jezebel prototype lens, proliferated after the *Birth of Nation*, a pictorial version of *The Clansman* (Bogle, 2001; Dines & Humez, 2003; hooks, 1996; Hudson, 1998; Jewell, 1993; Mapp, 1974; Mascaro, 2005; Pilgrim, 2005; White, 1985). While the Hottentot never had a "name" in these films, her bodily makeup and shape were still presented in the Mammy's figure. Authors agree that present day images are recreated, recommodified old racist stereotypes for modern day consumption (Dines and Humez, 2003; White, 1985). For example, the Mammy figure is no longer desexed, as seen in character portrayals of Queen Latifah (Prater, 2004). However, in *Norbit*, the visual image of Sara (the Hottentot Venus) comes to life when juxtaposed with Rasputia, *Norbit*'s main character. *Norbit* creates the Hottentot-Mammy-Jezebel imagery, or the B4, the big black woman who thinks she has a beautiful body.

As seen in *Norbit*, she does not care about her appearance in a two-piece bathing suit and is completely unaware of her unattractiveness to her husband whom she unashamedly emasculates:

> Certainly in the space of popular media culture black people in the U.S. and globally often look at ourselves through images, through eyes that are unable to truly recognize us, so that we are not represented as ourselves but seen through the lens of the oppressor, or of the radicalized rebel who has broken ideologically from the oppressor group but still envisions the colonized through biases and stereotypes not yet understood or relinquished. Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary film making. (hooks, 1996, p. 155)

hooks demonstrates my claim of the problematic nature of critiquing images of African Americans in critical cultural scholarship. For example, when scholars like hooks (1996) and Collins (2000) are African American women themselves, one may argue they use their own subjectivity to critique media structures. This is but one approach to understanding these images, not to mention a narrow one. The African American identity is so fluid and ever changing that no select group of scholars can speak for the subject audience as a whole.

Similarly, textual analysis, whereby individual women are included in studies that examine their interpretation of the film text, is also problematic. Audience reception studies like Coleman's (2002) are reader-oriented criticism in which black women talk about how they experience culture, here through their interaction with film. For example, *Say It Loud! African American Audiences, Media, and Identity* is a collection of qualitative studies focused on black subjectivities. By privileging their voices the "goal was to understand how African Americans make sense of their identity based on media treatment of race in films like *Menace II Society*,

The Color Purple or *The Cosby Show"* (Coleman, 2002). This focus continues to rely only on media representations and not the individual lived experiences. What I am suggesting here is that even reception studies are focusing on the reproduced, recreated and re-circulated narratives based on past racist stereotypes. This narrow focus continues to enhance scholarship and engage discourse about our experiences through a hegemonic lens, not our own. It is not to say that we cannot understand key aspects of race, class and gender through media analysis, but we cannot understand the fullness of the lives of individuals.

Media Out of Focus

If we take the advice of Audre Lorde and look outside of the master's tools (which I am calling the master narrative of the B4) to dismantle his house or oppressive structure, we need to find better ways of conducting research to enhance the lives of African American women. What are out of focus or missing within this literature are the mundane operations of these structures in the lives of everyday large African American women. What do we know about how they live with the B4 structure that has been created for them, but not by them? While critical cultural and feminist scholars have deconstructed these images, another body of literature is concerned with imagery and the physical body: body image scholars. These scholars are not particularly interested in the Hottentot Venus, the Mammy and the Jezebel figures, but rather in the effect that media have on the lives of women who are bombarded with large numbers of images that define beauty. This next section, then, completes this discussion concerning the large African American female as a physical presence in media. As we will see, body image research is limited in its understanding of how that imagery affects large African American women because of a

narrow focus on white women in body image research and a focus on the body mass index

(BMI) as a tool to determine weight (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

Focus on Body Image and Race in Media Studies

Body image researchers from all disciplines have created a vast amount of research to

examine issues of obesity and eating disorders among adolescents and women of all ages

(Bishop, 2000; Bordo, 1993; David, Morrison, Johnson & Ross, 2002; Duke, 2000; Goodman,

1995, 1996, 2002; Harrison, 1997; MacDonald, 1995; Root, 1990). Body image research is

overwhelmingly quantitative and typically addresses mass media's influence on body image by

providing participants with questionnaires using fashion magazines in order to get feedback on

how individuals are affected by them. The theories used include third-person effect (David,

Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002), social cognitive theory (Hendriks, 2002), social

objectification theory (Strerlan & Hargreaves (2005), social distance and social identification

(David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002), and social comparison theory, which is the most

commonly used (Botta, 2000; Frisby, 2004; Holmstrom, 2004).

All of these theories have similar elements in common that highlight the ways in which

individuals interact and/or perceive themselves in relationship to media and others. For example,

social comparison theory suggests that individuals compare and evaluate themselves and

significant others by selecting attractive people that they perceive as representing an attainable

beauty (Botta, 2000; Holmstrom, 2004). This comparison is supposed to motivate them to

improve their appearance (Holmstrom, 2004). However, in body image studies this comparison

is said to have a negative effect when examining the crucial link between viewing habits, (i.e.,

television and print media) attitudes, and behavior (Botta, 2000). As a result, since women are

comparing themselves to thin models of today, that portray unrealistic bodies, a proliferation of eating disorders exists.

Similarly, social distance, social identification, social cognitive theory and third-person effects all study the ways in which women respond to media images and in relationship to their female counterpart. Social distance, a central component of third-person effects, claims that as the social distance between individuals increase (the less similar they are) the third-person effect widens (David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002). Simply put, this means that individuals perceive that the same stimulus, such as repeated images of thin models, have a greater effect on others than it does them.

This same idea can explain social identity theory, which "holds that our self-concept is based in part on the way we perceive others and how we interact with them" (David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2000, p. 275).

Finally, social cognition is a learning theory that, in many ways, is central to aforementioned theories because is posits that individuals learn certain behaviors based on what they see. Consequently, self-objectification theory suggests that women internalize social cultural views of body image and in turn objectify other women (Sterlan & Hargreaves, 2005). All of these theories tie in nicely with body images studies because they bring to light how media have a direct impact on how we view and treat ourselves as well as others in society.

In my reading of body image research, the studies demonstrate that media and race are two of the most highlighted aspects of the field (Botta, 2000; Gluck & Geliebter, 2002; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998). Researchers typically agree that media influence body esteem at all ages and that media images are so incessantly engrained within our culture they have become the

ideal or the norm, seen as an unattainable waif-looking size at present (although this, as with all historical moments, seems to be changing). However, the same line of literature suggests at minimum that African American women are not as affected by mediated images of the ideal thin as their white counterparts.

In addition, African American female participants are said to have higher body esteem because of their refusal to compare themselves with white models. For example, Frisby's (2004) social comparison study reported that ethnic groups avoid comparing themselves with other groups because they know that doing so will threaten their self-concept or self-esteem. The participants in this study examined black and white models in various magazines. The only difference between *Jet* and *Cosmopolitan* was that black models had rounder breasts and buttocks. Yet, Frisby's (2004) study claimed that African American women at all sizes have higher self-esteem than white women because of their denial to compare themselves. This could be misunderstood as meaning that black women feel as if they can reach the size and shape of the black models. What happens here is that the suggestion that African American women identify with models of the same race ends up being misperceived as proof that black women are not as affected by ideal thin images. If African American woman are bombarded with black models that fit a version of the ideal thin model, with the exception of "trim curves," color would be an inconsequential difference because they would still have to adhere to an unreasonably thin standard.

Shields & Heinecken (2002) suggest that it is just as painful for African American women to see white models that fit the ideal standard even though black women have lower instances of eating disorders. Due to their systematic underrepresentation, coupled with

ghettoized images, African American women are presented with a narrow spectrum from negative images to none at all (Shields & Heinecken, 2002). In this instance, African American women are left to conform to white ideals in order to be included in the mainstream. Shields and Heinecken (2002) found that black women have a profound desire to change themselves because of this. The unfortunate part of the study was that there was only one African American female participant. However, as Bordo (1993) echoes, "To imagine that African American women are immune to the standards of slenderness that reign today . . . is to come very close to the racist notion that the art of glamour . . . of femininity belong to the White woman alone." (p. 63)

In other words, body image standards in the United States are so prevalent that it is racist to think that African American women are not subject to the same standards of beauty (or are not affected by mediated messages about beauty) as white women. Without question media have widespread effects on body image, but the focus on race and body image is too tapered. Other social spaces have been overlooked in this research, and when race is coupled with body image, the lines of social space are blurred.

Roberts, et. al. (2006) noted that, until recently, there has been a publication bias in the area of body image that limited qualitative inquiry. As such, the idea that a cultural protection within the black community allowed African American women to have a more positive body image than their white counterparts. This idea went unquestioned because survey results in quantitative studies typically showed that African American women reportedly had a positive body image because of this cultural protection (Molloy & Herzberger, 1998). The belief that African American women are not affected by thin ideal media images is slowly changing, but the idea that African American women have higher esteem still persists (Poran, 2006). Roberts et al

(2006) suggest that researchers start calling for more non-weight focused studies because African American women may be more affected when it comes to issues of hair or skin color. Ironically, this does not challenge any statement that large African American women have higher body esteem when it comes to weight. Therefore, research going in this direction will ultimately disregard weight as a factor and, hence, sustain racist ideologies. Instead of erasing weight from the equation altogether, another misguided area that body image scholars need to reconsider is the conceptualization of weight differences, accordingly, race in body image research.

Focus on Body Mass Index and Race

Although it is not my intention to give a full review of medical literature or claim to be an expert concerning the Body Mass Index (BMI) scale, there is ample evidence in medical literature that demonstrates the need to consider age, gender and ethnicity (genetics) when measuring fat (Prentice & Jebb, 2001; Deurenberg & Deurenberg-Yap, 2003; Jackson, Stanforth, Gagnon, Rankinen, Leon, Rao, Skinner, Bouchard & Wilmore, 2002). According to these studies the BMI scale can be off as much as +/- 5%based on age, gender, and genetics.[1] Therefore, the BMI (and its effect on those BMI measures) is not free from ideology and is not to be taken for granted, as so often happens in body image research.

Body Mass Index (BMI) is the primary tool used to compare black and white college-aged students' perceptions of weight to understand body image. For example, studies use the concepts of social distance, social identification and third person effects to examine how these students perceive the effects of advertising on their body image (Botta, 2000; David et al., 2002;

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[1] For the purposes of this study, I will focus on how this information relates to African American women. However, to see how BMI relates to other communities of color, such as Asians or Palestinians, please see http://www.halls.md/bmi/bibliography.htm to start; Halls has compiled an extensive online bibliography related to BMI research.

Frisby, 2004; Schooler, Ward, Merriweather & Carruthers, 2004). Problems arise when studies such as these use college aged girls with average BMI's, meaning that they do not fall within the range of overweight or obese women, and then generalize results to include overweight and/or obese women. For example, Schooler and Ward (2004) used social comparison theory and examined the connection between race, media content, body image and ethnic identity. Researcher's used a 31-question survey with scales measuring body image, body esteem, ethnic identity and television viewing habits. Their sample consisted of 548 white women and only 87 black women. Not only was the black-to-white ratio significantly large but the average BMI for black participants was only 22.7 and 22.0 for white participants. To date, a BMI of 20 to 25 is considered good for most people; overweight is typically defined as having a BMI greater than 27, and obesity greater than 30. However, the BMI tool is not sensitive to bodies that are not white, female, and under 17 years old.

According to Deurenberg and Deurenberg-Yap (2003), African American women have more muscle mass and less visceral fat than white women. Therefore, white and African American women with the same BMI do not have the same amount of fat; rather, black women, on average, have more muscle. The same research suggests that African American women should have a different BMI cut off point before being considered "overweight" or obese (Deurenberg & Deurenberg-Yap, 2002). For example, whereas the standard cut-off point for an overweight status is 25, studies suggest that African American women should have a cut-off point from as low as 26 to as high as 30 (Prentice & Jebb, 2001; Deurenberg & Deurenberg-Yapp, 2001; Deurenberg, Yap, & Van Staveren, 1998). Due to the debate surrounding body

image, race and body mass index issues, authors are calling for more explanatory studies to be conducted (Roberts, Feingold, Cash & Johnson, 2006).

B4 Out of Focus

The problem with quantitative body image studies is that they have been used almost to the exclusion of other methods (Averett & Korenman, 1999; Baker, 2005; Bishop, 2000; Botta, 2000; David et. al., 2002; Duke, 2000; Frisby, 2004; Harrison, 1997; Hendriks, 2002; Hitchon, Park & Yun, 2004; Holmstrom, 2004; Poran, 2006; Roberts et. al., 2006; Rucker & Cash, 1991; Taylor, Caldwell, Baser, Faison & Jackson, 2007). There are relatively few studies that are solely qualitative in top tier communication journals (Baturka, Hornsby & Schorling, 2001; Falconer & Neville; Williamson, 1998). Black women's perceptions about their experiences in culture as it relates to weight are typically found in books that target African American women or in popular culture magazines (Bass, 2001; Bennett & Dickerson, 2001; Christian, 2007; Gregory, 2001; Jones, 2007; Scott, 2006). More scholarly attention in this area is warranted, and this dissertation will attend to the gap in literature.

Chapter Summary

Collectively, critical cultural studies and body image studies have erased certain kinds of experiences. The complex experiences of large African American women are camouflaged when present-day narratives rely on the Hottentot, Mammy and Jezebel continuum. The erasure or absence of narratives concerning the large African American female is the Big, Black and Beautiful Body (B4) master narrative, a re-created representation of past racist ideologies. What is missing are opportunities for these women to narrate understandings of their own bodies. This study begins to provide these opportunities by interviewing women and seeking to trace the

stories that are used to narrate their own experiences of their bodies in culture. The interviews in

this study are intended to examine what kinds of narratives are embedded within the lives of

large African American women and figure out how these women understand their own bodies in

culture. I hope to find the successful and unsuccessful ways in which they negotiate their

identities within the B4 subjectivity in their everyday lives.

CHAPTER III. METHOD

Searching for the Master Narratives

The lack of qualitative research that addresses the needs and concerns of large African American women contributes to the erasure of their experiences in scholarship and society. The literature review in chapter 2 reveals the ways in which the lives of large African American women have been ignored by two research trends, critical/cultural and body image, which focus too narrowly on past racist conceptions of the black female body. To fill that gap, this chapter presents narrative theory as a way of conceptualizing and analyzing the everyday experiences of these women.

Open ended, in-depth interviewing is a widely used research method that seeks to obtain information from the perspective of the participant themselves (Baturka, 2000; Foss & Foss, 1994; Song & Parker, 1995; Wolszon, 1998). In terms of body image, Wolszon (1998) believes the stories of women struggling with body image and eating disorders can give insight within a sociohistorical context. Baturka (2000), who used in-depth interviews about body image to target obese African American women, reported these women were concerned about their health but felt pressure from their family members to project a positive self image. As such, the goal of using in-depth interviews in my study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of large African American women and their perspectives on body image.

Researchers typically use narrative analysis to interpret their findings from data gathered from in-depth interviews (Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2002). The "narrative paradigm is the philosophical statement that is meant to offer an approach to interpretation and assessment of human communication" (Fisher, 1989, p. 57). While the narrative paradigm is not a specific

method of analysis, Fisher (1985) explains how any genre of "a text is viewed as composed of good reasons, elements that give warrants for believing or acting in accord with the message fostered by that text" (p. 357). In other words, by analyzing stories gathered during in-depth interviewing, researchers can understand the reasons participants believe or act a specific way in relation to that text or, in this case, the stories they tell about body image.

Narrative analysis takes stories as sites of investigation to illuminate the ways in which human thought creates and/or refashions personal identity (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). Respondents typically reconstruct a past event to make a point, usually a moral one, in which the ideal and real, the self and society conflict (Riessman, 1993). These are often referred to as personal narratives and typically reveal historically bound experiences recounted by those on the margins. They serve as resistance to dominant "rationality" (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, p. xiv).While these stories do not carry indisputable truths; they serve to affirm plurality within different cultures and subcultures (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). A narrative analysis is useful for the ways it reveals culture, gender and racial inequalities and other practices of power through stories. For example, a feminist approach to understanding the narratives of women is concerned with how they operate in a patriarchal and sexist society, "scrutinizes past and present oppression" in cultural productions and "stress[es] the power or agency of ordinary people" (Baracan, 1993, p. 1).

In sum, narrative scholars are interested in the ways in which culture is reflected and influenced within the content of the story as text (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). My dissertation analyzes the narratives of large African American women to understand how their perceptions of body image reflect and are influenced by U.S. culture. Narrative analysis assumes that all

humans make sense of their world by telling stories. By analyzing their stories about social experiences specifically in relation to weight, we can see how they "function to reflect, define or remake culture" (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001, p. 219). In the next section, I will highlight six key concepts central to understanding narratives and the way I interpreted the stories in this dissertation: structure, theme, character, peripeteia, narrative voice and style.

Narrative Analysis Key Concepts

Structure

Structure implies that every story has a beginning, middle and end. Most of the events in stories become meaningful because of their placement within individual narratives. For example, some individuals may reach back into their past or look to the future to find a resolution to a conflict (Riessman, 1993; Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). This conflict is the most important part of the narrative structure because it is this tension that explains culture (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). Narrative analysis researchers look for these tensions within the structure of the stories to locate patterns of conflict. The women in my study typically talked about their body images in terms of how they first realized they were considered fat or large. They started from childhood as a beginning, the middle comprised their adolescent and teen years and the end was where they are now as an adult. Throughout these stories there were conflicts centered around how they felt about their body image in relationship to how others treated them as a result of their weight. The conflict stemmed from the B4 ideology versus their lived experience.

Theme

Patterned experiences allow the narrative analyst to identity themes (sets of patterns) in the text. One of the ways in which themes are indicated is through the repetition of sequences of certain phrases that appear across several interview participants (Riessman, 1993). At a micro

level of analysis, when these themes conflict and thus show forms of resistance, they become powerful elements by which we can define society (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). My participants consistently gave advice to other women on how to live their lives as large African American women. This revealed themes in which they expressed in various social contexts how they struggle because of their weight while simultaneously saying that they love their large bodies and have high self-esteem. What it showed was an ultimate disconnect between their bodies and self-esteem.

Character

Themes come to life when individuals talk about characters in their stories that represent acceptable behavior in culture (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). Character is an essential concept to any story because it involves the protagonist, typically the main character or leading person, whose ability to change or evolve allows the story to progress. There may be more than one protagonist; for example, a cast in a television series represents a group of protagonists with whom the audiences become acquainted (i.e., *Friends*, *Frank's Place*). The protagonist is often faced with a foil or a character known as the antagonist who represents or creates obstacles that the protagonist must overcome.

> Narrative analysis is concerned with how protagonists interpret things and we go
> about systematically interpreting their interpretations. Because the approach gives
> prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of
> subjectivity and identity. . . Subjectivity, of course, is deeply distrusted in
> mainstream social science, which value context-free laws and generalizations.
> Yet in personal narratives, it is precisely because of their subjectivity—their

rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, in their perspective—ridden

character—that we value them. (Riessman, p. 5)

It is useful at this point to explain how character will work in my dissertation, because I am

looking at the stories of real women, not from a movie or sitcom. My narrative analysis will look

at the ways in which the main character or protagonist, the large African American female,

interprets her understanding of body image in U.S. culture. The antagonists will be others whom

she talks about as an important aspect of her understanding of body image. My interpretation of

her stories will focus on how her agency in social situations, regarding weight, influences her

subjective position as a large African American.

Peripeteia

Peripeteia refers to the point whereby something happens in an individual's life that shifts

their lived experience or circumstances. Peripeteia "becomes a tool for showing the symbolic

pivots upon which individual and social life turns" (p. 226). In other words, just as there is drama

in television and film as the stories unfold, there are events in the lives of individuals that

influence their lived experience. In my study, peripeteia emerges when participants go on a diet

or begin an exercise program, and the drama unfolds when they tell stories of how antagonists in

their social circles react to these decisions and how they themselves ultimately behave and often

sabotage their efforts.

Narrative Voice

Every story has a storyteller, and the authority of the text depends on who is telling the

story. The point of view of twenty large African American women gives this text its authority

(Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). My narrative voice as a large African American female academic

feminist critic also gives authority to the text. The audience will take my personal experience as a valuable part of accurately interpreting the stories the women tell because of my relationship to them. Moreover, the ways in which the story is told and the audience receives it also enhance authority. Narrative voice is a combination of the research participants, researcher or author, and the way the text is written and thus received by the readers.

Style

Style, the last characteristic Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) refer to, is related to figures of speech used in the narrative. A lot of large African American women refer to themselves as "big girls", or "thick" or "big-boned". All of these, in addition to grammar and word choice, reflect culture.

Any combination of these six characteristics (theme, structure, character, peripeteia, narrative voice and style) can be used to develop a critical claim when analyzing text. According to Sillars and Gronbeck (2001), the relationship between *character* and *theme* is more important to understanding the culture that generated such stories than the other four characteristics individually, and this dissertation primarily focuses on the character-theme relationship.

The main purpose of my analysis is to search for the ways large African American women interact with or interpret the master narrative, the Big, Black and Beautiful Body subjectivity, or B4. My analysis focuses on the links between the protagonist (the large black woman) and the antagonists (friends, relatives, strangers, and so on) who uphold the B4 master narrative. The B4 can also function as a character foil since it is a re-created version of black female subjectivity based on past stereotypes. The B4 is not a person per se but created by

individuals in society that have the power to circulate such narratives. More importantly, the creators of the B4 narrative are not the large African American women it represents.

Master Narratives

Grand or meta-narratives, terms coined by Lyotard (1984), refer to pre-existing sociocultural forms of interpretation; today we call them master narratives. According to Bamberg (2004), theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu critique master narratives from a macro level of analysis, claiming they are secured knowledge systems that legitimize strategies to preserve power relations and difference (e.g., power, gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, and so on). In other words, master narratives offer identities based on pre-existing socially constructed difference within society. These stories or master narratives have power within the ways citizens internalize them, which inherently sustains these structures (Andrews, 2004).

This study is concerned with the operation of master narratives as oppressive forces that constrain and limit available subjectivities for large African American women. The power and domination over the large African American female body began with the forced diaspora—as slaves brought to the U.S. for economic gain. In order to maintain control over the lives, bodies and consciousness of slaves, slave masters used all the mental, psychological and material resources available to strip any identification with their African homeland. This lost historical connection began a postcolonial era whereby former slaves were confined by the master narratives. Thus, the identity of slaves and the conception of the large African American female body are tied up in perceptions that were constructed by others and not through their own lived experiences.

As such, as argued in chapter 2, concepts (master narratives) of the Hottentot Venus, Jezebel and Mammy have been re-created, reconfigured and reconceptualized over time to reflect the lives of large African American women, beginning with their lives in America as slaves. These are found in authoritative texts produced in history books, movies and all privileged knowledge systems. When master narratives are so deeply embedded within society as a way of life or a natural process within a culture, counter narratives are erased or camouflaged. According to Sillars and Gronbeck (2001), "culture is defined by the acceptance or rejection of themes" (p. 220). This dissertation will demonstrate tensions that arise in relation to *characters* and *theme* in narrative stories through in- depth interviews. In other words, the themes or master narratives and characters in the in-depth interviews of large African American women are the focus of my narrative analysis.

Gathering Data: In-Depth Interviews

Data collection started with an ad in the local newspaper, which received a lot of attention from college-educated women eager to participate. Although the stories from educated women are significant, I was set on talking to women from various backgrounds, including less educated women. In addition, most of the women in my study were in their late twenties or mid-thirties, so I recruited younger students on campus in order to have various age groups within the study. This was a difficult task; several younger women who contacted me were reluctant to be interviewed when they found out the focus of my study and rarely returned my calls. One such young lady, Lakisha, said "So, you wanna know how *h*appy I am being FAT, huh!?" I wanted to say "NO!" but did not want to influence any interviewees to say what I wanted them to say. My

answer to Lakisha was that I wanted to know her experience, whatever that was. She never called back and would not return follow-up phone calls.

One of my committee members explained how after going through these interview sessions, I would come out a different person, even a changed one. My first thought was, "Are you kidding me?" And then my next thought was," Oh, my god, are you kidding me!" These words were filled with fear of the uncertainly of how my subjectivity would change or be challenged, but my goal was to focus on the stories of other large African American women, not mine. My committee member was right. Every time I revisit the narratives, the memories and emotions come along with recurring headaches and sleeplessness.

Finally, for me, the awareness of the master narratives came with a sense of relief and direction. My product of passion became a source of enlightenment, and I see the ways in which my own subjectivity has been influenced by the master narrative. My goal now is to promote possibilities of kindness, compassion and outreach for these women in all social situations, seen and unseen by others.

Participant Selection

Participants who responded to the ad were asked for their height and weight to determine whether or not they were overweight according to BMI standards (see preliminary demographic appendix B). All of these women are from the Midwest, with education levels ranging from GED to doctoral candidate. I successfully recruited 40 participants. Eleven never made the interview, most of them younger participants. This warrants further study because these women seemed to be very apprehensive of or offended by the nature of the study. The young participants who are in this study provide excellent insight into how large African American female college students

struggle with body image issues. My purpose was to interview twenty African American women who resided in the Midwest at the time of the study (see participant chart appendix E). For participants who did not live in Bowling Green, I traveled to other parts of Ohio and Michigan; however, six interviews were conducted over the telephone.

In-Depth Interview Method

Researchers who engage in the narrative paradigm typically conduct in-depth interviews to analyze, interpret, code and then to recombine codes into themes across stories, people and contexts (Mccormack, 2004). Often these stories are referred to as life stories or personal stories because they are autobiographical in nature (Popp-Baier, 2001; Rappaport, 2000). This data-gathering method provides opportunities to uncover deep level meanings that reflect, communicate and help us make sense of the worlds we live in (Wiles, Rosenberg & Kearns, 2005). In contrast to positivistic methodology, discursive work celebrates the diversity, the plurality (even at the interpretive level), and the variability within this research (Tuffin, 2004).

In-depth interviews are unstructured person-to-person conversations that allow participants to speak at length about their thoughts, feelings and behaviors on important issues. In-depth interviews are explanatory and aim to understand the underlying reasons for a particular problem or practice in a target group (e.g., drug addiction or depression). These interviews are used to generate ideas, obtain in-depth information that questionnaires or structured interviews will not reveal, and evaluate the impacts of intentions on attitudes or beliefs. The researcher functions as a moderator and asks questions as needed. Typically, in-depth interviews gather only ten to fifteen participants due to the lengthy conversations. In essence, in-depth interviewing involves asking questions in addition to the "systematic recording and documenting

[of] responses with intense probing for deeper meaning and understanding of those responses"

(Guion, 2006, p.2).

My primary question was "How do large black women perceive their relationships to society and culture, on the specific matter of size, and how is this expressed in their narratives?" My approach was to describe the project and ask them to tell me the most significant experiences in their lives that formed their body images with an emphasis on weight. The average session was forty-five minutes in length. Afterward, I invited the women for a meal and explained that any discussion was still a part of the interview even though it was not taped.

In discussing media influences, some participants felt that it served as a tool to increase their self-esteem while others reported that it lowered their already injured self-esteem. Finally, the women talked about various ways in which agents in society reinforced the B4 subjectivity and effectively lowered their self-esteem or made them question their self-worth.

In-Depth Interview Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed, resulting in more than 200 pages of typewritten data. Using these narrative interviews, I entered the analysis to understand the embeddedness of the master narrative within the data. The master narrative "is a narrative version (or rather discourse/ideology) that is most commonly spread within particular populations" (Kolbl, 2004, p. 27). Kolbl (2004) effectively sums up the various definitions of the master narrative and demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of master narratives as a "narrative version." Therefore, I critically analyzed the narratives to search for ways in which participants engage the master narrative.

From an epistemological standpoint, this data are not the only "correct" reflection of reality or of any one "truth." I believe there are multiple realities, and no one reality should be privileged over another, as in the case of the B4 master narrative. This dissertation is a representation of how the master narratives work in the lives of twenty African American women as seen through my critical perspective as a large African American female academic.

Chapter Summary

Narrative theory is the theoretical and methodological underpinning of this narrative analysis. As such, this dissertation draws primarily from Walter Fisher's (1987) paradigm but also consults the work of other critical and feminist studies that employ narrative analysis research (Andrews, 2004; Miller, 2007; Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). In addition, the concept of master narratives as a micro lens was a guide in the analysis phase of my twenty in-depth interviews. The focus on master narratives is a way of seeing how our actions are guided by stories carried over time. This fact signals how important these stories are for populations that are forced into Diasporas; black folks, because they were separated from a home land, are often narrated, rather than narrating subjects. We began our time in America without an identity because we were property, and that was the identity. It is not our own voices, perceptions and understandings that inform the narratives that we live by; instead, these narratives have been constructed by others. The narrative approach is the best tool for examining body image of large African American women because it "begins and ends with everyday life" (de Certeau, 1998; Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). In-depth interviews provide an opportunity to access marginal everyday lived experiences and to understand the perspectives of reflective subjects (Miller, 2007; Wiles, Rosenberg & Kearns, 2005). de Certeau (1984) effectively sums up the reasons

why in-depth interviewing and narrative analysis are excellent ways through which researchers

can uncover sociopolitical experiences within everyday life:

> I shall try to describe the erosion that lays bare the ordinary in a body of analytical
>
> techniques, to reveal the openings that mark its trace on the borders where a
>
> science is mobilized, to indicate the displacements that lead toward the *common*
>
> *place* where "anyone" is finally silent, except for repeating (but in a different
>
> way) banalities. Even if it is drawn into the oceanic rumble of the ordinary, the
>
> task consists not in substituting a representation for the ordinary or covering it up
>
> with mere words, but in showing how it introduces itself into our techniques—in
>
> the way in which the sea flows back into pockets and crevices in beaches—and
>
> how it can reorganize the place from which discourse is produced (p. 5).

CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

Subjectivity Components of the B4 Master Narrative

The focus of this chapter is my analysis of how the Big, Black and Beautiful Body (B4) master narrative functions as an oppressive agent in society. My analysis comprises the lived experiences of twenty large African American women of various ages, classes and education levels. The events that occurred in the lives of these women were fascinating and devastating. Even though this study was sanctioned by the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB), my biggest concern was to avoid causing more pain or embarrassment to the women who spoke of their struggles. I feel honored by their willingness to share some of their most painful stories concerning issues with weight. I do not take them lightly—the stakes are too high. These stories have the capacity to be agents of social change by bringing to light injustices played out on the large black female body.

In addition, the awareness of the oppressive nature of the B4 and how it contradicts the social reality for black women can enlighten those who live within this binary structure (social reality versus lived experience), and thus, their lived experiences can become aids to self actualization. Their experiences could expose oppression and emancipate. As hooks (2002) explains, awareness to the colonized mind becomes an avenue for decolonization in which one can assert true agency and define him or herself on one's own terms. In effect, once the binary structures are revealed to large African American women, they can understand their struggles with body image and articulate their lived experience with the awareness of the structure rather than being confused, defensive or unknowingly contributing to their own subjugation. Thus, awareness is an essential aspect of their emancipation. Until then, the power of the B4 structure

remains in place and continues to constrain the identity of large African American women in relation to body image.

My interpretation of how the B4 structure operates comes from the perspective of a feminist theorist who had the same type of experiences as the large African American females I interviewed. As such, after going through the transcriptions several times, taking notes and searching for patterns, I noticed two distinct, yet troubling voices or dialectical tensions. On the one hand, these women claim to be proud of their bodies and profess to have high self-esteem. Their stories appear to line up with the master narrative of women who love their large bodies. On the other hand, their in-depth interviews reveal contradictions—a personification of pain and discomfort. In other words, stories of pain and discomfort produce dialectical tensions because the women are forced to live within these contradictions.

The dominant social structure is the Big, Black and Beautiful Body narrative that frames their experiences versus the opposing social reality of being fat in a thin-desired world. Dialectical tensions between these binaries are seen across four narrative themes dealing with *esteem, self-control, community acceptance* and *objects of desire*.

Esteem Narratives

One of the women in my study, Africa, was born in Nigeria. She has been in the United States for 18 years and became a citizen more than a decade ago. She has raised three children here and is working toward her master's degree. When I asked Africa about this notion of the African and African American community being more accepting of large women she answered:

> Africa: Ahh, I come from an educated family, and my family, care. And at that
> time I was young and I was looking for, you know you look for love and support

from your family, but you don't get it. And my weight is one of the reasons why,
even when I got sick, they would constantly say, "are you losing weight?" My
goal is to lose weight because the low, smaller size I am, the healthier I feel,
because weight to me is psychological.

ADP: What do you mean?

Africa: Psychological to me because, you know the way you are raised your
upbringing matters. All I know, it may not be the fact, but all I've known is,
family member telling you, "you cannot be overweight." So that's the life that
God has exposed me to, you know what I mean? I was not exposed to a family
members or relatives that say "oh, you are fat, you are beautiful." That's not what
I hear all my life; all I've heard all my life is, "you have to be healthy, you don't
have to be skinny, like a stick, but just at the weight that you can handle."

Africa's story is not common in our culture because of productions like National Geographic

documentaries and anthropology publications like Brink (1989). These media report or imply

that large African women are more accepted, but these same representations of African

American bodies are shown as exotic and deviant. Contradictory experiences are not promoted,

researched, written about or discussed (hooks, 1992).

Although these reports are interesting, when studies fail to engage with stories like

Africa's, society continues to sustain myths of the black body. As such, the African and African

American communities are portrayed as more accepting of large women, unless and until they

successfully assimilate into the white community (e.g., through comparison studies). It is racist

and egocentric to think that the only way Africans or African Americans can become "civilized"

or have a "normal" and healthy view of their bodies is to have contact with the white community.

The consequence of this cultural standard is such that large African American women who know

this othered status and struggle with their body images limit the ways in which they interact with

peers, co-workers or potential friends. When this happens, the power of the fat-is-beautiful myth

is sustained.

In another part of the interview, Africa explained how she feels out or asks questions of

people to see how they react to her weight.

Africa: At work, I was respected. Because my personality is outgoing, people do

not see my weight. People do not see my weight as an issue at work. I go there, I

do my work. However, because the life that I, because of what I've been exposed

to. I think my, my self-esteem is questionable. My personality is friendly and

outgoing, but people, I don't really let people, a lot of people get closer to me.

Because, I, I kind of feel like, if they know, maybe they will reject me and ah,

what have you. And uh, my weight issue has always been a topic. I want to know

what people think of how I feel. Which is wrong of me to put myself in that

position. But it has always been what I always do when people start getting closer

to me, but most people that I, most of my real true friends don't care about my,

they do not care about my weight.

This is an example of how Africa contributes to her own subjugation by her silence. It is

insecurity about her size and the fear of rejection by, in this case, her co-workers that constrains

her. It is possible, that if Africa would reach out to others, she could not only help herself but

also give an opportunity for others to support her. So why is she afraid? The social structure is so

powerful that the fear of rejection is not just as a fat black woman but the fear of wanting a different identity. Africa avoids situations in which she will have to explain that she has issues with her weight.

The problem is that when others in society assume you have a specific position they tend to disagree or challenge you on how you feel about yourself. This is what makes living within social constraints easier socially, but we should question whether it is healthy mentally, emotionally or physically.

As such, Africa's agency is lost when she has contact with individuals at work based upon the omnipresent narratives of large African American women, which she does not challenge. They are omnipresent because they are unquestioned and natural ways in which people believe she is supposed to act, think, feel and behave based upon her race and weight. Omnipresent because instead of worrying about the rejection of being a fat woman she has to worry about the rejection of her position as a large African American woman that struggles with weight, because she is not supposed to. Instead, Africa would rather act out the B4 subjectivity. As long as dominant master narratives proliferate constituting subjectivities for large African American women, social change is stagnating.

Misguided attitudes and perceptions of large African American women are drawn from historically racist narratives. These narratives have been built to sustain the master narrative, especially about the desirability of large black women. As Audre Lorde (1984) says, however, we can not dismantle the master's house with his tools. The first step toward agency is to expose the existence of the master narrative and strive to decolonize the mind.

"Esteem," however, operates at the center of the master narrative and further burdens the struggle to define oneself apart from others' stereotypes, especially in sensitive areas like body image. According to Miller and Downey (1999), "Self-esteem measures often include subscales assessing how respondents feel about their appearance of physical self" (p. 77). In addition, body image typically refers to an individual's attitude or mental predisposition to her physical appearance (Hendriks, 2002). Because the women in my study were specifically asked to reflect on their weight stories, self-esteem and body esteem narratives are used interchangeably.

Esteem narratives represent the large African American woman's subjectivity as intrinsically positive regardless of her excess weight. This sustains the Mammy narrative as a self-sacrificing large African American woman who was happy and jovial even in her oppression. Today, large African American women are also portrayed as "Mammy like" or nurturing, other identified and funny. Consider movie characters like Charlene in *Bringing Down the House* played by one of Hollywood's favorite of few large black actresses, Queen Latifah. Queen Latifah plays an escaped convict that swindles her way into Peter's (Steve Martin) family, a conservative lawyer in an upper class neighborhood. Although Queen Latifah seems to be portrayed as a tough convict, her characterization demonstrates the nurturing role in the family common to the Mammy prototype (Prater, 2004). Latifah performs domestic duties within the family including cooking, knitting and taking care of the children by helping them with their homework and giving them and Peter, advice.

Being Mammy-like may not seem offensive since the Mammy prototype is mothering. However, when this personality type is reserved for marked bodies, it limits the agency of those individuals. While Hillary Clinton was on the campaign trail for the 2008 Democratic primary

nomination, she was seen as a "bitch" or cold person because she exhibited "masculine" traits, the opposite of what society considers feminine. The same type of experience is true for large African American women in that they are expected to hold a certainly identity or subjectivity based on their gender, race and weight. Both are forms of gender oppression, the only difference is that the black body is marked additionally by racism. Unless a large African American woman presents Mammy characteristics, she is seen as a "bitch" and not worthy of acceptance or human compassion unless she gets back in her place.

Implications of esteem narratives limit the ways in which large African American women can give voice to discontentment with their size. In order to appease the master narrative, they negotiate their identity, which constantly affects their sense of esteem. In the previous section, Africa's explanation of how she "feels out" how people feel about her weight before considering them as friends is an example of how damaging this narrative is. Unfortunately, Africa's response sustains her own oppression.

What gets lost in studies that claim African American women have higher esteem is the fact that these women still want to lose weight. All of the women in my study, with a BMI ranging from 30 to 53, were trying to lose weight. In addition, while these women may not want to be underweight or a size zero, they all want to be healthy and their weight was part of how they conceived being healthy. This drive to be healthy (but not necessarily thin) creates the misperception that large African American women, like the prototypical Mammy, are not concerned with their weight.

Large African American women have been narrowly defined in terms of esteem for so long that the only agency they conceptualize in terms of body image relates to being "healthy,"

not thin. After all, they are unable to attain "real" beauty, the Euro-American beauty standard (white, middle class, college educated and waif thin), with long blond hair (hooks, 1992). These limitations leave large African American women with no choice except to try and love the way they are and be as healthy as possible.

Consider 57-year-old Bertise, who reveals the ways in which her identity is constrained within the B4 subjectivity. Bertise appears to have high esteem:

Bertise: I've never had negative problems, responses from other people concerning my weight. I mean, I have problems with myself. This shadow, behind me [*laughs*].

ADP: Why do you think you have problems with your own weight?

Bertise: I don't know, I'm, I'm fatter than I wanna be, and I'm fatter than I should be. Okay. And I would like to be a size perfect 10, you know, like most of us. We just like our bodies some shape or form; I wish I had big legs; I got bird legs, too many thighs and too many, too much butt and too much stomach, no boobs! [*laughs*] If we can just shift around a bit, I probably would be okay.

ADP: When you think of your body image, what comes to mind?

Bertise: Well. [*laughs*]. I like me, [*laughs*], what else can I say. I mean, even, you know like I say, I get frustrated with my butt sometime, but all of me, this is all of me, this gonna always be all of me. Whatever it is, bigger, smaller, this is gonna be me, and I thank God for every bit of me.

ADP: What about your self-esteem?

Bertise: My self-esteem. Wooooww. [*laughs*]. Curve ball. Well, my self-esteem, that's a different issue for a different problem. So, my self-esteem, is kind of the pits, but it's getting better, but it has nothing to do with my weight. I've had other issues [*pause*] in my life that have damanged my self-esteem, but I'm getting help to repair it. So, I think that's a positive thing. It's not an overnight journey, but I know a thousand miles start with one step, so I'm steppin [*laughs*] one step at a time. [*laughs*].

The limited ways in which Bertrise can understand her self-esteem is clear. There is a disconnection between her physical body and her self-esteem. The African American female body is not considered the standard beauty because of its skin color and curvaceous nature. This means that even self-esteem can not be attached to the already condemned body so they look elsewhere to understand their self-esteem.

Bertrise's interview indicates that on a body esteem survey, asking questions concerning how she feels about her body or self-esteem, she would answer that she loves her body because it is a part of her. However, what is left out is the fact that she still wants to lose weight and thinks that she is fatter than she should be. This is how averages of perceptions can lead to damaging surface level data because they do not probe deeper into how women like Bertrise feel about their self-esteem as it relates to their body.

Unfortunately, the esteem narratives also affect other aspects of a black woman's sense of self—her self-control, community observances and as an object of desire. Because Bertise loves her large body, it automatically equates to lack of concern about unhealthy fat, diabetes and other weight related consequences. These narratives are used to justify oppression against large

African American women by those in society that see her subjectivity as deviant when in fact it is not.

This next narrative example comes from my first interviewee who talked about how she uses esteem as a shield. Jill is in a weight loss program in which she has lost sixty pounds, but she is still considered severely overweight by social standards. She is an educated professional woman and claims to have high self-esteem. However, she explained why she believes large African American women choose to sustain the B4 subjectivity. *We Wear the Mask*, by Paul Laurence Dunbar, is a famous piece of literature that talks about these constructions. Jill's idea of a "positive stereotype" is an example of how the poem is still relevant in the lives of large African American women today. Jill embodies Dunbar's mask in her interview.

ADP: Well, what about when people say large African American Women have higher self-esteem even with their large bodies?

Jill: Uhm, it, I think it depends on, I think, it's uhm, sometimes it's a front.

ADP: Sometimes it's a front?

Jill: Yeah, sometimes I think it's a front.

ADP: Why?

Jill: Not all the time, not all the time, but I think, you know, with any, especially with black women, we're very, we're perceived as being these strong black women. So, that's like in every aspect we've gotta play that role, so if we are heavier, we can't acknowledge that that is hurtful, so uhm, we have to put on that mask and come across a certain way and, uhm, because we're living up to that, trying to live up to that positive, you know, positive stereotype.

ADP: That's interesting, a positive stereotype.

Jill: Turned a positive from the negative. Well, if you want to compare the two it's more of a positive than a negative, so we will continue to wear that mask and front, you know, like we got it together, and we may be struggling, so.

Here, Jill explains how large African American women put on a front because it is an easier identity to portray. Everyone recognizes the B4 subjectivity and it appears to be a positive stereotype. On the other hand, if you have a different position than the B4 you may be questioned and this can be an uncomfortable experience and a difficult one to explain.

Earlier, Africa also alluded to the consequences of this positive stereotype because she explained how people at work like her but at the same time, her true identity or concern with her body was an issue that she often hides. The difficulty with the positive stereotype is the power that comes behind it. By this I mean that the "front" Jill talks about has the power of the B4 supporting it. Rather than try to explain the struggle, it is easier to go with the flow and allow others to think you have this high esteem.

The positive stereotype presented itself in one of the final interviews during a recruiting session at a plus-sized clothing store. The woman working in the store realized that I was gathering stories based on weight and attempted to refer customers whom she perceived as having high esteem. My interview with Shanique implicitly shows the masked operation of the "positive stereotype" drawing from the B4 identity. Shanique's verbal and nonverbal cues told me that she was offended by my presence. In fact, she did not make eye contact, as if I was a representative promoting B4 structure. Accordingly, when asked about her weight related experiences, she took on a defensive attitude and said, *"I don't have any stories."*

Like the Mammy, Shanique is a defender of the house. She stood up for this oppressive force and wanted me to think that she was okay with her body, but all of her verbal and nonverbal body langage told me that she was angry. Shanique is an example of large African American women that hold up the big, black and beautiful body structure (B4) as a shield. During my conversation with Jill, she asked me how I intended to break through the shield and I could not answer that. My hope was that women would automatically open up to me because I looked like them. But my position as an academic researcher made me something other than just another large African American woman having a conversation. The difference is that I could see through the positive stereotype because of my own willingness to use this shield in certain circumstances.

These tropes define the large African American female subjectivity. Since these narratives come from past conceptions of African American women, when taken together, all of these traits are easy to believe. The power comes from their historicity. For example, the Mammy's primary trait was being nurturing and self sacrificing. Her large body served as a cushion for the emotional needs of others. These traits are attached to those with large African American female bodies. The portrayal of the large African American female body is marked with the remnants of past stereotypes. These recognizable features of the Hottentot, Mammy and Jezebel, along with the narratives about them, make the B4 subjectivity a seemingly inescapable power structure.

Self-control Narratives

        The self-control narratives sustain the B4 concept by limiting ways in which the large African American female can conceptualize weight-loss efforts. Self-control narratives circulate a lack of concern for weight control. As such, self-control narratives constrain a black woman's identity by teaching her that she is born to be fat. The self-control and esteem narratives are paradoxical constructions in which the large African American female subjectivity is positioned. These seemingly mutually exclusive concepts are constitutive elements of an African American woman's identity (not having self-control versus having high self-esteem). The invisible and yet powerful binaries of the B4 structure versus social reality presented to large African American women are limiting. The interviews show the ways in which her agency is limited by the belief that she is "supposed" to be big-boned. One example comes from Henrietta, a high school graduate who works in the hotel industry.

        Henrietta: When my sister was even chunky like me, I didn't feel anything was wrong with it. You know, I didn't feel she needed to lose weight, but that was her, you know, how she felt about her body, but I ain't never have a problem with it. I felt, you know, we was, we was born to be thick, we was just always thick. So when she lost her little weight, you know, I was proud of her, and she looked good, but I never said, well, I'm a try to lose some, you know what I mean 'cause I'm alright with my weight. You know. It's not a big issue in our family.

Here, Henrietta is explaining that while her sister has lost weight, she herself was not influenced by it; however, earlier in the interview she tells a work-related story:

Henrietta: Uhm, couple of friends at my job, about three of 'em, is on this diet,

uhm, we all around the same age. Ah, we got a little extra meat 'bout the same.

And, so, they trying to diet, but I haven't started yet, I probably start it, I don't

know, this weekend [*Her voice goes down, and then she clears her throat*]. And, I

don't know, I just, I feel like I'm a little, getting a little chunky size, so we

[*pause*] we looking to lose about 15 apiece, 15 or 20 pounds a piece.

Henrietta's agency is erased because of these two conflicting realities. Henrietta lives within the binary of the master narrative and her social reality. It is apparent that while she claims that she is okay with her body and not influenced by her sister's weight loss that she has a problem with her "chunky size." In fact, she and the other co-workers are planning a dangerous weight loss method using a mixed drink of cayenne pepper and water. What Henrietta shows here is a sense of learned helplessness, the sense that being big is natural. However, her actions do not follow through because her lived experience reveals that she does not feel that being "chunky" is natural for her.

Each of the women in this study, whether they considered themselves thick, fat or plump, have all attempted and continues to try and lose weight. Some were successful, some were not, and others maintained that their weight fluctuates. In any case, the narratives are so embedded within their consciousness that even when they did attempt to lose weight, they gave up too soon, sabotaged their success, or stopped at a weight that was considered okay by B4 standards based.

Cassandra was talking about a Weight Watchers venture in which she had lost weight. Sustaining the self-control narrative, Cassandra was convinced that she could not be a lifetime

member of Weight Watchers. Becoming a lifetime member without member fees requires reaching the BMI standard. Cassandra found other ways to support her self-control drive.

Cassandra: If you have a note from a physician. You know my doctor was willing to write me a note, because my doctor was, even, my doctor was like, "you look fine; I would be concerned if you lose anymore weight."

ADP: Wow.

Cassandra: He was like, "you, you, look fine, you're healthy."

ADP: Was he African American?

Cassandra: He was from India.

ADP: Wow.

Cassandra: But even my gynocologist, who was a white woman, told me, she was like, "you look great," 'cause I told her, I said, well, "I wanna lose at least 50 more pounds," and she like, "you're not a white woman, honey," is what she told me.

ADP: [*laughs*] Okay.

Cassandra: She was like, she said, "you're a black woman, you have a big butt, and you have hips." She was like, "if you need me to write you a letter," she's like, "'cause that's not realistic." She was like, you're not; she was like, m-mm, she was like, "I know you wanna keep some meat on your bones, don't you?" and I said, "yeah, I do, I do." I was like "I don't wanna be stick figure thin," and she was like, "I'll write you a note. I don't think, no, that's not realistic for you."

Cassandra unknowingly contributes to her own oppression. The B4 structure has such a strong

foundation of historical narratives that even her physician sustained the myth. When physicians

suggest that having fifty pounds of excess weight is normal for an African American woman, it

demonstrates the prevalence and power of these narratives. Doctors are supposed to understand

health, but they are influenced by B4 narratives, which, influence judgment about their medical

training.

Looking back over Cassandra's interview information, she would have been in the

severely obese category on the BMI scale even though both doctors told her this weight was

acceptable. Williamson (1998) recognizes that these myths are detrimental to African American

women when the structure is reinforced by the medical community:

> I do not suggest that textbook anorexia or bulimia nervosa is widespread in
>
> minority communities (though binge eating for purposes of self medication is
>
> common among poor women of color). However, the above myth is so prevalent,
>
> so digestible, not only for researchers, but also for doctors and other helping
>
> professionals. (p. 67)

While Cassandra saw the doctors' comments as a compliment, they also inadvertently reinforce

racist notions of large African American women.

Even if African Americans had a culturally relevant scale, as suggested in chapter 2,

while her weight at the time would not have been severely obese, she would have still been

overweight even by the adjusted standard. This is certainly one of the consequences of having no

culturally relevant BMI scale and a society that advocates B4 status. However, the medical

community is not the only advocate:

Cassandra: I think the smallest I got was 215. That's the smallest weight I gotten to, but I honestly, I mean, people thought that I was like, small, small, you know, and I remember my momma like, "don't lose anymore weight." And, you know, people were like, "you don't need to lose anymore weight" and uhm like.

ADP: What did you think when your mom said that?

Cassandra: I was really, and she was like, "you look good, but you don't need to lose anymore weight," and it was funny because my father, my father was always supportive of me when I was younger, but as I got older my father would say little stuff about my weight and everything. You know "you need to lose some weight, you need to do this." And I was like, "you fat; too, you need to lose some weight." And I remember when I lost the weight he was all concerned: "is she not eating, is she starving herself? What's wrong with her? She doesn't look the same way, she was sick, you know, don't lose anymore weight. What are you doing, are you eating, do you need some money for food? I hope you're not starving yourself." And uhm like, you know, I never felt good enough 'cause I'm like okay, when I was heavier, I was too fat; now that I've lost the weight, you know, I'm anorexic.

Self-control narratives function to sustain these women and this structural force is embedded within society. Embedded to the extent that these women, along with their families and doctors, do not see self-control as the type of agency they can possess.

Consequently, this kind of reinforcement keeps them in a state of learned helplessness. Jill's anxiety about the narrative observer (the ways in which society buys into the B4 narrative) constrains the very thought and act of exercise.

> Jill: Yeah, I just started to uhm, you know, I changed my eating habits for about two months, and so I started losing weight. And then I figured okay, the next step is, you gotta start, you know, exercising. . . . . There was a walking path in a park, and it had tennis courts and a pond, and I had driven by it a lot because it was just right across the street. So I don't even know how long it took. . . . . I don't even know the words to articulate how I felt, just trying to make this decision, to, just cross the street, walk across the street and walk around the park. It was a huge deal. . . . . So, I remember walking out that day, and you know, usually I wouldn't walk any further than the car port, you know to get my car. And how, in my mind I just kept pushing myself, like okay, walk past the car port, okay, cross the street, okay, cross over, okay, you're here, you're at the, you're at the starting point. Okay, just start walking, just start walking, walk around. It was a big deal. . . . . You know, I was, you know, pushing myself. I mean, I just, I had to talk to myself, talk myself through it. Through that fear. You know, nobody was there to do it. And uhm, just talking myself through that fear that it was okay, you know I think, I was so bogged down, with, okay, people gonna be looking out the window at me like where is she going, what, what, she's going across the street and what, she's about to walk, you know [*laughs*]. That's how I was thinking, that's how I was thinking. Just that people were watching me. Just even crossing

the street, you know how people go past you; it was kinda like, what, she has the

audacity to start walking!

The structural limitations within the B4 narrative are powerful, but Jill's agency was asserted when she forced herself to confront them. In the previous section, Jill talked about how keeping on the social mask of the B4 is sometimes easier because of the fear of rejection. This is how being a large African American woman is an isolating experience. As Jill said, no one was there and she had to do it for herself.

Although Jill did this, society can not expect every large African American woman to have the same ability. Consider those that struggle with alcoholism and other addictions, are they expected to pick themselves up by their bootstraps and do it all by themselves? That type of western mythology gives the illusion that everyone has the ability to be successful in every way all by themselves, regardless of their circumstances. But is that really true? People that are successful typically talk of those who have helped them along the way. Human beings need each other and large African American women are human. Besides, Jill had already started counseling at this point with her weight control clinic so she was held accountable for getting that exercise done and in this sense she was not all alone.

Another thing to consider is the fear Jill spoke of; what was she fearful of and why? And why was this fear such a powerful force that she had to talk her way through step by step? Her fear was made up of the struggle between contradictory binary social narratives. The stronger of the two is one that she grew up with that kept her in her place. The binary structure she faces says that she does not have the capacity of self-control (B4), on the one hand, versus her lived experience of fighting to gain self-control, on the other hand, these two forces constrain the way

in which she views exercise. The narratives say that she cannot believe in the B4 subjectivity and exercise at the same time. She is bound within the ideologies that circulate and surround her existence.

Community Acceptance Narratives

To what extent the African American family and community influence B4 narratives? Many of the women in this study have been targets of hurtful speech acts from people who believe they should be proud of their bodies, even when they are struggling. In *Excitable Speech,* Butler (1997) explains:

> Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal
>
> way; rather, it is by being interpolated within the terms of language that a certain
>
> social existence of the body first becomes. . . . Thus, to be addressed is not merely
>
> to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by
>
> which the recognition of existence becomes possible. . . . One "exists" not only by
>
> virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being recognizable. (p. 5)

Butler considers living within the binary of the B4 narrative and a woman's lived experience. One who *carries* the large African American female body is *seen* as having certain subjectivities. "Visibility" attracts violent speech acts from community and family members who believe the narratives about the positive aspects of being a large black woman.

For instance, the shape and size of the Hottentot Venus are very much like 90% of the women in this study, myself included. Because of Hottentot's "abnormal" shape and size, she was poked and prodded at, spit on and yelled at by spectators (Hobson, 2003). Today, this kind of behavior is not acceptable; however, being rude to fat bodies still gets by. When comments

come from outsiders, it is one kind of experience, but when it comes from family members, from mother and father, from spouses and significant others, it can affect a person's entire life.

The problem is when researchers claim there is a cultural protection from the black community; it could be that they are overlooking a general empathy among minorities in terms of an understanding of oppression. In other words, when minorities deal with issues of race, gender, sexuality or other identity markers, they understand what is like to be constantly ridiculed for who you are, particularly in public. So, African Americans may strive to be supportive in this sense, but this supportiveness may not be consistent.

Here is an example of how Ebony, a mother of two with a master's degree, experienced violent speech acts from a member of the African American community.

Ebony: Oh, wow, I just thought of this. Uhm, [*laughs*] I was at a grocery store, and there was this older lady in there. Sister Millie. And we used to go to the same church. Uhm, she was a member. She was with us but she's passed now. We used to be members of this old church I went to and one day she saw me in the store after I had my baby. This must have been after the second baby. And she, and you know we said our hi's, hello, how are you doing, how is everything going. And she said, you know, how old is that baby? And I told her he might have been about 3 to 4 months. [She said] "And it's about time you start losing that weight! Yaw, yaw can't just be sitting around letting, you know, ah, with that weight all on you! I was telling my granddaughter, yaw need to, gotta get out there and start working out and eating better 'cause you can't just be sitting around and just getting—you know you really need to lose some weight." And I

was in the grocery store, and there was people there, and I was [*pause*] so

embarrassed. And the, and the only reason why [*laugh*] I did not curse her out, it

was 'cause, it wasn't, she is sister Millie!

ADP: Okay.

Ebony: I figured, I just figured, she old, and old people just normally say stuff

and, you know, she was really old, Sister Millie is about 80.

ADP: Okay.

Ebony: You know, and at that age they kinda just say what come to mind, they

kinda figure like [*laugh*] reach to that point to where they can say what they want.

So, you know they just, end up, talking out the side of they neck, and yeah, she

kinda gota free pass on that, but yeah, I was, I was like really, really, really

embarrassed. Really, really embarrassed, but yeah.

ADP: That was in the grocery store?

Ebony: Yeah, that was really embarrassing.

The elderly lady felt her comment was justifiable and thought she was giving Ebony some well-

needed advice. However, there are instances, not only in the black community, but even in the

home, when the antagonist is a black mother. Jalicia is working on her doctoral degree:

Jalicia: When I was about, how old was I, probably was 8 [*inaudible*] when I was

little, uhm, my mom used to buy like, cookies, potato chips, all this other stuff.

And she, her favorite at that time was Oreo cookies, and I know, uhm, ah, it's not

funny, I can a, it's good I can laugh about it now, but, she, I ate like half, you

know how they, they comes in the packs of two.

ADP: In the rows?

Jalicia: Yeah the row. I ate like a row and a half, and she came in, and she was really really mad at me. Why you have to be a glutton, and I was just like![*long pause*] What?

ADP: How old where you then?

Jalicia: I probably was, I was younger than 10, so, so ever since then, that has stuck with me. Even, like, even till this day, uhm, when I, when we talk about old [*pause*], like when we were little sometimes I'll bring that up.And she was just like, a glutton, I was like, oh, okay, but I think when she's that [*pause*]. I wrote about it, in my dissertation 'cause I'm-a show that part to her, 'cause she doesn't realize, how, how, you know how that really stuck with me. She kinda thinks nothin' of it, and you know, and I don't blame her. I'm not mad at her about it, she was just being, a mom, but that was really hurtful.

The way in which these speech acts hurt is by their long term effects in the lives of these women. Jalicia mentioned that she will let her mother read her dissertation because she is writing about her experience as a large African American female in an autoethnography. Cassandra had a similar issue with her mother.

Cassandra: I was a small child until the 6th grade. I remember gaining weight, and I would remember, my mother, when we would go shopping, she would make the experience, terrible. Ah, I remember, [*pause*] going to the store and, wanting certain clothes and, she would look at the clothes and say, well, this would fit, if your fat ass hadn't gained so much weight, you know, or she would say, you

know, I'm not taking you shopping anymore, because this is just disgustin'. And

so it was, and for her it was, you know, I just don't understand, you know, you're

getting bigger and bigger. So, so the more depressed I got more I ate.

However, Cassandra did confront her mother as an adult after going through therapy.

Cassandra: When I was going through therapy, uhm, part of my, my issue with

therapy was, uhm, or one of things I talked to my therapist about was, do, do I

confront my mother about the way that? 'Cause a lot of the issues were about her.

And it was do I confront my mother, and you know one of the things she talked to

me about was, "you have to confront her, in order to make you feel better, and

you have to be okay with it, regardless of what her reaction is, because she may

not give you the reaction you want. And then I don't want that to interfere with

your healing process." . . . And one night I did talk to my mom about it, and I

remember just crying, and at the time my fiancé at the time was with me, and I

remember crying and saying you know, you made me feel about myself, you

made me feel bad about the way I looked and, everything, and at first, that, that

night, she was like I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. But after she had time to sleep on

it, she called me back the next day. And she was like, "you know what, I had

thought about what you said, and I'm not apologizing for that. I didn't do

anything to you. You know, I didn't do anything wrong; you know, you're just, I

don't know where this is coming from. You know, you've gotten educated and

taken all of these classes and all this other stuff, and now you wanna say that I

was a bad mother, and I wasn't a bad, and I'm not, you know I'm not, you know,

I'm not gonna take responsibility for that."

These excerpts demonstrate the power of the B4 narratives. Parents and members of the black

community are not automatically supportive of the larger African American female. Ebony

continued to say how embarrassing her experience was in grocery stores. Her pain was evident

and just talking about it seemed to put her back in that place as if she was experiencing it all over

again and she began to cry. Public humiliation is not uncommon for the women in this study and

they deal with it in a variety of ways but most of the time, they just ignore it because they want

to be the bigger person.

When comments come from parents, as in the case of Cassandra and Jalicia, it results in a

lifelong struggle with body image. Ironically, when Cassandra confronted her mother, it gave her

a sense of empowerment to know that she explained to her mother how she hurt her; however,

her mother presents another issue. Cassandra's mother, like so many other antagonists in these

stories, do not believe they did anything wrong. The community acceptance narrative erases

stories like these and other ones like Marty's in the introduction, who had a similar experience

with her father. Butler (1997) notion of "violent speech acts" are a part of the ongoing

oppression of large African American women. As one of my participants, Merecedes, said,

"When you're overweight, people never let you forget it," even those in the African American

community.

Objects of Desire Narratives

The Jezebel is the desirable black woman. Men want her innate inability to control her sexual appetite. The large African American female is seen as the same. But the large African American woman is not an object of desire; she is a sex object.

Objects of desire and sex objects both limit the agency of the woman. However, the significance of the terms is important to note. Objects of desire can connote a man's sexual desire for a socially acceptable woman (DeWall, Altermatt, & Thompson, 2005). However, when a woman is treated as a sex object, the desire or pleasure of the woman involved is irrelevant. In his study of the sexual narratives from Martinique (Caribbean) men, Murray (1999) explains how desire "whether it be for sex, self-knowledge, or power, is culturally and historically conditioned" (p. 160). He goes on to say that race and ethnicity yield different norms on the basis of desire (Murray, 1999). An excerpt from Nikki Giovanni's (1979) *Woman Poem* explains the notion of a sex object in the case of large African American women:

> …It is a sex object if you're pretty and no love or love and no sex If you're fat get
>
> back fat Black woman be a mother grandmother strong thing but not woman
>
> gameswoman romantic woman love needer man seeker dick eater sweat getter
>
> fuck needing love seeking woman (Giovanni, 1979).

This attitude rests upon the narrative that the black culture is more accepting of large African American women. African American men are said to be less occupied with a woman's weight (Root, 1990). Webb, Looby and McMurtery (2004) give an example:

> African American women who are considered overweight by the dominant
>
> culture's standards are perceived more positively by African American men. . . .

Historically, within the African American community "fat women" are viewed as

attractive, smart, sexy, employed, wanted by men in the community, are able to

attract husbands, and rulers of their households. (p. 371)

This is another misconception of the lived experiences of large African American women. The

truth is, as Webb, Looby and McMuretery (2004) report later in the study, African American and

white males prefer moderate-sized women.

The object-of-desire narrative sustains the belief that black women are innately

promiscuous and have an animalistic drive for sex. This myth served as justification for the rape

of black female slaves at the hands of their white masters (White, 1985). Today, this same myth

functions for large African American women who are mistreated at the hands of black men, who

disrespect them as women because of their large Hottentot-like body. These same men benefit

from their mammy personality. Even worse, they are interested in having large African

American women perform a kind of Jezebel characteristic by expecting them to do anything

sexual to obtain their affection.

Accordingly, the Jezebel figure is the most prominent one in the bedroom where large

black women are victims. Some of the things large black women have explained that men expect

them to do because of their size constitute rape. Modern rap videos demonstrate the ways in

which the black female body is highly sexualized and victimized by images that deem them

highly sexual, as a Jezebel.

The cultural representations of black females as sexually aggressive, out-of-the-jungle

women, suggest they deserve this mistreatment. Even during slavery and Jim Crow, black

women were cast as Jezebels and their rape by white men was justified. In the same way, men

that expect large black females to perform lewd sexual acts because of their size do the same thing. This is the position that allowed white and now black men to rape and demean black women without remorse.

When this happens, large African American women have limited sexual agency. They are not seen as feminine because the Mammy, the Jezebel and the Hottentot were not treated like women, but rather as objects for men to use them in whatever way that pleases them. The Hottentot brought riches to the man who controlled her image, the Mammy is still on shelves as Aunt Jemima and the Jezebel is still luring men in the music industry in rap videos. What a commodity the large black woman is for those who are pleased to use her, and the pleasure is all theirs. Coming from this subjugated position, she is obliged to entertain them, and since she has a false sense of self-esteem that has been created by the B4 narrative, she does not even see the oppression for what it is.

Some participants sustain the myth or "positive stereotype" by saying, "Mo Pushin' for the Cushion." However, the bedroom constrains the ways in which black women experience pleasure. For example, Mercedes was my strongest supporter of the B4 concept. She was determined to show how the structure was relevant in the lives of big girls and wanted to encourage others to assert their agency. As a single mother, Mercedes talks about one of her bedroom stories, with the antagonist, a man she met on a chat line:

Mercedes: I meet this guy on a chat line, and when we actually went up to meet,

he said, uhm, oh, you know, he said you. . . . . He told me I was bigger than what I

had described, which I never lied; he said, oh, I just didn't expect uhm, he told me

I was bigger than Latifah. Okay, whatever. . . . . But then later on he said that,

uhm, he said, "you know what, you not like other big girls, you know, most big

girls," this guy was Black and Puerto Rican, he had green eye bla bla bla, he was

like, "well most big girl really, you know, they wanna do everything I tell uhm to

do, they wanna do everything I want," he said, "you're not like that." Damn right.

ADP: [*laughs*]

Mercedes: Just because I'm big doesn't mean you can take advantage of me.

This is another example of the ways in which objects of desire and the community acceptance

narratives limit agency. Considering the self-esteem myth, would a woman with high self-

esteem, as Mercedes professes to have, seek relationships online as a normal practice? Was

Mercedes hiding her true size? This may be representative of a larger issue. Although online

dating is becoming common practice today, it would be interesting discussion to see how many

large African American women take this avenue so they can get men to appreciate their

personality before seeing their size. The gentleman that met Merecedes obviously felt he was

misled. In addition, if her self-esteem was high, the way he spoke to her upon their first visit was

disrespectful but she continues with the relationship. Not only does Mercedes stay in the

relationship, but she is still treated as a sex object, not as an object of desire.

Another woman, Octavia, also tries to live within expected limits. Octavia is a high

school graduate and a mother; she has diabetes and the highest BMI of all the women in the

study. Octavia attempts to position herself favorably in relation to the B4 narrative:

Octavia: Oh, never was a issue with me, m-no, not ashamed [*laughs*].You know, I

mean, I used to like, okay, turn, keep the lights out or whatever. Uhm say that

part, but, I had gotten used to whoever I was with, you know what I'm saying, as

long as I'm comfortable, and we comfortable, so, you know, I never had problem

with that, in that department.

Although Octavia attempts to position herself favorably, she still admits to turning the lights out

during sex, again, hiding her body. Octavia does not hide behind a computer, but with the

bedroom lights erases her body because she is embarrassed by its size. Later on Octavia explains:

Octavia: To be truthful, sometimes, it can put you in a deep depression, for some

people, but not for me. When I get like that in a little mode sometimes, I may just

sit down and talk to my mom or, you know, pray. I do a lot of prayer, so that

helps.

Like so many interviews, Octavia's was filled with contradictions. On the one end, Octavia says

it can put someone in a deep depression, for some people, but not her, and then she goes on to

say, "When I get like that I talk to my mom and do a lot of prayer." Riessman (1993) discusses

the question of being truthful to oneself:

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate,

become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths . . . Unlike

the Truth of the scientfic ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to

proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation,

paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world

views that inform them. (p. 22)

Riessman's (1993) perspective provides a context for considering the ways in which Octavia's

contradition or "lie" reveals the powerful constraints of the B4 narrative. Her talk about the deep

depression of unnamed others most likely refers to herself. And the way that she fights her

depression is through confiding in her mother and through prayer. That would mean that Octavia
is not seeking treatment for what may be depression linked to her weight issues but in this
interview she established a clear link between the two. In fact, the women in my study who had
issues in the bedroom, and even the ones that claimed they did not, all had constraining
experiences related to their weight. Women like Jill and Jalicia completely avoid relationships
because of their bodies. Africa reluctantly gives a couple of her bedroom stories, and the first one
is about her former Nigerian husband:

> Africa: And uhm, when you are in a relationship, at least you want to share how
> you feel with whoever you are in a relationship with. Unfortunately, my case,
> there was no support.
>
> ADP: No support from your husband?
>
> Africa: 'Cause all I am hearing is you should lose weight; if you reduce weight,
> you won't be having all these health problems.
>
> ADP: So would you say that your weight ended your marriage or was apart of
> that?
>
> Africa: Ah, it was one of the excuses that he gave, but I don't think that's the
> main issue. But when somebody don't want something, they uses anything to get
> out of relationship. So in this case, it's one of the excuses that he gave, in addition
> to other things.
>
> ADP: Do you think you are being honest with yourself to say that it wasn't a main
> issue?
>
> Africa: No, a yes, I have been, I am honest with myself. It is not the main issues.

ADP: Okay.

Africa: Because I say it affect us, it does not mean we don't have sex; it just, it was not, it was not an issue the first year, the second year. Then after that it becoming an issue then affected the relationship. You know, when he was not having an affair it was not an issue. The day an affair come in, you see the weight is becoming an issue.

ADP: Did the affair happen after you gained weight?

Africa: Ahhhh, it's been there. I just was not paying that much attention. I guess, focusing more on outside, seems to be happening more, like he ah, always have a relationship outside. He focused, he focused more on my weight so he will be staying outside more, so, affair has been there; it's his nature, it just what he wants to do.

ADP: So your weight affected how your husband perceived you and you think he thought

of you?

Africa: Yes.

Like Mercedes, Africa also began dating men online after her divorce. The men they both met were typically from out of town.

Africa: Oh, I'm not gonna talk about that one.

ADP: No one will know who you are, just me.

Africa: Okay, when I, the relationship I tried to, after seven years of divorce, go back in a relationship. And uhm, I've always been attracted to skinny guys, and

most of the people I dated I have always been skinny, male. During sex, I was really uncomfortable because of my weight. So, this is even after seven years. This is the fact that I had lost some weight, I'm wearing a, I've dropped two dress sizes, I'm still uncomfortable. 'Cause I did not see myself with a flat stomach, what have you. And it, it affected me, like, [*inaudible*] divorced for seven years. I mean, it's time for me to start dating, but because of my weight I'm like, I'm too fat, I don't feel like it will be, you know, yeah.

ADP: You said this to someone?

Africa: At least that is one of the, the guy when we were talking was like, mmm, it would be nice if you lose some pounds.

ADP: Who said that, a guy that you were thinking about dating said that?

Africa: Mhum, that I slept with, recently, so, anyway.

ADP: You did sleep with the guy?

Africa: Mhum, I told you, you know. But it's only once. During the Thanksgiving. The guy didn't come back for Christmas. Are you taping this?

ADP: Yes, but only I hear this, Africa. Nobody hears this Africa, nobody else, nobody, just me; I guarantee you 100%, nobody will hear this ever. I'm so serious, please trust me.

Africa: Okay, he was not even that good in bed.

ADP: Did he tell you this before or after?

Africa: After. After.

ADP: Did you find that he expected you to be a certain way because you were

overweight, or did you think that didn't make a difference?

Africa: It didn't make a difference. I don't know what's his problem. He said he's used to dating big women; however, because most of my weight are in my belly, it's not proportionate.

ADP: So he likes big women that are in proportion?

Africa: Yeah, in proportion. So, based on one of the thing, and you know you, when you still having sex, it allows you to exercise your stomach, what have you. So, anyway, so that's on one of the ideas, one of the things. What else can I tell you.

Africa's story is a very common one, however, her story is not often told. This story is often kept secret just as Jill's weight loss struggle was. Sexual intimacy is the most secretive and potentially threatening narrative of all. And one in which, if large African American women would be honest with themselves and with others, the damaging aspects of the B4 narrative can be exposed. But first, we have to be honest with ourselves. When I asked Africa if she was being honest with herself concerning the effect her weight had on her failed marriage, she said no at first, and then she said yes. Africa thought that her weight was more of an excuse for her husband to have an affair. This is how Africa struggles between the binary of the B4 culture, telling her that her weight was not the problem versus her social reality that the woman her husband had an affair with, was thin. Africa's weight was an issue and her husband was not supportive of her and pressured her about losing weight.

Africa waited seven years before deciding to go online and start looking for companionship. She had lost weight but sex was still uncomfortable for her and for the man she

met online. After they met and had sex, he mentioned that it would be nice if she would lose weight. He never came back again. Africa, like many of the other women, was very reluctant to have me talk about these kinds of issues. But as much as it hurts, they are the kinds of stories that need to be told to expose the oppressive narratives for large African American women. Africa, like the other women, tried to make light of the situation and explained how having sex was like exercising your stomach. Nevertheless, the bedroom narrative is so strong that people actually believe that large African American women are objects of desire and do not consider their weight a factor in relationships.

Large African American women try to live between the tensions of thinking that large black women are desirable versus their desire to be thinner, healthier, more attractive and more sociable. They often make light of the situation in an attempt to reposition themselves in a more positive light, instead of facing the hard and hurtful truth in the bedroom.

Africa, like so many other of these objectified women live with enormous shame about these experiences, yet they are the victims. This is another example of why it is easier to live by the B4 subjectivity, rather than face this social reality.

These women experience embarrassment and shame as they try to live within the structural binary of the B4 versus their lived experience. As much as they tried to hide it, the hurt and pain were clear as they talked with a smile on their face. Unless we expose the oppressive power of these B4 narratives, large African American women will live forever with these burdens, especially in terms of sexual intimacy, the most difficult part of the interviews. Each excerpt demonstrates the limited interpretations available for the large African American female identity.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), when individuals try to make sense out their experience, the social construction theory provides an explanation of why such contradictions occur. They occur because there is little space in which these individuals can talk about their experiences.

> In order to maintain subjective reality effectively, the conversational apparatus
>
> must be continual and consistent. Disruptions of continuity or consistency ipso
>
> facto posit a threat to the subjective reality in question. . . .subjective reality is
>
> thus always dependent upon specific plausibility structures, that is, the specific
>
> social base and social processes required for its maintenance. (p. 154)

They go on to say:

> Since every individual is confronted with essentially the same institutional
>
> program for his life in the society, the total force of the institutional order is
>
> brought to bear with more or less equal weight on each individual, producing a
>
> compelling massivity for the objective reality to be internalized. . . . Put simply,
>
> everyone pretty much is what he is supposed to be. In such a society identities are
>
> easily recognizable, objectively and subjectively. Everyone knows who
>
> everybody else is and who he is himself. (p. 164)

Berger and Luckmann (1966) help us understand the ways in which the B4 subjectivity—including the four patterns presented through these narrative analyses—is the conversational apparatus that is continual and consistent in the lives of large African American women. The disruptions they talk about are the contradictions within their stories that lie between the binaries

of the B4 versus their social reality. It is because their social reality depends upon the specific plausible structure of the B4 that their agency and identity are limited.

Continuing with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) framework, this could explain how every large African American woman is confronted with the same institutional program—the B4 narrative—for her life in society. The power that this narrative has on specific individuals is dependent upon the woman's weight (i.e., BMI $\leq$ 30). In other words, the power of the B4 is stronger for large African American women that are considered obese, severally obese, or morbidly obese. This means the women in these categories tend to retreat to the B4 subjectivity more because they are where they are "supposed" to be and thus, their oppression becomes internalized.

These narratives reveal the power of the B4 structure and its limitations on those affected by it. Because of this, their identity is limited and constrained within the confines of a B4 structure produced by past racist ideologies.

Analysis

The Fattening Room

The "fattening room" is a West African rite of passage for adolescent girls, who spend anywhere from three months to two years dependent upon tribal affiliation isolated from others (Brink, 1989). These young girls are not allowed to have contact with anyone, especially men, because of the superstitious belief that if they did, they would become thin. Living in such seclusion was an attempt to help the girls become women, with developing breasts and a menstrual cycle being seen as evidence of success. It can also be viewed as a practice intended to advance the species by providing the best community incubator for women of child-bearing age.

Eating several large meals a day, almost by force, they are able to get plenty of rest and are bathed and massaged daily (Brink, 1989). In addition, their task is to learn how to become successful wives, which includes cooking and home-making duties that range from how to wear makeup to how to be frugal with finances, and anything else they need to know in order to please their husbands and mothers-in-law and to rear children (Brink, 1989).

This ritual is typically something only wealthy families can provide. These traditions are usually held in poverty-stricken regions of the country, and this room is a luxury and privilege that most of the local tribes can not afford. Thus, relatively speaking, the end results of gaining weight signify wealth and beauty. This practice is not widespread but it still exists in certain tribes today. In other tribes, these places are called "fattening houses."

The "Fattening House" as Metaphor and Analytical Framework

Although there are differences between West African and American cultures, the idea of the fattening house still offers a useful framework or model for understanding and analyzing the lives and cultural practices of American women—including the ones studied here.

The evidence provided through narrative analysis of testimony of twenty large African American women suggests American society, including its mediated culture, has confined these women through a sociological "fattening house" that has been further perverted by slavery and racism. The net result has stripped black women of their collective agency, once available through their African customs and communities, and replaced it with social structures that distort their cultural heritage and also isolate individual women to further reduce their relative power in society.

As is typical for oppressive social structures, the objects of oppression, in this case the large African American woman, are unaware of these fattening social structures. The result, as we see in the narratives, is a split between perceptions of themselves as individuals and their lived experiences. The dynamic of the interview narrative in effect help researcher and subject form a mini-community in which it was safe, on many subjects, to discuss these deeply personal issues.

The fundamental difference, though, between the cultural practice of the fattening house and the imposition of American social structures on African American women, is rooted in the transition to slavery. We can assume that at least some cultural practices and traditions traveled from Africa with slaves, including ideas about fattening women for child-bearing. This information, though, was instantly distorted when viewed through the lens of the slave owner.

Everything we know about slavery suggests efforts to colonize and disintegrate the sense of community among Africans in America and to isolate individuals. If a young woman in Africa enjoyed the collective security of being accepted into her community of older women while being groomed for marriage and child rearing, she was stripped of that social support once she became someone's property.

If fattening a young woman was thought desirable by the African community or by African men, the practice was also embedded within a larger cultural framework associated with other social components. In America, however, the goal was singularly economic—fattening meant child-bearing, which translated into more property and workers for the owner.

Just as a big, strong African man was prized as a worker but ridiculed as a man, the large, nurturing African woman was prized as both a worker and producer of offspring, but ridiculed for being fat, oversexed or immoral.

The fattening house framework helps us see not only a possible explanation for a cultural belief system favoring largeness in African American women, but it also provides a benchmark for comparing the difference between a social support system in one's home culture (Africa) versus being isolated and oppressed in another culture (America). Many of the women providing testimony for this study confirm that sense of isolation and the patterns of their testimony illustrate the split between self-perceptions and the reality of their lived experiences.

The evidence in this chapter helps us understand how America has erected its own metaphorical fattening house as an ideological, socio-cultural construction of large African American female subjectivities. These subjectivities have their roots in old racist notions of the black female body as seen in the unruly spectacle of Hottentot Venus, in the overweight and

dowdy Mammy figure and in the highly sexual Jezebel. On the basis of the narratives collected here, though, we can further subdivide this house into categories, or "rooms," that reflect the different aspects of what large African American women are thinking and feeling about their bodies and their relationships with others.

The fattening house for the Big, Black, Beautiful Body (B4) can be viewed as having four rooms that sustain the prevailing ideological narratives that hold the structure in place. Both the foundation and framework of this analytical model help explain the ways in which U.S. narratives of large African American women, past and present, have built and sustained this powerful structure.

The socio-cultural implications of this are seen in the narrative interpretations embedded within the cultural resources and artifacts controlled by those with the power to construct the fattening house. This is achieved in part by promoting such ideology in film, television, literature and academic articles. However, the significance of media, while great, is not nearly as oppressive for the women as the lived experiences are within their own families that are also influenced by the B4 ideologies.

According to Brink (1989), the Nigerian fattening room is typically in the father's house and I suggest that the African American family perpetuates the metaphorical fattening house in America. As discussed in chapter 2, studies report that large African American women have cultural protection when it comes to weight. Although this idea is beginning to be challenged, this notion remains prevalent (Poran, 2006). This chapter shows the ways in which the African American family's support is seen through the perceptions of these large African American women.

Four Patterns—Four "Rooms"

The four categories, or "rooms," that emerge as patterns within these narratives are esteem (which we can equate with the living room); self-control (the kitchen), community acceptance (the family room) and objects of desire (the bedroom).

The living room is where the B4 subjectivity resides the most. It lives there and it is the first room that you enter when you walk into the fattening house. This esteem room is the first room large African American women go to for strength because this is where high body esteem and self-esteem myths reside. She goes here when she needs a boost and puts on the B4 mask in order to pretend that she has it all together and is not bothered by bombarding representations of thin women in fashion magazines or on television.

The kitchen is where she does not have to practice self-control over what she eats because her self-esteem and body esteem are so high. She can eat what she wants and not worry about what others think, so she goes into the kitchen to enjoy her food.

After eating she can go spend time with her family and even eat more. Besides many of her family members are big and food, family and fun are what life is all about.

After a long day of singing, laughing and being jolly, the large African American woman prepares for bed. The final room of the day where her desirable body lays to rest and she can serve her boyfriend or husband's every need. Her Big, Black and Beautiful Body never has to worry about her relationship because she is loved and wanted by black men who love her large body. At least, this is my interpretation of the stories or narratives surrounding the fattening house.

As the protagonist, the large African American female's agency is in deciding how to live within the confines of these rooms. The conflict here is that her agency is limited within the rooms of the fattening house because alternate identities are not available to her. Ironically, experiences that contradict rooms within the fattening house create a constitutive absence or erasure of her lived experience. By constitutive absence I mean that the power and prevalence of the B4 narratives in American culture prevent not only her but others in society, including family, friends, health care experts and strangers alike, from identifying her large body outside of the B4 subjectivity.

This creates an automatic *erasure* of her experience because it prevents the large African American woman (and all those around her) from seeing her as anything other than someone who loves her Big, Black and Beautiful Body. For example, talk show host Oprah Winfrey recently did a show on puppy mills. Puppy mills have dogs in cages solely for the purposes of breeding unless someone rescues them. They live within the confines of this small cage. As such, they have no other outlook on life because they are not allowed to leave this cage. In fact, ones that were rescued could not walk because they had never learned and did not have the ability to walk on their own.

My point is not to compare large African American women to animals. Instead, it is to represent the ways in which one that is confined to a specific experience or space does not have the ability to grow outside of such a limited environment. As long as large African American women are not allowed to see themselves or experience life outside of the fattening house, they are constrained. The rooms represent the limited context in which they can "choose" to have an identity.
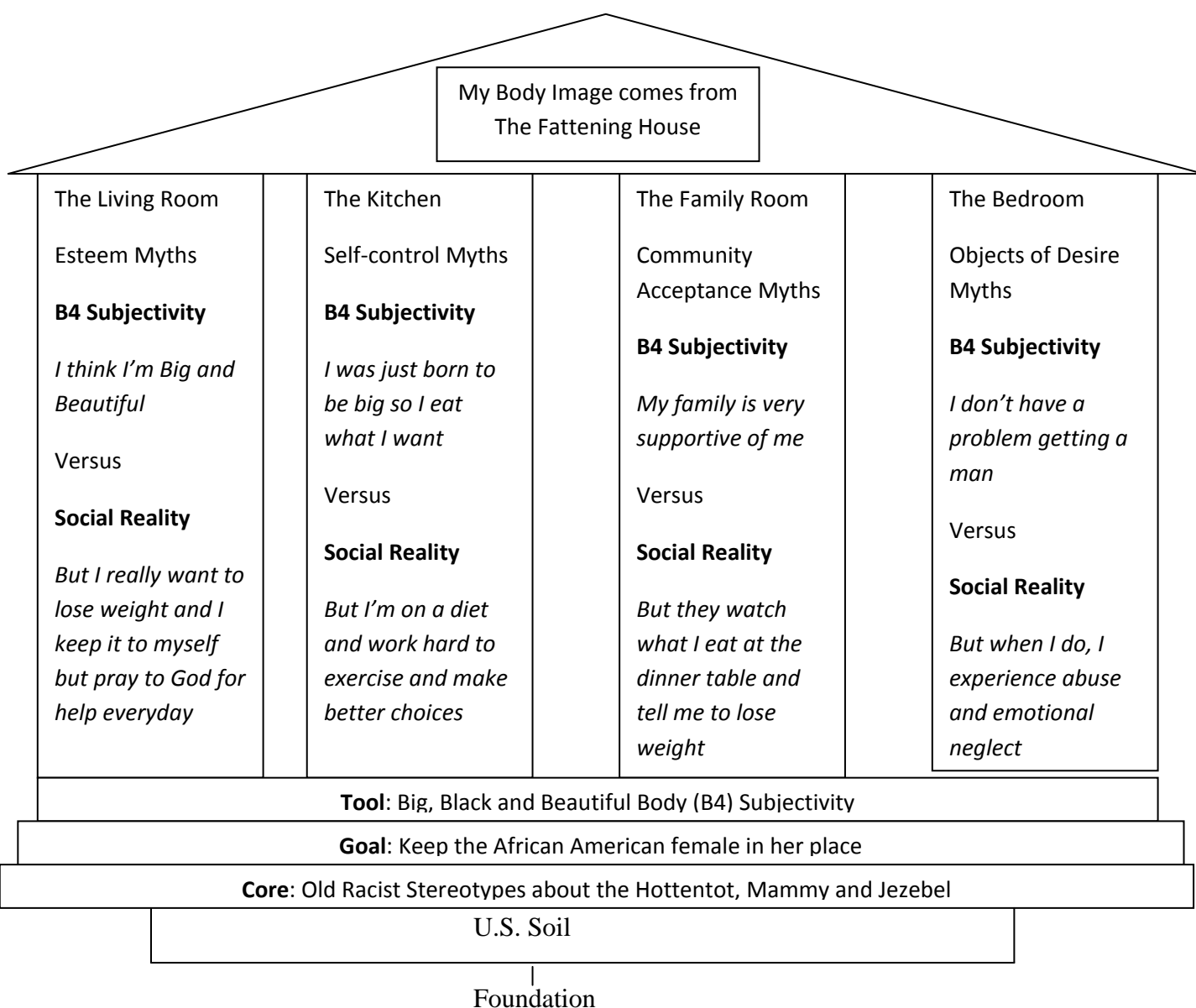
As it stands, agency for a large African American woman occurs when she reframes herself within the context of the fattening house. Reframing in this sense is "a strategy of repositioning oneself to one's own advantage" (Lu & Ahrens, 2008, p. 385). Consequently, the large African American woman is made "other" even in this repositioning of her limited identity because it is contingent upon the fattening house's rooms, or narratives about the B4 subjectivity.

The metaphorical fattening house demonstrates the ways in which she is born and locked into a specific identity. There are so few options that it is very difficult for her to step outside of the fattening house. This house is so powerful and prevalent that large African American women need to go through the process of decolonization in order to step outside of this fattening house. Moreover, even with decolonization the house remains for so many that live within the constraints of the fattening house as well as those in society that believe its ideology.

Therefore, as more individuals become aware of the fattening house, they must be advocates for its destruction. One goal of this study is for large African American women to have the freedom to assert their agency based on their own lived experience instead of consistently repositioning themselves between the binary of the B4 structure and their social reality. And for those in society who contribute to her oppression to judge her based on individual character rather than generalizing her based on fattening house narratives.

If Berger and Luckmann (1966) claim that "identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society," (p. 174) large African American women are stuck between society's narratives about the fattening house versus their social reality. As such, one can suggest that dialectal tensions exist when individual identity is in conflict with the one society portrays. These dialectical tensions function through the four myths presented in this

dissertation with the esteem myth as the most pervasive part of its structure. The following is a visual representation to further demonstrate how this structure functions in society and in the lives of large African American women.

My Body Image comes from
The Fattening House

The Living Room

Esteem Myths

B4 Subjectivity

I think I'm Big and Beautiful

Versus

Social Reality

But I really want to lose weight and I keep it to myself but pray to God for help everyday

The Kitchen

Self-control Myths

B4 Subjectivity

I was just born to be big so I eat what I want

Versus

Social Reality

But I'm on a diet and work hard to exercise and make better choices

The Family Room

Community Acceptance Myths

B4 Subjectivity

My family is very supportive of me

Versus

Social Reality

But they watch what I eat at the dinner table and tell me to lose weight

The Bedroom

Objects of Desire Myths

B4 Subjectivity

I don't have a problem getting a man

Versus

Social Reality

But when I do, I experience abuse and emotional neglect

Tool: Big, Black and Beautiful Body (B4) Subjectivity

Goal: Keep the African American female in her place

Core: Old Racist Stereotypes about the Hottentot, Mammy and Jezebel

U.S. Soil

Foundation

The intention of this graph is to give a visual representation of the constraints of the fattening house in the lives of African American women. It also demonstrates the ways in which things that go on within the house can remain behind closed doors, secrets of pain and shame. The

women that live in this house live on a continuum of fat and as such are more or less affected by the power of this house. The earth or the ground of the fattening house in the U.S. is planted on old racist stereotypes of Hottentot, Mammy and Jezebel, and these narratives function to support or undergird the B4 subjectivity. In this house, the rooms coincide with themes that emerged in the interviews. The fattening house is a useful metaphor to show the ways in which the narratives of large African American women constrain their identities.

Moreover, this chart shows the Master Narrative of the B4 Subjectivity as functioning in three distinct ways. The B4 subjectivity manifests itself through the proliferation of narratives in society that suggest the large African American woman is big and proud with Queen Latifah's larger than life persona at the forefront. Next, there are negotiated identities or ways in which large African American women claim a learned agency. Finally, there are their lived experiences that fall outside the realm of the B4 subjectivity. However, as the master narrative proliferates in society, we still have to live within the structure.

Conclusion

In sum, first we have the constitutive subjectivity based on past racist stereotypes that are reproduced in society. To make matters worse, large African American women in this study buy into this identity as something positive and promote it during social interactions. In fact, when these women are asked directly if they have high self-esteem, they generally say yes because this is the only subjectivity they have to identify with as large black women. Therefore, even though their lived experiences tell otherwise, they still strive to uphold this positive stereotype even if it is not representative of their social reality. Their stories reveal that the high self-esteem master narrative is a means to an end, not the end itself. These women do not automatically have high

self-esteem because they are large African American women, but because society teaches them that they are supposed to, they find ways to navigate this subjectivity and hence live to fulfill the positive stereotype.

These stories and the fattening house framework demonstrate what is at stake for large African American women and society. The fattening house depersonalizes social interaction for the large African American female because it leads to others make assumptions about their subjectivity. This fattening house subjectivity limits personal growth for large African American women because they believe they are born too big and therefore live within these constraints, instead of looking for alternative ways of living. In addition, when large African American women look for alternative ways of living, they tend to be isolated and do not have access to other social networks that can assist them. The fattening house unfortunately justifies unfair treatment of large African American women in very public and private ways that have been exposed in this dissertation.

Consider the way Ebony and Jalicia were treated in public and compare it to the way that Mercedes and Africa were treated by men. The impact of the way these women were treated was not only unfair but without human compassion because society believes that each lives within the fattening house happily. Therefore, others felt justified in treating the large African American female body in ways that support the fattening house's narratives. These conditions are oppressive and raise public policy questions in a country that advocates for the fair treatment of women and other minorities.

This dissertation exposes these conditions to make a better life for large African American women so they can begin to assert their own agency free from the fattening house

structure. Women like Jill should be able to walk down the street or go into a gym without the fear of the condemning remarks of the fattening house subjectivity that wants to keep her in her place. I would like to end this chapter with the words of participants who wanted readers to understand certain things about large African American women.

> Cassandra: That we're beautiful, uhm, that, you know, we come in all different sizes within our plus size range and that our bodies are different, and, you know, uhm, that we're different, that all, plus size women, plus size African American women, are not alike, and I think that sometimes we are portrayed as, you know, overbearing, starved out, ah, you know, like I just wanna eat, I just gotta eat. So, uhm, so that's what I would want people to know, that, that plus size African American women, that we're a force to be reckoned with. Don't sweat on us. That's pretty much it, that's pretty much it, don't sweep on the plus size chick.
>
> Precious: The bigger the woman, the bigger the heart. Ah, 'cause you can run up to grandma, you can run up to her with any situation, grandma be like, it's okay baby, you know, so uhm, I think the bigger the woman, the bigger the heart. Especially black women because they've had to deal with more, it cost more to be black, so, you know, they have to, deal with more stuff, ah, different things, ah, like oppression or whatever. Ah, I think we should gravitate toward black women and protect women, instead of pushing uhm away. And to to me, ah, fat black women make excellent wives 'cause you know you ain't gone get hungry [*laughs*] you're never gonna go hungry.

Laqueinta: I would like people to know that we're just humans like everybody else. We have soul, we have emotions, we have needs, we have everything else everyone else has. Just because we are bigger, just because we are portrayed as people who eat all the time and who are lazy and all this stuff, it's not true. I mean it could be true [*laughs*] for some people, but it's not true for me, and uhm, yeah, we're all human, and that's it.

Some participants had advice for other African American women:

Danielle: I would want people to know, to, to, not take for granted, that you are overweight. And, don't just think that you can just, eat and eat and eat; just because you already large that doesn't mean that you can't just stay the same or even lose some. And, uhm, be happy with yourself; don't go to the point where you're so mad at yourself for being overweight that you do things that just may just kill your self-esteem and may end up, you know, [*pause*] uhm, doing some, some damage, damage to yourself, so.

Bertise: I, I think people should be more accepting of themselves first of all, you know, and that we're all human, and there's a variety of everything; nothing is or was supposed to be all the same. 'Cause then there would be no intrigue [*laughs*]. So, and a person should not let society dictate to them personally how they should look or how much they should weigh. Because to me, that's an impossible thing. You know, ah, me as a black woman, I never wanted to look like Barbie, I didn't let my kids play with Barbie, because this is not a replica of who you are; you know, you an individual, you are special and beautiful the way you are.

And others found this interview therapeutic:

> ADP: Do you have any questions for me?
>
> Octavia: No, this is interesting because I'm learning about myself and what I need to do and what I should be doing [*laughs*]. And then what I have accomplished, what I have, you know, as losing the weight, I, I have noticed, and and you feel a lot better, yeah.
>
> ADP: Okay, well, that's it then.

I included these remarks because during the interviews the women were very intent on giving advice to other large African American women. Consider what this advice suggests. For example, Merecedes said that if large African American women did not stick together that we wouldn't make it. Why would she make such a comment if her "living large and loving it" subjectivity was coming from of a place of love and happiness? These women were trying to help other women make better choices as they lived within the constraints of the fattening house. They were trying to help them make a better life for themselves by accepting the fattening house because it is easier. On the other hand, they were also encourging them, as Danielle did, to take a look at their eating habits and realize that they can have some self-control. And finally, I added these because, as Octavia mentioned, honest self reflection about her weight helped her realize that she had been trying and accomplished positive results at times during her weight struggle, so the interview was therapeutic.

Part of what happens in the fattening house is that you feel the weight of oppression, and that weight is the physical bodily sensation and presence of fat that reminds you that you are in the house. Not only does that weight remind you but so do others in society that make comments

or treat you based on your recognizable large African American female body. What happens then, is that a great deal of your idenity is attached to that body and you are not sure how to function without the weight of your body and all the narratives that follow it. In fact, the way people automatically accept you as loving and nurturing is not a negative experience. However, it is negative when they expect you to be that way all of the time and if you happen to have a bad day you are a bitch or are dangerous. Being seen as a sexual woman is not a negative thing because it is a part of human nature. However, when you are seen as an animal that will do anything for a man in order to have a limited amount of affection, it is negative. And it is certainly not negative for people to assume that you have high self-esteem and love your body. However, when the reverse is true and others are rude to you because they think you have a "priviledged" positive subject position, it is a negative experience.

As these women struggle between the binaries of fat oppression and their social reality they still want to change it for other people, just as I do. That is why this study is important, so the women in these interviews and others like them can realize their oppression and fight against it. It is also to help those in society that feel justified in the horrible ways in which they treat large African American women, to realize that it is wrong. Many people think they are doing the large African American female a favor when they point out their so called "priviledged" subject position, as Cassandra's doctors did. Or, consider how Ebony's elder lady in the grocery store pointed out that she needed to lose weight, as if Ebony didn't know and in the most offensive way.

As hooks (2002) says, all feminists should fight against any form of oppression and refute them. It is my hope that the fattening house is a convincing metaphor that explains the

oppression of large African American women as revealed in their narratives. There are other ways I could have explained their stories but the powerful nature of a house that is not easily torn down demonstrates the strength of such a structure. The fattening house is as powerful as any house and until now, it has been invisible with locked in narratives about large African American women. Now she and others in America can realize that this house, this oppresive structure, is metaphorically material in the lives of the large African American women so things can begin to change.

CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Marty: I had lost weight before, about 25 pounds. But then I end up gaining it

back, uhm, because my, my overweight-ness comes from emotional eating. When

I can't cope, when I get nervous, my response is to eat, my way out is to eat. . . . I

used to stuff myself and stuff my emotions so I didn't have to feel pain or any,

feel any type of negative emotion. I would eat and like stuff myself, and so when I

was like full stuffed, I couldn't feel nothing but being fully stuffed [*laughs*] . . . .

And, I, and I feel like, this, like my heaviness, [*Marty uses her hands and arms as

a clasp to give attention to her full body*] like my weight has been, it's it's it's

over, it's kinda like, got, the real me trapped.

ADP: Who is the real you?

Marty: When I say the real me trapped, I mean like the vibrant, risk taking,

unafraid, not really concerned about what people think. Because I noticed that

when I started to lose weight, I, I felt totally different. I felt like there was a

person, there was a woman on the inside of me tryin' a get out. I felt totally

different, I felt sexy, and I had lost 25 pounds, I felt sexy, I felt more desirable,

you know, I just, I felt totally different. I felt totally different.

Marty expresses here how her embodied experiences of entrapment constrain her agency. The

real woman inside of Marty who came out when she lost weight is the person whom she believes

is her true essence. Unfortunately, her weight, along with society's condemnation of the large

black body, prevents her from being her true self in society. This is similar to the experiences of

Africa who has to "feel out" individuals to see how they respond to her issues with weight before

getting close to them. Marty's erased agency is not uncommon to the women in my dissertation. This is the most significant consequence, not being able to express or be themselves based on their physical body. This is not an uncommon experience for women with weight struggles and body image concerns, regardless of their ethnicity. However, the absence of these stories from this specific population of large African American women creates an even heavier burden of erasure. The burden of keeping on a social mask to portray a false subjectivity leads to erasure, but also to a life of loneliness. This is not loneliness in the traditional sense—she may have friends and relatives around her; she may even be in a relationship—but the woman she is supposed to be is not represented by the life she lives.

Dissertation Summary

Current research trends have not fully explored the representation of large African American women. Traditionally, critical cultural scholars have examined past racial stereotypes including depictions of how the Hottentot Venus, Mammy and Jezebel are continually reconstructed. The focus on these racist stereotypes does not account for how such representations influence and affect those in U.S. culture who bear a resemblance to these prototypes. The other research trend that my dissertation highlights is body image. Body image researchers do not account for past racist stereotypes of the large African American female body. However, a crucial link is established between past stereotypes and body image scholars' implicit re-presentation of the Big, Black and Beautiful Body subjectivity.

The primary aim of my research was to find out how large African American women perceive their large bodies in relationship to society, in addition to how those concepts sustain, reinforce or re-create past racist stereotypes. Using narrative analysis, I evaluated more than two

hundred single-spaced pages of data transcription on the lived experiences of twenty large African American women. Interview data revealed that African American women do, in fact, suffer from weight prejudice and have struggles with body image and body esteem. It also revealed that their portrayal of high self-esteem is drawn from their reliance on the only identity available to them in society, the Big, Black and Beautiful Body subjectivity. Their stories reflect what it is like to live under the shadow of past and present racist conceptions, which are critiqued by critical cultural scholars and implicitly reinforced with the help of body image scholars. These two research traditions are open to question.

The population/sample demographic of quantitative researchers is too narrow, and their reliance on BMI should be reconsidered. Critical cultural researchers' quest to deconstruct media representations will remain a significant area of study but these analysts need to talk to people in order to balance their assertions with the abstracted media criticism they make. My study includes a type of woman not represented in these two traditions. As such, this is one of the first purely qualitative analyses using narrative analysis to explore the stories of large African American women. More significantly, these narratives bring to light binary structures that limit the identities of large black women (i.e., B4 subjectivity or social reality).

My data chapter begins by presenting a historical Nigerian custom called the fattening room, a ritual for only the privileged few in an area where poverty was the norm. Adolescent girls were fattened as rites of passage into womanhood, a custom seen as desirable. However, the projection of this desirable fattened body into the African American community has been taken out of context as the fattening house was relevant to individuals who inhabited a particular space in history.

In chapter 4, I situate the Big, Black and Beautiful Body, or B4, as the constitutive subjectivity or building of the fattening house, as metaphor. The story as metaphor helps us understand how hegemonic forces started building this conceptual fattening house (B4 subjectivity) with the institution of slavery at its roots. These forces used communication devices, such as ads, books, film and tv, to create an "othered" status of the black body. This same foundation built the fattening house.

After the foundation of the house is built, I consider the framework. My framework is made out of wooden beams because my intention is to help burn this oppressive house to the ground. Therefore, while the foundation represents past racist conceptions of black womanhood (i.e., the Hottentot Venus, Mammy, Jezebel), the framework is made up of the re-created or camouflaged past and present narratives about black womanhood that sustain the foundation of this house.

Inside this house are the women's stories that demonstrate the ways in which this house is an oppressive structure. Their in-depth interviews reveal the four rooms that explain how the fattening house constrains the agency of these women by demanding they position themselves in relation to it. As they try to reposition themselves within their narrative stories, dialectical tensions, or the simultaneous resistance and sustaining of the fattening house, result.

Implications

The implications of these stories reveal that the master narratives position large African American women as responsible for their own subjugated status in society. When sociocultural narratives of the large African American female subjectivity are so deeply embedded in their identity as well as the social spaces, they go unquestioned. This way, the racist and sexist forces

that constrain them are not held accountable for this oppression. As these narratives become more engrained in society, the large African American females' agency continues to be constrained, leaving them trapped in their bodies and fixed in the rooms of oppression (the fattening house).

Another implication of this study is the ways in which the master narratives are historically significant vehicles that recreate racist notions of black womanhood. The Mammy stays in the kitchen, the Jezebel remains in the bedroom, and the Hottentot Venus still has to walk up and down those narrow stairs as commanded, while others spit and poke at her obnoxious body because she "shouldn't be so big." Today the large African American female subjectivity has remnants from all three of these historical icons and, as shown in this dissertation, has been mistreated as a result. As long as large African American women have to assert bodily agency that stems from the subject positions of racist stereotypes, they remain in the fattening house. Unfortunately, they suffer as a result of trying to live up to this "positive" (but really negative) stereotype. It may sound good or seem cool when large African American women assert agency by holding up the Big, Black and Beautiful Body structure; however, their social reality, as Jill put it, "sucks." Jalicia also comments on living between the binary:

> Jalicia: I just wish people would realize that people that are overweight, they, just don't be so quick to judge. Don't label, don't stereotype. Because how would you feel, if, if, somebody makes fun of something about you, and it's not true. It's interesting how, we have these things where, we're being sensitive to gays' rights or disabilities or even sexual harassment, but you can still come out and say, this person is fat!

The women in my dissertation live between a binary set up by a social system. What they hide are their dieting status and feelings of discontentment with excess weight. By doing this they deprive themselves of loving relationships, dealing with depression on their own, and denying their own pain. Jill talked about how she would rather not say anything about her dieting status because if she fails, she will face ridicule and constant monitoring of her food. She told me a story about her mother hiding cake from her after she had lost weight. Another time during her birthday outing, everyone in the family let her know when she had had enough to eat. So, after that, she went back to medical weight loss to go through the detoxification phase, in which it is possible to lose ten or more pounds in less than a week.

This leads to another implication of the fattening house, that learning proper eating habits is essential so these women do not have to go on fad diets, which research shows only work short term. Lack of proper information not only leads to dangerous fad diets but also to instances like Cookie's who describes what she considers good eating habits:

Cookie: I eat really good during the week, but on the weekends it's when I may be eatin' bad. Like I pack lunch every day for the simple fact that I only have a half hour lunch. So when I get up in the morning I have the Dole jars of, uhm, grapefruit, I may eat like 2 or 3 of those grapefruits out of there, I may, I always gotta have my water in the morning and a tall glass of grapefruit juice. Then I keep a, thing, tall thing of grapefruit juice like a jug at my desk. So, I drink those to suppress my hunger until lunch time. After lunch time I drink those to suppress my hunger. And then I come home. I get up at 9:30 at night, and I'll either drink

or eat a bowl of cereal, something like that. So during the week I eat good, in my

opinion, I think that is.

While Cookie is subjected to living up to the B4 structure, she does not go outside for diet and

nutrition. Living under the fattening house roof does not offer access or the priviledge to seek

alternative identities. There are no peers to help because they also live within the fattening house,

and when a woman attempts to diet, she often does it in isolation and perhaps with some

adequate information. Grapefruit juice has a lot of sugar. Even knowing the right things to eat

though, require community intervention and positive support.

Conseqently, when a woman lives within the fattening house and even her physicians

unknowingly uphold the strucuture, the information available to her is limited. For example,

Octavia has diabetes and is under a doctor's care; however, she did not know what a BMI scale

was or any concept of what a healthy weight for her would be. Elaine also has diabetes, and she

said that she has just accepted it because "it is here to stay," as she put it. So their diet and

deprivation attempts lead to depression and denial.

Depression is there because there does not seem to be a way out of the fattening house,

and since the women do not perceive a way out, they eat. The more they eat, the more depressed

they become and the more weight they gain. Then they stop looking at the scale and deny that

the weight problem even exists, until, of course, they have a health concern and have to maintain

a reasonable weight or suffer health risks. But Cookie explains that as long as she is comfortable,

can find nice clothes, and does not have health problems, she is fine. She lives in the denial the

fattening house allows, but her social reality tells another story.

The consequence of these results, then, is the limited personal growth of large African American women. They have no ability to name social reality because their identity is primarily constrained by the fattening house and their lived experience is typically erased. The gravest consequence they suffer is at the hands of others who watch them in the house and believe that they are actually happy being there. Their physical bodies automatically place them in the house. Just as the Hottentot was in the circus cage, the large African American female body is marked. As targets for social hate toward both fat and black, they become what Butler (1997) defines as "recognizable" (p. 5).

<div align="center">Implications for Future Research</div>

The family, the medical community and body image researchers can all become allies in the fight against the fattening house. The most significant influences on how these women viewed their body all came from family relationships. Special attention in this area is necessary in order to foster a positive identity rather than a stereotype for large African American women. In doing this, outreach efforts need to be extended to the black family to deal with the fattening house structure.

Just as significant, outreach efforts need to target the medical community. One way to begin is by creating a culturally relevant BMI scale that will have more realistic guidelines for people of different ethnicities and ages. Finally, comparison studies can be advocates for understanding how the fattening house functions without adding white women who live under a different and equally oppressive system.

More research is needed that focuses on the lived experiences of large African American women with specific attention to weight. This is a fruitful area for sociologists and psychologists

as well as nursing research. Since sociologists deal with the family unit; there can be studies aimed at understanding the dietary habits of the family. Psychologists can certainly do more in-depth interviews such as this one in order to understand and help these women deal with the struggle. It would be interesting to explore the ways in which college and depression play a part in their weight gain. Psychologists, along with nursing researchers, have already begun to explore the narratives of large African American women. With the recognition of the fattening house, more directed research toward the large African American female identity is warranted. The medical communities need more efforts to understand the influence and impact of physicians' counsel on eating disorders or weight issues. Critical cultural scholars can also take a more directed look at the identity formation of the large African American female. And finally, body image scholars need more research aimed at this very specific and valuable population. The fact that these women wanted to give advice or social and moral support to other women in their position speaks volumes. What is not said is that they obviously have a problem with their body image; otherwise, why would they have to "encourage" others? The words of wisdom that I listed near the end of chapter 4 were something that the women did on their own, and at first I could not make any sense of it. But in the end, I understand that they want to reach out to others like them, like us, in order to help them deal with the pressures of the fattening house. Mecedes said that big girls have to stick together; otherwise, we wouldn't make it.

The knowledge of the fattening house is freeing. I don't have to hate the fattening house, but understanding it allows me to teach others about its operation. The more society understands the fattening house, the more likely people will become curious about those who struggle within

it. The more curious we become about the structure, the more likely that alternative ways of

thinking about large African American women will surface.

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APPENDIX A

Recruiting Ad

African American Women: Just About Your Size Research Study Participants Needed! Are you a big girl? If so, I would like to know more about your experiences with weight in society. Please email or call me for more information at pdangel@bgnet.bgsu.edu (419) 353-4828. (Must Be Over 18)

Script via phone/email inquiry

Dear Potential Research Participant:

I am interested in talking to large African American women, age 18 or older, in order to get their personal life stories in relationship to their weight. I would like to do this because a lot of the body image or weight related research has very few if any large African American women in their studies. I think that it is wrong to make assumptions about African American women of all sizes from these studies. That is why I think your stories are important.

If you are interested in telling your story, please let me know. Once I have enough interested participants, I will contact all of you for a general meeting to go over any questions or concerns that you may have. If you are still interested at this point and meet the weight requirement, we can proceed to sign you up for the study and set up indiviual interview dates. Please leave the best way for me to contact you when I have recruited enough participants. Thank you for your time and interest in the study. I so look forward to meeting you and getting your stories.

Angela

APPENDIX B

Pre-Interview Demographic Questionaire

Name _____

Age _____

B.M.I. if known or height and weight _____

Place of birth _____

Permanent residence if student at BGSU _____

Contact information _____

APPENDIX C

Participant Chart

Alias: Original Interview order	Age	BMI	Education Level
Jill	35	37	MA
Africa	35	42	BA
Aiesha	38	30	AA
Henrietta	30	32	HS
Ebony	26	39	BA
Mercedes	30	48	BBA
Marty	31	39	MED
Octavia	38	53	HS
Gwendolyn	28	43	BA
Rita	28	37	BS
Danielle	19	37	HS
Cassandra	32	44	MA
Precious	28	45	HS
Laqueinta	21	49	HS
Mary	21	29	HS
Elaine	28	31	AA
Bertrise	57	30	GED
Cookie	24	47	BA
Shaniqua	26	45	HS
Jalicia	39	37	MA

Education Level Abbreviations:
MA: Master of Arts   BA: Bachelor of Arts   AA: Associate of Arts
HS: High School   BBA: Bachelor of Business Administration
MED: Master of Education   BS: Bachelor of Science   GED: General Education Degree

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions and Protocol

My purpose is to explore, "How do larger Black women perceive their relationships to society and culture,on the specific matter of size and how is this expressed in their narratives?" Interviews were semi-structured with guiding questions. I did not want lead the women to talk about media or focus on their race as an essential factor in their experiences. However, as suspected, these issues came up while listening to their stories. Allowing women to talk about their individual experiences before asking additional questions provided a richer analysis and more holistic understanding of body image and fat African American women. The following script was read verbatim to each participant before the interview:

> This interview process will be led by you, and my role is simply to listen, and I
>
> will ask you to expand or clarify something that I may not understand or would
>
> like to know more information about. The main point of this interview is to
>
> understand how you perceive that culture/society has influenced how you feel
>
> about your size/weight. I would like you to tell me the main stories from your life
>
> that come to your mind. These stories can be either positive or negative, can
>
> involve people that you know or do not know personally; they can involve
>
> anything or anyone that you wish. I am not looking for anything in particular; I
>
> just want to know what, whom or what circumstances in your life have affected
>
> the way you perceve your weight in relation to the world around you. Do you
>
> have any questions at this point? Is it okay if I turn on the tape recorder now?

Preliminary guiding questions were as follows

- What do these narratives tell us about fat African American women's:

    o body image esteem or self worth?

    o perception of their weight in relation to idealized body images?

    o perception of how their weight affects relationships with their family members and the African American community as whole?

    o perception of their weight and how it affects romantic relationships?

    o perception of their weight and how it affects everyday activities such as: going to the mall, buying clothes, or eating in restaurants?

    o And finally, perception of their weigh as it affects their drive for thinness?

From these guiding questions I made up a list of questions to ask only if needed. Below is the exact form I created to print off before each interview and place within a folder. I also had cassettes that were labled with the participant's name and interview number/order.

Interview Checklist and Participant Folder Information

- ✓ Consent form to be read and signed before interview
- ✓ My script/questionnaire
- ✓ Blank cassette tapes, pre-labeled
- ✓ Recorders, mine and one from IMS (Do I need a separate microphone?)
- ✓ Remember to get mic attachment for phone/telephone interviews
- ✓ Money for meal afterward
- ✓ Debriefing materials for interviewee w/my card
- ✓ My stopwatch so I can keep track of my 30 minute tape on each side

Name _____Respondent Number_____

Date, Time, Location _____

Age _____Ethnicity_____

B.M.I. if known or height and weight _____

Place of birth _____

Permanent residence if student at BGSU _____

Current location_____

Contact information _____

Highest grade completed/level of education_____

Do you know whether you have any heath-related consequences directly related to your weight?

       This interview process will be led by you, and my role is simply to listen, and I will ask you to expand or clarify something that I may not understand or would like to know more information about. The main point of this interview is to understand how you perceive that culture/society has influenced how you feel about your size/weight. I would like you to tell me the main stories from your life that come to your mind. These stories can be either positive or negative, can involve people that you know or do not know personally, they can involve anything or anyone that you wish. I am not looking for anything in particular; I just want to know what, whom, or what circumstances in your life have affected the way you perceive your weight in relation to the world around you. Do you have any questions at this point? Is it okay if I turn on the tape recorder now?

       Possible back up/emergency questions in case women are do not have any stories to tell

<div align="center">Media Related:</div>

How do you see large African American women in media (tv, magazines, billboards, commericials)?

What do you think when you see media images of white models?

What do you think when you see media images of black models?

What do you think about when you see someone like Monique or Queen Latifah who see themselves as big and beautiful?

<div align="center">Public Spaces Related:</div>

What kind of shopping opportunities are there for larger African American women (clothes, shoes, shopping centers)?

Can you tell me about your experiences with dining out?

Can you tell me about a time where there was an issue with your weight in relation to school or work?

Personal Spaces:

Can you tell me about your weight related experiences with friendships/girlfriends?

Can you tell me about your weight related experiences in romantic relationships?

Can you tell me about your weight related experiences with your family?

What about children (yours or others)?

Body image:

When you think of body image, what comes to mind?

When you think of your body image, what comes to mind?

What about your self-esteem?

Would you like to be skinny?

Are you happy being fat?

Do you think fat black women and fat white women have anything in common? If not, why? If yes, what would that be?

Do you have an eating disorder?

Have you ever tried to lose weight? If so, how? If not, why not?

To wrap up: Do you have any questions for me?

Is there something that you would like to talk about that we haven't during this interview?

If you have any questions beyond this point, please feel free to contact me either by phone or email.

Debriefing Material

The BGSU Counseling Center assists students with educational, social and personal concerns that may interfere with their academic progress. Counseling services are limited to enrolled BGSU students and are provided at no charge. Although there are no specific limits on the number of counseling sessions available to individual students, our goal is to provide quality services in as short a time as possible. Issues often addressed in counseling include: study/test taking concerns; stress/anxiety reduction; relationship concerns; depression; family concerns; eating disorders; sexual concerns; grief and loss; and other related concerns. Except for emergencies (which are handled promptly), all counseling services are available by appointment only.

The Counseling Center staff welcomes all students. We aspire to respect cultural,

individual and role differences. Our goal is to create a safe, supportive and affirming climate for

individuals of all races, ethnicities, national origins, genders, gender identities, sexual

orientations, religions, ages, abilities, sizes, socioeconomic statuses, languages and cultures.

Counseling Center
Division of Student Affairs
Bowling Green State University
422 Saddlemire at North Conklin
Bowling Green, OH 43403
Phone (419) 372-2081
Fax (419) 372-9535
http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/sa/counseling/page13275.html
After office hours you should contact:

The Link, 1022 N. Prospect, 352-1545. Crisis Intervention Center, 24-hour Crisis Hotline,

Information and Referral, and Victims Advocacy Program (for victims of violent crimes).

Non BGSU Students may contact these fee-based services:
Allies in Mental Health LLC, 130 S. Main Street Ste 218, 419-354-2464. Bowling Green for

immediate day/evening appt. (www.alliesinmentalhealth.com).

Stresscare Behavioral Health, 3425 Executive Parkway, Ste 230, 419-531-3500, Toledo, OH,

most insurance accepted, evening and Saturday appt. available as well.

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT FORM – The Fat Ladies Sing: A Narrative Analysis of Larger African American Women's Perspectives on Weight in American Culture.

These interviews are being collected for the purpose of my dissertation research. The result of the project will be a conference paper and submission to a scholarly journal as well as my final requirement to obtain a PhD.

1. *What is the purpose of the study?*   To explore how larger black women perceive their relationships to society and culture, on the specific matter of "size," as expressed in their perosnal stories.

2. *Why I was asked to be a participant?* You were asked to be interviewed because the study is looking for larger African American women to talk about their personal experiences with weight. This project is completely voluntary and you must be at least 18 years old to participate. Should you decide to participate or not, it will not impact grades/class standing/relationship to the institution and you are free to withdraw at any time.

3. *What will be involved in participating?* If you agree to participate, we will arrange a date, time, and agreed upon interview session. You will come in for a health conscious selection of refreshments, assigned a letter to identify you for privacy. I will ask you a few questions to get a conversation going about the subject at hand. The entire project will take not more than two hours.

4. *Who will know what I say?* The material from the interview will only be accessible to me. As my dissertation is written and goes to a conference or journal article, you will only be identified by your assigned letter, gender, age, or ethnicity. This session will be audio taped and I will take my own notes as a back up. These audio tapes will be fully transcribed. The information will only be seen by the researchers involved to protect your confidentiality rights. After the project is complete the audio tapes and transcribed notes will be locked in a safe filing cabinet and left in my office for three years and then destroyed. Also please understand that our discussion is to be kept confidential and not discussed elsewhere.

5. *What risks and benefits are associated with participation?* The anticipated risks of this study will be that it is a sensitive topic that could have emotional responses to the material discussed during the interview session. There is no guarantee that you would receive any benefit from the interview. However, being a larger person myself, I suspect that talking to other large people will be a benefit to you because you will get to share your feelings in a safe environment. The project itself should result in a more complete understanding of how larger African American women feel in a thin obsessed American culture.

6. *What are my rights as a respondent?* You may ask any questions regarding the research and they will be answered fully. You may withdraw from the study should you choose. Your participation is voluntary.

7. *If I want more information, whom can I contact about the study?* If you have any questions about the study contact Ms. Angela D. Prater at 419/372-3403 Department of Communication Studies, Bowling Green State University. You may also contact my project advisor Dr. John Warren if you have any questions about the study at 618/453-2291 Department of Speech Communication, Southern Illinois University. If you have any questions or concerns about the conduct of the study or your rights as a research participant, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board of Bowling Green State University at 419/372-7716 or at hsrb@bgsu.edu.

You are making a decision to participate or not participate in the study. Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years old, have read the information provided above, have had your questions answered, and have decided to participate. You are also giving the investigator authorization to record your responses and to use the information for research and publication.

_____   _____
Signature of participant   *Date*

_____
Signature of principal investigator Angela D. Prater

Ms. Angela D. Prater, PhD Student, Department of Communication Studies
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Phone: 419-372-3403 • Fax: 419-372-0202 • Email: pdangel@bgnet.bgsu.edu