I DO NOT WEEP AT THE WORLD: Examining Black Women's Expressions of Selfhood and the Revolutionary Act of Claiming Experiences and Identity

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Sociology

Middle Tennessee State University

December 2019

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ABSTRACT

Black women's interpretations of popular media are marked by a unique experience that is both racialized and gendered. In this study I explore Black women's self-defined interpretations of media and literature that portray Black womanhood. Additionally, I consider how Black women's perceptions of such portrayals affect their impressions about popular media in general. I addressed my research questions by conducting qualitative interviews with fifteen individuals who self-identified as Black women and a small focus group which contained three of the original interviewees. Six distinct themes emerged from this study: the magical Black character, the exotic Black woman, natural and diverse representations, filtering, media distrust, and consequences. The women in my study described their interpretations of popular depictions of Black womanhood in terms of the underlying perceptions that informed these depictions and the effects of these perceptions upon their daily interactions and their relationships with media and literature in general. They perceived these factors as interrelated and typically did not distinguish a fine line between the perceptions about Black womanhood that were encouraged by media and literature and their regularized experiences as Black women.

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INTRODUCTION

"You want me to be a tragic backdrop so that you can appear to be illuminated, so that people can say 'Wow, isn't he so terribly brave to love a girl who is so obviously sad?' You think I'll be the dark sky so you can be the star? I'll swallow you whole." –Warsan Shire

"No, I do not weep at the world…I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife." –Zora Neale Hurston

In popular culture, Black women are often portrayed as victims of depressing social conditions, as martyrs for a cause greater than themselves (normally for their people), as highly sexualized and dispensable commodities, or as perpetual nuisances who regularly disregard behavioral norms (e.g. 'loud and angry'). Even scientific research appears to confirm such portrayals of Black women, often generating statistics which confirm that, due to intersectional oppressions, Black women frequently experience higher levels of violence, discrimination, and poverty than Black men and/or white women. Similar to portrayals of Black women in popular culture, "statistical inequalities do not adequately capture Black women's lives" (Harris-Perry 2014:46). Attempts made at ameliorating these negative images of Black women are often still tainted by popular ideals. Black women are praised as the strong matriarchs of their communities and families, adored for their resilience in the face of countless hardships, and loved for their continual dedication to the cause of their people. These ideals about Black womanhood are limiting when they are circulated as the sole definitive traits of

Black women. Popular ideals are often utilized to amplify contempt for Black womanhood in media that negatively portrays Black women. In media that positively portrays Black womanhood, many of the same ideals are utilized to foster love or concern for Black women by romanticizing their victimhood.

Popular ideals about Black womanhood are reflected in the media as repetitive images and narratives of Black women battling violence and oppression, being praised for martyrdom and subservience, witnessing their husbands and children being harmed, killed or imprisoned, or being measured in worth in terms of their sexuality. They require that Black women accept defeat as human beings, disregard their own humanity, and consistently view themselves as the least important, and/or most damaged facet of their own societies.

In a world that can only define Black women against standards that represent widely held societal ideals, it is revolutionary to envision spaces and realities that are not bound by normative standards. These spaces and realities are often fostered when Black women artists generate media and literature that disregards societal constructions about their identity. These artists neither deny nor trivialize the hardships, pain or suffering experienced daily by Black women in America. They simply refuse to accept inaccurate representations about what Black women are/can be. They have taken it upon themselves to rewrite their characters in every genre to reinforce the humanity of Black women.

Statement of the Problem

Disparaging representations of Black womanhood have been a hallmark of Western literature and media since the first slave colonies were established. These representations were originally created for the purposes of justifying the oppression and

commodification of Black women as slaves and subordinates (Cummins and Thompson 2016; Windsor et al. 2010). These early, colonial depictions continue to inform representations of Black women in modern culture and media (Collins 2000; Windsor et al. 2010).

Most stereotypical representations of Black women produce narratives and images that do not accurately portray Black womanhood due to their historic function as a means for justifying inhumane treatment. Studies such as Wally-Jean's "Debunking the myth of the angry Black woman" have revealed that popular narratives and images about Black women are typically unsupported by actual research, and unsound when empirically tested (Wally-Jean 2009). This factor does not lessen the effects of misrepresentation. Several social science studies have purported a relationship between negative forms of representation and Black women's adverse experiences in intimate and professional settings usually characterized by repeat micro and macro aggressions (Lewis et al. 2016; West et al. 2016).

Media misrepresentations often reflect perceptions of Black women from the viewpoint of the dominant culture, but what kinds of impressions do these perceptions have on Black women? Black women are forced to consume dominant narratives and images on a daily basis either directly (through text and media) or indirectly (through the resulting attitudes levied against them). I am interested in exploring Black women’s selfdefined interpretations of art and literature that portray Black women. I examine whether they believe that alternative and counter representations are powerful enough to address the misrepresentations and stereotypes about Black women. I consider what impact they believe that positive and negative depictions will have on future portrayals of

Black women in popular culture. My research questions follow the same line of inquiry: How do Black women describe specific texts and imagery that portray Black women? What portrayals are perceived as empowering? What portrayals are perceived as negative or

"controlling images"? Do Black women view the positive or negative media as producing long term impacts on future portrayals of Black women in popular culture?

I addressed my research questions by conducting qualitative interviews with fifteen individuals who self-identified as Black women. My main pool of applicants originated from three sources: two groups that primarly focused on the empowerment of Black women "Sacred Womb Circle," and "Sweet Water Collective" and interested students (who met the criterion) from the Africana Studies program at Middle Tennesse State University. Research on racialized and gendered stereotypes indicates that Black women's voices often go unheard in speeches and group discussions (Sesko and Biernat 2009). So, it was very important to me that my interviews consisted entirely of the opinions of self-identified Black women.

The women chosen for the study were prompted to discuss specific literary compositions and visual images, in the form of poems, stories, movie clips and vignettes, that exemplify various portrayals of Black women. The interviews served to illuminate prevalant themes in Black women's interpretations of portrayals of Black womanhood in media and literature.

Study Significance

"She was not us. We laughed with the black men, with the white people. We laughed at this black woman who was not us."—bell hooks

Black women's interpretations of popular media are marked by an experience that is both racialized and gendered. Normalcy in American media and literature is overwhelmingly marked by maleness and whiteness. As such, Black women's interpretations of media content tend to be vastly different than those of white men, white women, and Black men (hooks 2001). White men, white women, and male audiences are typically afforded the luxury of being represented through the gaze of someone who fits their own likeness (someone who identifies as either white or male). Black women are not normally afforded this luxury and must therefore regularly view themselves through a distorted lens.

In *Sister Citizen*, political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry refers to the "crooked room" sensation. This idea describes the sensation that Black women experience when they attempt to understand and/or incorporate dominant portrayals about Black womanhood (Harris-Perry 2014). The crooked room sensation refers to the metaphorical discomfort of constantly twisting and bending to regain a sense of the center when all of the available images and narratives display "crooked" or fragmented renderings of Black womanhood. This study provides an avenue for Black women to critique the disparaging narratives and portrayals that dominate American media and literature. It is paramount to consider Black women's own interpretations about the media portrayals that are often meant to define them.

Background

Throughout the historic record Black women activists have problematized the politics of representation in American cultural narratives and within American media. They have done so by drawing special attention to issues of race and gender. In 1851 Sorjourner Truth delivered her renowned speech "Ain't I a Woman?" to the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio. This speech challenged cultural narratives and practices at the time that positioned Black women as inferiors to both whites and men. Truth's address inquired why she, as a Black woman, was not understood to require the same respect and treatment that was commonplace for other women. Her speech simultaneously suggested the ability of women to perform competitively in cultural areas that were typically dominated by men.

Black feminist journalists Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper recognized the necessity of media recognition in the press concerning issues of unjust treatment based on race and gender. In her book *Southern Horrors* (originally published in 1892) Wells-Barnett noted that "there is no educator to compare with the press" (Wells-Barnett 2012:36). Activists such as Wells-Barnett and Cooper fought to make issues of race and sex visible (especially in news media) in narratives that were typically characterized by the silence of women and people of color. Barnett argued that inaccurate coverage (or lack of coverage) about the racial transgressions of the South allowed horrors such as the lynching of Black men and women to occur with impunity.

A century later, bell hooks addressed the media misrepresentation of Black women in movies and film in her essay *The Oppositional Gaze.* In this essay, hooks asserts that Black women as film spectators, develop an oppositional gaze in order to

subvert the dominant gaze that was characterized by whiteness and maleness (hooks 2001). According to hooks, on the rare occasion that Black women were represented in film, their characters served as a humorous backdrop to the main story; a convenient scapegoat whose presence invited scorn, disregard and belittlement (hooks 2001). Hooks asserted that despite the prevalence of racism in early films, Black male spectators could still "enter an imaginative space of phallocentric power that mediated racial negation" (hooks 1992: 118). No such space existed for spectators with the misfortune of being both Black and female.

In her book *Black Feminist Thought* sociologist Patricia Hill Collins attests that the negative assumptions commonly ascribed to Black womanhood interact as a measure of cultural surveillance which serves to "maintain Black women's subordination" (Collins 2000:266). Collins argues that these assumptions about Black womanhood are so deeply ingrained in American culture that they are regularly displayed through widely accepted narratives and images and saturate most media renderings of Black women. According to Collins, this creates a cultural atmosphere wherein Black women are compelled to participate in an internal process of "self-definition" that is characterized by reframing and re-naming their experiences in a positive or affirming light.

The tradition of Black women questioning normative portrayals of Black womanhood is evident throughout the historic record. It is equally evident that Black women have felt compelled to make similar inquiries throughout the trajectory of media evolution in America. From narrative descriptions (whether dominant in hearsay or literary description), to the news press, to film and television, and more recently the internet, Black women scholars, journalists, artists and activists have demonstrated

collective diligence in questioning and deconstructing and/or re-defining representations of Black womanhood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to orient my study, I utilize the theories of intersectionality, Black feminist standpoint theory, and womanism. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw developed intersectionality as a framework for locating and analyzing sites of multiple oppression uniquely situated within the sociocultural atmosphere such that they are often rendered illegitimate by more visible sites of oppression (such as oppression that is experienced either on the basis of sexism, or racism). I will review Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality and consider why it is particularly useful for women of color.

Distinguished sociologist and scholar Patricia Hill Collins provides an exposition of Black feminist standpoint theory in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. I examine Collins' analysis of standpoint theory and how it informs her related concept of "controlling images." Finally, the term "womanist" coined by feminist activist and writer Alice Walker, has been taken up among several scholars of color as an appropriate theoretical framework for addressing issues that uniquely affect women of color. I consider how womanist theory relates to bell hooks' concept of "decolonization" in the book *Sisters of the Yam*.

Intersectionality

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* which is a concept that enabled her to analyze forms of oppression that are typically rendered invisible by more commonly known forms of oppression. The term was originally created to illuminate the complexities of racialized and gendered experiences commonly confronted by Black women in America. In her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and

Antiracist Politics" Crenshaw argues that the "single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law and that is also reflected in feminist theory" is constructed in a manner that cannot account for nuanced forms of oppression and discrimination encountered by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989:139).

Crenshaw posited that current antidiscrimination laws and policies were ineffective in accounting for the full scope of oppression experienced by Black women because it "forces them to choose between specifically articulating the intersectional aspects of their subordination." In other words, Black women are expected to choose between their discrimination on the basis of either race or sex, but never both. Claims made on the basis of racial discrimination (due to being African American), or on the basis of sexism (due to identifying as women), are more readily legitimated than those proposed on the basis of a kind of discrimination simultaneously produced by the interaction of sex and race. Crenshaw speculated that this exposed the "centrality of white female [and Black male] experiences in the conceptualization of gender discrimination" (Crenshaw 1989: 31).

Intersectionality, therefore, is a concept that embraces the reality that discrimination is neither stagnant nor one-dimensional. It cannot always be pinpointed at a specific location (e.g. race or gender) and does not exist in a vacuum. It is capable of interacting with other forms of oppression and discrimination in a manner that produces unique and hybrid experiences of prejudice. In her article, Crenshaw examines the 1976 case of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* wherein five Black women attempted to sue General Motors on the basis of discrimination. The courts found the allegations unsatisfactory because the women were unable to provide proof for their discrimination

on the basis of either race or sex, when in fact, it was both. Crenshaw proposed the concept of intersectionality in order to provide a framework (and a word) that legitimized experiences which resulted from the intersection of multiple types of discrimination. For clear reasons, this framework resonates with many scholars who study how particular social phenomena operate amongst Black women in America.

I found this to be an appropriate theory to guide my study because it provided a strong foundation from which to view and analyze Black women's understandings of media representation. It is a framework that reveals the position of Black women in areas where it is often rendered invisible and gives legitimacy to the accounts given by Black women about their own experience. Assessing Black women's opinions and interpretations through an intersectional lens also lessens the tendency toward essentialism because it is a framework that accounts for the possibility of multiple experiences both between and within groups that are otherwise typically identified as homogenous (i.e. Black women).

Black Feminist Standpoint

Intersectionality theory dovetails with Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist standpoint. In her 1990 publication *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* Collins introduces Black feminist standpoint as a framework that appreciates the unique sociocultural positions of Black women and "demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge" (Collins 2000:221). Black feminist standpoint is a theoretical stance that focuses attention on how interlocking systems of oppression (such as race, sexuality, gender and class) interact with an overarching system of domination. According to Collins, a distinguishing feature

of Black feminist standpoint theory is that it insists on conceptualizing change via mechanisms of individual consciousness raising and social transformation which promote societal change at both cultural and institutional levels.

Similar to intersectionality, Black feminist standpoint seeks to avoid the tendency toward essentialism by appreciating the diverse experiences among Black women emerging from differing social positions. Black women are not viewed as a homogenous group; instead Black feminist standpoint theory recognizes that similarities in the experiences of Black women across America (and even in the diaspora) generate similar forms of knowledge. This is the knowledge that is circulated among Black women and inherited by Black girls as a collection of strategies for existing within a particular social reality amidst interacting systems of domination.

Controlling Images

Patricia Hill Collins' concept of "controlling images" can be understood within the framework originating from Black feminist standpoint theory. Controlling images refers to "images of Black womanhood, [that] reflect the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (Collins 2000:266). In other words, controlling images are inextricably linked with the systems of domination responsible for generating a Black feminist standpoint. Collins contends that the four controlling images of mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and jezebel dominate most of the popular discourses and images that depict Black women. This limited view of Black womanhood leads to heinous stereotypes and deplorable depictions of Black womanhood.

The controlling image of *mammy* is that of "the faithful, obedient domestic servant" (Collins 2000:266). According to Collins, the mammy image was used to justify

the use of house slave labor and to normalize Black women's overrepresentation in domestic roles. The mammy represents the loving, motherly domestic servant who cares for her white children better than her own and is overcome with unending faithfulness to her master's family.

The controlling image of the matriarch affirms the depiction of Black women as castrating and unfeminine (Collins 2000). This image gained popularity during the feminist movements of the sixties. In contrast to the mammy image, the matriarch exemplifies the "bad" Black mother who stereotypically heads the household and is unaccepting of her rightful secondary place in the racial and gender hierarchy. This image was largely created as a shame tactic, to propagate that it was shameful, improper, and unfeminine to be the kind of (Black) woman who did not comply with normative rules of race and gender.

The controlling image of the welfare mother is, according to Collins, largely a strategy of policing Black women's fertility. This image labels the fertility of poor and or minority women as "unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country" (Collins 2000:270). This is the image of the poor and ignorant (Black) woman who is a "baby-making machine" and relies on the resources of good American taxpayers to fund her only pastime (making more babies).

The final controlling image is that of jezebel, a sexually promiscuous and aggressive Black woman. Jezebel, according to Collins, was generated during slavery as a strategy for justifying the commodification of Black women's sexuality and normalizing the sexual attacks of white men upon Black slave women. Collins argues that

Jezebel is central to white male's conceptualizations of Black womanhood because "efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression" (Collins 2000: 271). Presenting Black women as sexually ravenous, aggressive, and deviant bolsters the argument that they deserve any acts of sexual violence perpetuated against them.

Womanist Theory

Womanist theory aligns favorably with intersectionality and Black feminist standpoint theories. Alice Walker coined the term "womanist" in her 1983 publication *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose.* Here Walker describes a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color…a woman who loves [and appreciates] other women…committed to the survival of entire people…and loves herself. *Regardless"* (Walker 1984: xi-xii). Black feminist scholars have gravitated toward womanism as a functional branch of feminism that is inclusive of the experiences of Black women because it decentralizes the overwhelming focus on white women's issues that is typical of mainstream feminism.

Womanist theory is often utilized in Black feminist research because of its ability to centralize the experienced realities of Black women in America (Phillips and McCaskill 1995; Williams 1986). Additionally, womanist theory is a feminist perspective that is "committed to the survival of and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker 1984: xi-xii); therefore, it resists the tendency (that is common in mainstream feminism) to paint all men and/or non-feminist women in a negative light. Womanist theory as a whole, is the kind of feminist theory that decentralizes the normalcy of whiteness in feminism, exhibits a deep love for women/women's culture, resists certain

kinds of gendered essentialism, and thereby creates a feminist framework that can be comfortably utilized by Black feminists and feminists of color.

Decolonization

Bell hooks' concept of "decolonization" falls neatly into the framework of womanist theory. In her book *Sisters of the Yam* bell hooks expressed the importance of Black women "decolonizing" their minds. Decolonization refers to the idea of "breaking with the ways our reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture and asserting our understanding of that reality of our own experience" (hooks 2015:01). This concept is related to womanist theory because it advocates an act of mental consciousness raising that is rooted in decentralizing the dominant norms and ideals that are prevalent in mainstream ways of thinking. It encourages us to define reality in a manner that centralizes our own experiences and ways of being. For Black women, this could translate as either rejecting or outrightly disregarding dominant frames of reference such that they are rendered miniscule or obsolete in our scholarship and ways of thinking. My study aims to centralize the interpretations of Black women in generating the meanings of depictions of Black womanhood in media and literature as opposed to relying on ideas that have been generated from individuals (and groups of individuals) who do not identify as Black women.

In this section I have discussed the theories that will interact to provide the foundation for my study. This theoretical foundation produces a functional guide for approaching research that is based largely on interpretations made by Black women. It resists tendencies toward essentialism and emphasizes the legitimacy of Black women's experiences and ways of knowing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section I consider the relevant literature produced from studies with similar areas of focus. A review of the literature revealed prevalent trends informing studies geared at analyzing popular representations of Black women in America (in media, literature, and cultural discourse). The four themes that emerged from the review were as follows: outcomes of negative representation, developmental implications of representation for Black girls, perceptions of Black women's representation within the dominant culture, and Black women's perspectives regarding specific controlling images.

In the following section I discuss literature that exemplifies each of these four themes.

Outcomes of Negative Representation

In my review of the literature I found that most studies that exclusively included participants who identified as Black women were based on the after-effects of negative representation (such as physical/mental health and experiences in relationships). Research speculates that the mere knowledge of adverse cultural perceptions results in detrimental mental health consequences and/or internalization of negative stereotypes for many Black women (Jerald et al. 2017; Major et al. 2013).

In 2017, a team of researchers from the University of Michigan and the University of Virginia explored the health implications of Black women's knowledge of negative stereotypes (Jerald et al. 2017). The study was comprised of undergraduate and graduate university students who self-identified as Black women. The participants completed a survey that assessed meta-stereotype awareness, self-care behaviors, mental health symptoms and racial identity.

The study revealed that Black women were hyper aware of the cultural ideologies that negatively affect perceptions of Black womanhood and that this awareness led to detrimental health outcomes. Furthermore, it revealed that even actions taken to improve mental health (such as counseling) could be deleterious for Black women who perceived discrimination from a health care provider (or within the provider's environment). The researchers utilized theoretical frameworks from health, social psychology, and intersectionality to inform their analysis (Jerald et al. 2017).

The scope of unfavorable outcomes resulting from negative representation is not limited to mental health. There is also a purported relationship between negative forms of representation and Black women's adverse experiences in intimate and professional settings. The 2016 study *Ain't I a Woman?* examined "the experience of gendered racial microaggressions" (Lewis et al. 2016) of Black women attending a predominantly white university. The study was guided by a Black feminist theoretical framework and study participants included undergraduate, graduate, and professional level attendees of the university.

The participants were U.S. born women who self-identified as Black. Participants attended semi-structured focus groups where they were asked eight questions geared toward capturing experiences of racial and gendered microaggressions. The results indicated that subtle forms of discrimination (such as being silenced and/or treated as invisible) characterized by repeated microaggressions were related to projected stereotypes in school and the workplace. Projected stereotypes refer to the expectation that Black women are likely to exemplify the qualities of certain controlling images.

Acts of microaggression not only have a detrimental effect upon the intimate and working relationships of Black women, but they have been found to be interconnected with Black women's self-perceptions and body image issues. A 2015 study concerning common body image concerns among Black women were related to internalized perceptions of beauty that were inextricably interlocked with controlling images and devaluing narratives (emerging from slavery) about Black womanhood (Awad et al. 2015).

The study participants were asked to answer four research questions pertaining to body image issues. The participants commonly attributed their beauty and body image concerns (including hair texture, skin tone and body shape) to messages prevalent in the media, family, and their general surroundings. The study revealed that even beauty and body image were related to adverse experiences of microaggressions, prejudice, and psychological distress (Awad et al. 2015).

Developmental Implications of Representation for Black Girls

Studies that specifically considered participants' perceptions of Black women's overall representation in the media were typically geared toward documenting the development of self-esteem and self-concept in Black adolescent females as they matured into women. Muhammad and McArthur's qualitative research on Black adolescent females for example, illustrated that most images and narratives about Black womanhood are "rooted in longstanding narrow racialized and gendered images of Black women" (Muhammad and McArthur 2015:139).

Black teenage girls aged 12-17 were asked to take part in a writing study and to consider how Black women and girls were portrayed (both in media and in society in

general). Several derogatory traits of Black women's portrayal in the media including the regular policing of Black women's hair, portrayals of Black women as angry and violent, and portrayals that sexualized and objectified Black women were mentioned. The results indicated that common media images and narratives have the potential to affect the identity formation of young Black girls during adolescence. It illustrated that presenting tools and strategies to combat negative portrayals levied against Black girls during their formative years can encourage them to assume the agency to claim their identities in a positive light.

In 2016 a similar study was conducted to investigate the contribution of media representation to Black college students' support of racially specific gender ideologies (based on stereotypes about Black women) and traditional gender ideologies (Jerald et al. 2016). The study specifically aimed to reveal the process by which media representations influence Black youth's views about Black femininity and the extent to which this influence informed their perceptions into adulthood. The participants were men and women who self-identified as Black or African American and ranged in age from 17-27 who indicated that they had spent their formative years (ages 5-15) in the United States.

The study assessed the participants' levels of media exposure, perceptions of media realism, endorsement of traditional gender ideologies, and ethnic identities. The results indicated that media use was a significant correlate of the participants' endorsement of stereotypes about Black women and traditional gender values (Jerald et al. 2016). Perceptions of Black women as Jezebels, Sapphires, and/or strong Black women were found to be correlated with the participants' consumption of specific types of media including TV, magazines, and music videos. The significant influence of media

contributions to the development of gendered and racialized perspectives during the formative years of Black youth is a factor that is also strongly implicated within the results (Jerald et al. 2016).

Overall Perspectives on Representation within Dominant Culture

A few studies assessed the interaction of Black women's representation in the media and the modern cultural discourse of color-blindness. Color blindness is related to the following ideas: that racism is no longer a prevalent issue of significant social impact and that an individual can distance themselves from negative implications and consequences of the dominant racial hierarchy by claiming that they do not see color. The studies in this section were geared toward a mix of Black and non-Black participants, possibly in an effort to produce non-biased results. These analyses depicted how media that are perceived as racially "neutral" are often informed by layperson conceptions of race and gender that inform the present social climate. Philip Kretsedemas' study on interpretations of Black women on prime television revealed that stereotypes such as the "angry Black woman" were perpetuated in "modern-day" media in covert ways (Kretsedemas 2010).

Kretsedemas' study focused on depictions of the "angry Black woman" on the Prime-TV show *Ugly Betty*. The participants for the study were Ugly Betty fans who identified as White, Hispanic, Black, Asian, and multiracial (62%, 16%, 12%, 6%, and 4% respectively). Participants were asked to discuss the racial and gender-based implications of scenes from Ugly Betty that displayed portrayals of angry Black women.

The study results indicated that stereotypes about Black femininity are able to exist covertly in modern media due to the popular discourse of color-blindness (Kretsedemas 2010). Participants denied the presence of the angry Black woman stereotype when they examined the anger of Black female characters that were not perceived to be "acting Black." In this way, Black female characters who are perceived to be aspiring toward whiteness can be portrayed as unruly or conniving without the audience interpreting the enactment of the "angry Black woman" stereotype.

A 2017 study titled *Gendered Race in Mass Media* revealed that Black women and Asian men were often afforded little or no representation in mainstream magazines (Schug et al. 2017). The authors argued that media representation of Black women and Asian men in popular adult magazines would be relatively scarce due to pervasive cultural notions which suggest that Black women are masculine and that Asian men are feminine (Schug 2017). The study examined magazines geared toward North American adults between the ages of 18-39. Study participants viewed the magazines and coded for the perceived races and genders of the models pictured in the magazines.

The study results indicated Black women and Asian men were relatively invisible in magazines marketed to US American adults. The majority of the Black magazine models represented were men and the majority of the Asian models represented were women. These results illuminate how the intersectional nature of certain stereotypes can render Black women invisible particularly in media that is generated to uphold normative standards of femininity (Schug 2017).

Perspectives Regarding Specific Controlling Images

The majority of the studies that solely examined the perspectives of Black women about common representations of Black womanhood (as opposed to the after-effects of representation) focused on Black women's perspectives concerning a specific stereotype or controlling image. These studies focused on Black women's interpretations on images of the angry Black woman, Jezebel, and the strong Black woman (Wally-Jean 2009; West et al. 2016; Wingfield and Mills 2012).

Adia Harvey Wingfield and Melinda Mills study *Viewing Videos* examined the effects of class on Black women's interpretation of media representation, specifically the Jezebel-like sexualized representation of Black women in music videos. The study included participants from middle class and working-class backgrounds. Participants were asked to consider the representation of Black women in several popular rap and r & b music videos. Middle-class participants overwhelmingly reported that the images were false and unrealistic representations. Working-class participants typically viewed the images as realistic representations that depicted Black women's sense of agency. These results implicated a struggle for Black middle-class women to distance themselves from oversexualized depictions of Black womanhood, and the tendency for working-class Black women to identify with the benefits of such depictions (such as agency).

In 2016 a study labeled *The Price of Strength* examined Black women's perceptions of the "strong Black woman" stereotype. Thematic analysis was used to examine the responses of 94 Black women (ages 18-39) to a survey and open-ended questionnaire. The open-ended questions were geared toward analysis of the strong Black woman stereotype. The results indicated that qualities attributed to the strong Black

woman could be embodied as "a protective factor for optimal mental health" and an example of positive methods of coping or a predictor of mental health disparities resulting from negative forms of coping (West et al. 2016: 403). The study indicated that over-identification with the strong Black woman stereotype could also prevent Black women from seeking necessary therapeutic treatment.

Wally-Jean's article *Debunking the Myth of the Angry Black Woman* examined the angry Black woman stereotype alongside an assessment of the actual prevalence of anger in Black women. The study participants were comprised of African American female college students. The participants completed State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory-2 (STAXI-2) and their results were compared with the normative sample of the STAXI-2 which measured the estimates of anger in the majority culture. In comparison with the general STAXI-2 estimate for anger, the study participants reported "significantly less frequent angry feelings" following instances of criticism, disrespect and negative evaluations. In fact, the opposite was revealed to be true, implicating that Black women often held in feelings of anger even in situations where it would have been deemed appropriate. Wally-Jean's article revealed the stereotype of the angry Black woman to be unsupported by the actual lived experiences of Black women.

Reviewing the relevant literature exposed nuanced gaps in the research on Black women's representation in the media. Many of the studies analyzing perceptions of media representation were either not comprised of Black women (such as studies that were comprised of Black girls, or white men, or unidentified populations) or were comprised of a mix of participants who either did or did not identify as Black women. The studies

that were comprised solely of Black Women typically only considered their interpretations of a specific controlling image.

This nuance is interesting considering that research speculates that the scholarly contributions of many marginalized populations (by virtue of race, sex, class, or gender) tend to go unrecognized or underappreciated when they are superseded by the opinions and views of the dominant population (Sesko and Biernat 2009). My research aims to specifically consider the perspectives of Black women about the overall representations of Black womanhood in media and literature.

STUDY DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

Research Design

In this study I use a phenomenological design. A phenomenological study "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell 2013:76). The impetus for this design is to capture what can be considered the essence of a particular phenomenon. My approach to this design was informed by Clark Moustakas' conceptualization of transcendental phenomenology. This approach entails that the main measure of extracting meaning should be derived from participants' descriptions of their experiences (Creswell 2013). This perspective aims to assure that more credence is given to the participants' interpretations than to the interpretations of the researcher.

Moustakas outlined five essential steps for analyzing phenomenological data (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell 2004). The first step is for the researcher to set aside prejudgments (a process that Moustakas referred to as "epoché") prior to the study. This allows the researcher to conduct interviews from an open and fresh perspective. The second step is for the researcher to identify significant statements made by participants. These statements are then clustered to create themes in the third step. For the fourth step, the themes are utilized to create a description of the participants' experiences. Finally, the researcher formulates a description of the essence and/or meaning of the phenomenon derived from the description of participants' experiences.

The design is congruous with my research focus because it allows participants to frame and define their own experiences. Black women are too often expected to frame their experiences according to the ideas and stereotypes that are prevalent in the dominant

culture as opposed to framing them based upon their own beliefs and ideals. A phenomenological design takes the salience of the participant's view seriously. The design is compatible with my research inquiry because it allows Black women to partake in cultivating the meanings their own experiences and utilizes the combined knowledge cultivated from these experiences to extract the true essence of the phenomenon.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected through two processes; fifteen individual interviews and one focus group which contained three of the original fifteen participants). In a phenomenological approach to data collection (as with various other qualitative designs) researchers conduct several open-ended interviews in order to reach the point of data saturation (Creswell 2013). For this purpose, I planned to conduct twenty interviews. This type of design typically requires that the interviewer pose interview questions that are open-ended and fairly broad in order to encourage interviewees to focus on sharing their experiences. I conducted fifteen interviews ranging in length from twenty minutes to just over an hour. Once I began the process, I began to notice distinct recurrent themes during the first few interviews.

During the interviews and the focus group discussion, participants were encouraged to express "what" their experiences are and "how" they experienced them. The central aim of each interview was to uncover the textural and structural descriptions of participants' experiences with the phenomenon. Textural descriptions include information based on *what* participants experienced with the phenomenon, while structural descriptions include information on *how* (where/why) certain experiences occurred (Creswell 2013).

Study participants were prompted to discuss literary compositions, visual images, and clips from movies and shows that contain a variety of depictions of Black women. The use of visual data in the interview process assisted not only in narrowing the subject matter for participants but also their interpretations of media and literary depictions of Black women. Another advantage of using visual stimulus is that it can elicit associated thoughts, feelings, and memories from participants that may have otherwise taken a backseat had a more traditional interview been conducted.

Other scholars have illustrated the benefits of integrating alternate mediums of information into the interview process, particularly researchers who employ artsinformed inquiry and arts-elicitation techniques. In her article *The Power of Visual Approaches in Qualitative Inquiry*, Lynn Butler-Kisber asserts that "knowledge or understanding is not always reducible to language" (Butler-Kisber 2010:2). She makes the case that arts-informed research can be an effective way to generate unique forms of knowledge. Anna Bagnoli, also a proponent for arts-based approaches, observed that while verbal interviews privilege language as the main source of knowledge, our actual experiences are composed of multiple sources of information (some visual) that deserve to be investigated (Bagnoli 2009). Other researchers have noted that visual stimulus can even help to ease the relationship dynamics between interviewer and participant by providing a visible conversation topic and/or activity (Clark-Ibanez 2004). While I did not use a method of arts-based inquiry that required my participants to generate their own art or photographs (a method utilized in many forms of art-based inquiry), I found the use of a visual stimulus beneficial in helping my participants to uncover the layers of their interpretations of the portrayals that were discussed.

My study incorporated visual stimuli in the forms of images, videos and literary excerpts (accessible in 'Appendix C' of this document). I attempted include visual stimuli that had the potential of being understood as both negative and positive to avoid steering the ideas of participants based upon the visual content. I was interested in gaining insight into the values that my participants attributed to certain types of portrayals, but I wanted the visual content in the study to encourage my participants to discuss themes and implications that they believed were present within popular depictions of Black womanhood in general. For this purpose, I was weary of including content that would stimulate discussions based solely upon whether the portrayals were interpreted as "bad" or "good."

The visual content included the following images: a makeup advertisement from the company "Fenty Beauty", a lingerie advertisement from Victoria's Secret, cover art from the book *Zahra the Windseeker,* an image of pop singer Beyonce Knowles posing as the World War II cultural icon Rosie the riveter, an image of the main cast from the prime-time television show *How to Get Away with Murder,* an image of Serena Williams contesting an umpire's call during a soccer match, an image depicting the mixed race protagonist from the movie *Belle,* an image of the women warriors from the land of Wakanda in the movie *Black Panther,* and an image of a house servant from the movie *The Help*. The literary excerpts included excerpts from the writings of Black female authors Warsan Shire, and Zora Neale Hurston, a description of the plot for Disney's film *The Princess and the Frog,* and statistical literature briefly outlining health disparities amongst Black women within the United States. The video clips used for the study included clips from the prime-time television show *Scandal,* clips from the movies *Girl's*

Trip, Hidden Figures, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and *The Princess and the Frog,* and the 2012 Pepsi Max Super Bowl commercial entitled *Love Hurts.*

The stimuli were introduced to my participants at the beginning of each interview. I began by asking participants to discuss their experiences with portrayals of Black women in media and literature that particularly stood out to them. This initial question served to introduce the topic and to orient our subsequent discussion. After participants addressed this question, they viewed a slide-show presentation of the images, videos, and literary excerpts that were chosen for the study. The slides were numbered from one to fourteen and each participant was given a single sheet of paper on which to take down notes related to their interpretations of each slide. I encouraged participants to number their responses to reflect the numbering of the slide to which each note referred. The notes provided an anchor point for participants to draw from when they answered the interview questions in the discussion that followed.

To analyze the data for this study, I began by describing my own experiences with the phenomenon in question. While I question whether it is possible for any researcher to fully set aside prejudgements based upon their experiences with the subject matter, I believe that it is both valuable and necessarry to address these prejudgements. The nature of academic research is often that individuals research topics in areas with which they have experience and/or are familiar. Therefore, all research is perhaps colored by bias to varying degrees. I approached epoché as a step that allowed me to examine my biases in order to refrain from steering discussions with my interviewees in a manner that reflected my own interpretations about portrayals of Black womanhood. I allowed my participants to explain to me the meanings behind these depictions and to engage me in discussions

that were angled based upon their views. I resisted anticipating their views and answers (though at times I found this difficult) which allowed them to present insights that I would not have otherwise considered.

After collecting the necessary data, I transcribed eight and a half hours of audio recordings from the interviews and the focus group totaling two hundred and twelve pages of transcripts. I assessed the transcribed information and located significant statements and reoccuring ideas which I used to develop themes. These themes were then grouped based on textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon. I also examined the emergent themes proposed in my review of the relevant literature. Finally, I used an amalgamation of the themes generated from my interviews and focus group and those highlighted in my literature review to create a composite description of the phenomenon and forge a greater understanding of its underlying structure.

Interview and Focus Group Settings

Qualitative and feminist researchers alike have long argued the importance of remaining sensitive to the power dynamics that are present within the researcher participant relationship. One way to ensure that power is distributed appropriately between researcher and participant is to take special care in considering the most conducive research environment. In adherence to this tradition I attempted to select interview locations that are either comfortable or discrete to disseminate the possible tension that participants may experience during the interview process.

I was fortunate enough to be fairly familiar with two of the groups that I pulled participants from (Sacred Womb Circle and Sweet Water Collective). Participants generated from both groups were given the options of being interviewed at the group's

general meeting location or within the privacy of their own homes. In the instance that neither location was suitable for the interviewee, they were encouraged to suggest a comfortable alternative (such as a nearby library).

Participants generated from Middle Tennessee State University's Africana study class were interviewed at a more central location that was accessible from the University's campus. I had not established the type of rapport amongst these participants that would have made it appropriate or comfortable to conduct interviews within their homes (or mine). For this group of participants, I conducted interviews at the University library. I attempted to ensure the comfort of participants by providing an accessible and familiar location for the interviews.

The interview location for the focus group was selected based upon the group of participants represented by the majority of the discussants. The Nashville-based group represented the majority, so the focus group was held in the home of one of the discussants.

The interviews were anonymous. The only identifying information that I gathered from the women in my study were their ages. I believed that allowing participants to remain anonymous would encourage them speak plainly about their interpretations during our interviews by helping to foster a safe space. I developed pseudonyms for each participant which will be utilized in the findings section.

Positionality

I reflect on my personal experiences to express why I was drawn to this particular subject and to highlight its importance to me. This also represents an important step in epoché, which helps the researcher to examine possible areas of bias so as to decrease

(when possible) the effects of this bias on interactions with participants and data. This step encouraged me to provide space for my participants to share thoughts and ideals that sometimes differed from my own, and to approach my analysis in a manner that privileged the views of my participants.

My attachment to the research focus of this thesis stems from my personal experience as a Black woman in the United States. During my formative years, I was lucky to have parents that shielded me from media and experiences that they believed would hurt my development. At home, I was often surrounded with images of beautiful, powerful, and unique women of color. I was also encouraged to read books from notable Black female authors (among other books). This generous upbringing, however, could not shield me from the narratives and perceptions that dominated the outside world. My relationships with friends and family members outside of my home-nexus exposed me to several painful truths about dominant perceptions about Black women. I was not ignorant about these perspectives; I'd been educated about them at home and made to understand the importance of defining myself in spite of these ideologies. But I was not forced to acknowledge these perspectives in a way that informed my daily life and I was naïve about the way that these various narratives and perspectives had already shaped certain conditions of my life experience and would continue to inform them well into adulthood.

I am passionate about this research because I have been an advocate for women's rights for as long as I can remember as well as a proponent of Black feminism. In my painful and frustrating adulthood experiences of being discredited, silenced, or otherwise shunned due to my intersectional status as an African American and a woman, I developed a desire to participate in the kind of work that creates spaces for Black women

and allows their voices to be heard. While I have attempted to examine the interpretations of the women in my study in a manner that is not mainly colored by my own experiences, the passion behind my choice to conduct this research remains. This thesis is merely a contribution to a long legacy of Black female scholarship that challenges and resists normative notions of Black femininity and creates a scholarly avenue for Black women to describe and experience themselves based on their own merits.

Anticipated Findings

I anticipated that this study would reveal prevalent themes and ideas about depictions of Black womanhood in media and literature that commonly circulate among communities of Black women. I hypothesized that the women in my study would more readily identify with the depictions of Black womanhood that had been generated by Black women. Additionally, I surmised that some of the media and literary content would be interpreted as producing competing ideologies about Black womanhood; I particularly looked forward to discussing the implications of depictions that could be simultaneously perceived as positive *and* negative. I expected that interpretations would also be influenced by age, personal experience, and/or level of familiarity with the imagery.

FINDINGS

The themes that emerged from my study fell into two major categories: "Interpretations of the underlying narratives" and "Reactions encouraged by media perceptions." Interpretations of the underlying narratives refers to the underlying narratives that participants suspected informed various portrayals. This information includes the 'tropes' and stereotypes that participants considered to be represented within the portrayals. Reactions encouraged by media perceptions refers to the reactions my participants reported based on the impressions that they drew from certain media portrayals. This category focuses on beliefs and practices related to my participants' perceptions about media depictions of Black women.

Six distinct themes emerged from this study. In the category of underlying narratives were the themes of the magical Black character, the exotic Black woman, and the importance of natural and diverse representations. In the category of reactions to media representation were the following themes: filtering, media distrust, and consequences. In general, the underlying narratives informed the reactions that my participants reported having to the media and literature depictions as a whole. Therefore, I will begin by discussing the underlying narrative themes that emerged during the study.

The Magical Black Character

The assumed "magic" of Black womanhood was a concept discussed by several of the women in the study. While it may seem initially that "magic" would be considered a positive attribute, this theme was regularly associated with depictions that participants described as negative. The defining component of the magical Black character's magic was that it was a gift endowed upon her to be used in the service of (typically white)

others. The magical Black character, therefore, has certain parallels with the controlling image of the "mammy." These narratives are both inextricably linked to the expectation that Black women must dedicate all of their time and resources to be of service to others.

The magical Black character (MBC), however, appears to be a somewhat evolved form of the mammy trope. The MBC possesses several qualities of the "strong Black woman" trope, such as resilience and a propensity to effectively "handle business" at any cost. At best, the MBC is an amalgamation of the mammy and the strong Black woman. While the mammy image typically highlights Black women's skill in utilizing their "natural" nurturing abilities in the service of white children and families, the MBC narrative highlights Black women's skill in combining their superior powers of "business handling" and "natural resilience" with their nurturing abilities in service to their white counterparts.

The narrative of the MBC is progressive in that it partly subverts the controlling images of mammy and the angry Black woman. This is because it takes Black women's productivity outside of the sphere natural motherhood roles and it (sometimes) reconstructs their anger as sass and/or tough love. These elements of the MBC's character can therefore be read as empowering as they appear to combat the negative assumptions ingrained in the narratives of mammy and the angry Black woman. However, my participants questioned the extent to wich the MBC *actually* succeeded in subverting the narrative that Black women's abilities should be used in service of others. The role of the MBC in media portrayals is usually a supportive role in which a Black woman supplies a white character with the courage, initiative, and/or insight that they need to reach their highest potential.

One of the video clips that participants viewed during the interview process was a clip from the prime-time television show *Scandal*. This particular video showcased Olivia Pope, a Black female Chief of Staff member to the White House. In the scene Olivia Pope delivers a tough-love speech to her mentor (and superior) Cyrus Beene. The video brought up the discussion of the MBC narrative in several participant interviews. Sasha describes how Olivia Pope's behavior aligns with traits of the MBC in the following quote:

> And it's like they come in and they act all magical and they raise something and the wind blows, and the trees… [both laugh] And that's what it came across as. Like this white man is going through it, something's happened to him apparently, but he needs this Black woman to step in and like remind him that he's the best thing. You know and she has to *yell* at him, but from a place of love. And *only* through this can he realize that *he* is the white man who will save us all!

According to Sasha, the MBC is a character who is always there to inspire, aid, and create a magical solution. Additionally, Sasha explored the irony that the MBC's main purpose was to validate the power of her white counterparts:

> It always goes back to like, I'm going to help you figure out that you deserve to have power over everyone. *Me* as a Black woman, I am coming here to remind you that you have the right to have power over everyone *including myself*. It's just a lot.

Interviewee Oyin made similar observations about the underlying MBC narrative that appeared to color the interaction between Olivia Pope and Cyrus Beene: This Black lady is not just an autonomous Black lady who happened to make it all the way up to the White House and this and that…the *reason* she made it there was to give this white man the gumption that he needs.

Here Oyin discusses the underlying assumption that the most important aspect of the

MBC's power and resilience is her ability to use it as a tool to inspire a white character. Oyin goes on to explore the parallels between the Scandal scene and a popular television show called *Shrill*:

> She [the main character] is trying to embrace being full-figured. Her mom is always trying put her on a diet and make her eat less and stuff like that. And, her roommate is this *Black* girl. Of course, the Black girl is fullfigured too, but that's never spoken on. And *any time* the main character needs some support, the Black girl magically appears… It's not that this Black girl is autonomously existing and loving her own full-figuredness. It is that she *exists* in her full-figuredness to make the other woman okay with hers.

Oyin highlighted that the overarching assumption is that the magical Black character's main purpose for *existing* is to offer support.

Similarly, Sonya explained how the depiction of mammy in the film "The Help," encourages an ongoing narrative that Black women only exist to save everyone. She explained that the depictions of Black women as 'magical saviors' have far-reaching implications, particularly in the workplace, that influence the expectations placed upon Black women in real world social settings:

> At my last job, they would come to me, and I would think to myself, I'm like "I'm not going to use my 'Black girl magic' to fix your problem. Because, for one, you don't appreciate it. And two, you come to *expect* it.

Sonya explained that she believed it was unnecessary for Black women to occupy themselves at work by fulfilling expectations based upon views of Black women as magical saviors.

The MBC portrayal fosters the idea that the assumed strength (or anger) of Black women should be viewed not as a threat, but as an accessible and constructive resource, a catalyst for productivity. A "progressive" version of mammy; the MBC is not the servant

and/or housemaid. Instead she is portrayed as a worker in the office, a friendly roommate, an entrepreneur, or your boss. She has overcome all odds (in light of her double disadvantage as both a woman and a person of color) to obtain a more or less equal footing with her white counterparts so that she can conveniently offer support, and or inspiration to them when necessary.

While most women in my study found the portrayal of the magical Black character to be undoubtedly negative, there was a small subset of women who did not. This idea countered my initial expectations. The unifying idea amongst the perceptions of these women, was that within portrayals of Black women as magical saviors were positive implications about the strength of her personal character. I labeled this idea as "negative but necessary." While most of the women in this subset pointed out the negative underlying assumptions about MBC portrayals, they asserted that these assumptions did not make the entire portrayal negative. Kiya referenced a depiction of the mammy from the movie *The Help,* stating that although the overall scenario was problematic some positive results may have come out of it:

> But, *she* [the mammy in *The Help*] might think of some parts of it as positive because, you know even though like *this* girl, even she was white and privileged, and didn't have parents who were supporting her in the way that they might've, or that they should've, cause didn't that girl have some sort of like learning disability or something?…So, then every morning, the Black woman told her, you know 'you're strong, you're smart, you're important.' And then when she ended up having to leave, that's like something that that little white girl can take with her.

Kiya also noted that while she did not agree with the overall idea of the Mammy, she also perceived the depiction as a portrayal of nurturance. Jasmine also shared insights about the photo:

> I mean, she looks tired, she does, but she's gonna get it done. And we're *always* tired, but we're gone get this done, we're gonna get through it. Resilience. That poor baby don't mean, you know, that poor baby wasn't trained to hate *yet*.

Jasmine explained that the depiction emanated a message of 'resilience.' When I asked her to expand on this idea she stated:

> It's on its way. It's just, resilience isn't going to start the day that you are at your lowest. I mean, yeah, you'll probably hit rock bottom, yesterday. But the next day that's, that's the end. You can't go no further. You know? So that's just, you know, she's like 'I'm sick of this shit but I'm a be all right. I'm going to get through this.' You know?

Kiya and Jasmine each asserted the idea that portrayals highlighting the resilience, strength, and nurturing abilities of Black women should be celebrated, because they represent an ability to create a positive outcome from a hopeless or negative situation.

Shannon argued that while she took issue with the historic institutions from which Mammy emerged (slavery/segregation), she found that the depiction of Mammy in *The Help* also represented a kind of communal caring that was lacking in more modern times:

> I think that's something that's kind of been like left behind a little bit. Like there's been a kind of like a 'care for your own' kind of mentality. Um, that I think has plagued not just Black women, but like mostly everybody. Like look out for your own and then you're done after that. But um, I thought the image was pretty powerful.

Shannon viewed the photograph as a reminder of the significance of extending care and nurturing to those outside of one's immediate circle. In all, the women who highlighted the positive meanings of this portrayal, focused on regarding the qualities of nurturance, care, and resilience with importance and respect.

The Exotic Black Woman

Another theme that emerged during the study was the theme of the *exotic* Black woman. I found this theme to be particularly important because it was often expressed in

conjunction with the concepts of colorism and the normalized (European) standard of beauty. Participants particularly emphasized that the exoticization of Black women in media and literature was largely based on the idea that Black women were not really human. It was therefore noted as a concept that promoted the exploitation and dehumanization of Black women. Participants noted that Black women were more likely to be exoticized when their physical appearances too closely adhered to Eurocentric standards of beauty *or* when their physical appearances did not adhere to these standards closely enough.

At the beginning of each interview I asked my participants to describe some of the representations of Black women that they had encountered in media and literature that stood out to them. Joy explained that the main aspect that stood out to her in media depictions of Black women was the frequency with which they were exoticized. Joy explained:

> The first thing that came to mind was Black women being portrayed as 'exotic.' And I say that because, and it traces back, it goes way back to the psyche of the white colonists that brought us here, but the exoticness, the parts that are accentuated about the Black *female* body make it seem like we're exotic. Because over here in the west you know, the *perceived* culture that is dominant is Caucasian…Their bodies do not look like ours. And they have an infatuation with what they are *not*.

Joy attributed the exoticization of Black women in media to the failure of Black women's bodies to adhere to the Caucasian culture that is perceived as dominant in Western society. In her statement, she examines the possible motives behind the kind of exoticization that occurs when a Black woman's physical appearance does *not* fit the European standard closely enough. According to Joy's explanation, Black women are

othered because of their physical appearance and then fetishized *because* they have been othered. In other words, it is often the ways that Black women are portrayed that cause them to appear exotic, due to an accentuation of physical characteristics that do not fit the standard.

Alicia expanded on this idea, pointing out that Black women who possess darker skin tones are often oversexualized and forced to demonstrate an aggressive type of sexiness that differs greatly from what is considered 'sexy' in mainstream media. She pointed to an image that featured an ad for Fenty beauty makeup and an image that featured warrior women from the movie *Black Panther*:

> When I see, again, unambiguous Black women, when they're sexy, even though they're not showing a lot of skin, and I think like though it's definitely really classy, it's *still* a bit overly sexualized because of the demeanor of the warrior woman stance that they have. And so, when you get into the darker shades of pigmentation *that's* what's sexy…a dominatrix type of sexy rather than you know, maybe a Dorothy Dandridge like dainty type of sexy. It's like 'oh you're too dark for that.'

Several women in the study remarked about the exoticization of Black women with lighter skin tones and certain hair textures in the media. A movie clip from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which Halle Berry plays the role of the Black female protagonist Janie, was a common stimulus for this discussion during interviews. Nicky related the concept of praising lighter skin in Black women to practices of segregating Black people according to skin color during slavery:

> Typically, going back to slavery even, there was a disparity in terms of skin color. And how they kept that going. And the darker skin women were relegated to the field, well, darker skin *people* relegated to the field, and those who were in the house. So, as I see like Halle Berry, she's *always* presented as this extra feminine, extra soft, extra beautiful.

Nicky also expressed how this color spectrum operates to legitimate the normalized European standard of beauty:

> If it's a representation of beauty then they want to take in the fair skinned, thinner depictions, those who mirror the more European ideal of beauty…But then you have the darker women who are portrayed as the help.

Alicia echoed Nicky's sentiment and elaborated on the qualities that are often attributed to Black women with lighter skin: "And then, the Halle Berry situation. While it seems all, you know, butterflies and roses, it's the mixed pretty girl, this innocent and lovable being." According to Alicia, media representations of Black women that are meant to be perceived as innocent and lovable, tend to highlight Black women who have lighter skin, "mixed" heritage, or appear otherwise racially ambiguous.

This trend presents itself in the lives of Black women in the form of microaggressions from non-Black friends and colleagues and scrutiny (or praise) from family members and peers. Charity explained that Black women and girls are often praised for looking "almost white" by both family members and non-Black friends. She contrasted this praise with the reactions and comments she regularly endured from white friends and coworkers about the texture of her natural hair, such as "you like an Amazon woman."

Portrayals of Black women as exotic are interrelated with normalized European standards of beauty. When this standard is applied to the physical appearance of Black women, it is often imbued with ideas based in colorism. The exoticism of Black women is also informed by the expectation that Black women's bodies will not fit the norm. As a result, Black women can be exoticized for being either "too Black" or "not Black

enough." When Black women are "not Black enough" they are praised as an anomaly in terms of beauty and allowed to inhabit mainstream interpretations of sexiness. Conversely, when Black women are portrayed as sexy, but are perceived as "too Black" to convey mainstream models of sexiness they are othered and/or fetishized as warriors and Amazons.

Natural and Diverse Representation

Thus far I have discussed themes that participants generally viewed as negative in terms of popular portrayals of Black women. The following theme represents what the majority of my participants viewed as distinguishing components of positive depictions. The theme, labeled "natural and diverse representation," examines the significance of representations that encourage Black women to embrace the diversity of their unaltered physical appearances. Most interviewees discussed the powerful and positive effects of images that displayed the diversity of Black women and/or did not alter their natural hair and physical characteristics.

> And that's important. To see that diversity and know that its accepted, whether or not other people that are close-minded see it as beautiful. You don't have to minimize yourself or change your appearance or you know *anything* to be more palatable to these individuals that don't see your beauty…

Charity made the above remark to expound on the significance of diverse and unaltered portrayals of Black women. She asserted that the principal factor of importance is that these depictions rebuff the perception that Black women must alter their appearances in order to fit a specific ideal of beauty. She also mentioned "these individuals" that are unable to recognize the unaltered appearance of Black women as

beautiful. It is presumed that the "individuals" Charity referred to represent those who ascribe to the ideal that European standards of beauty are superior. Her statement highlights the assumption that Black women need to work hard to make themselves more palatable in appearance to reflect the aesthetics of the dominant culture.

Jasmine pointed to an image of Wakandan women from the movie *Black Panther* and expressed her appreciation for their ability to emanate class and beauty with natural hairstyles and minimal makeup:

> I just saw effortless beauty and empowerment and community. Like, I mean, they both have their hair in these, you know, very effortless styles. They're naturally gorgeous…That's what I saw. I don't care what you guys think about me. I'm going to do me, that's all I'm going to do. You could go somewhere else and worry about whoever, but me, I don't care.

The "effortlessness" that Jasmine refers to contradicts the assumption that Black women have to put a great deal of effort into how they look due to physical shortcomings. The majority of these perceived shortcomings are related to the inability of Black women's skin, hair, and bodies to adhere to the normalized standard. Like Chasity, Jasmine appeared to perceive portrayals of Black women with minimal alterations to their outward appearance as a challenge to societal pressure to conform to the European standard of beauty. She asserted that women in the picture emanated an attitude of "I don't care what you guys think about me." Charity and Jasmine's descriptions acknowledged a dialectic relationship between normalized perceptions about Black women and counternarratives that challenge these perceptions.

Participants expressed that they viewed diverse representations of Black women as positive for similar reasons.

Namely because these depictions challenged the idea that all Black women are the same. Oyin explained:

> I don't like the thought that we can *only* look one way. And part of what I love about being a Black woman is that there are fifty-thousand ways to do it. And you know, you rarely see that. It's just this *one* look that you see *all the time*.

Alicia echoed Oyin's explanation when I asked for insight on the types of portrayals that she believed provided positive representations of Black womanhood. She stated that the depictions that she viewed as positive were the ones that made her feel "seen." She explained that women with darker skin often struggle with feeling that they are unrecognized and unseen. She expressed that diversity was an empowering facet of the portrayals she saw as positive:

> It makes me proud and it reinforces just how amazing and layered and dynamic and strong that we are. And that there is no *one* picture of beauty when it comes to us. And there is the whole spectrum of beauty. And so, when I see these strong images and these *powerful* images, it makes me feel *proud.*

Oyin and Alicia perceived diverse representations of Black women as tools that combatted essentialism. When represented in media and literary portrayals, the capacity of Black women to be dynamic, diverse, and multifaceted, is an instrument that subverts the perception that the blanket term "Black woman" refers to a homogenous group of individuals. It seems appropriate to mention here that the idea of diverse representation was not limited to the physical characteristics of Black women. Several interviewees suggested that empowering, diverse representations also encompassed portrayals of Black women who *talked* and *acted* in ways that were inconsistent with stereotypical expectations.

Originally, I intended to label this theme "Natural and Diverse is *Beautiful"* because participants regularly referred to the concept of "beauty" in their discussions about the significance of natural and diverse portrayals. Most expressed that it was important to have representations that displayed the natural features, characteristics and diversity of Black women as attributes that were *beautiful*. However, the reasons given by participants for viewing the representations as 'positive' mainly highlighted the effectiveness of these depictions as tools of resistance against an overwhelmingly imposing Eurocentric gaze.

Filtering

The underlying narratives that were presented in the previous section served to inform the reactions encouraged by media perceptions that were reported by my participants. One such activity that was reported consistently among the women in my study was the practice of consciously controlling the types of and amounts of media that they interacted with. I refer to this process as *filtering.* Filtering media was typically described as a protective measure against an unwanted bombardment of negative representations generated from popular media. Participants reported practices such as only viewing films, television shows, and reading literature that they found uplifting and empowering and/or limiting interaction with mainstream media as much as possible. Participants framed media filtering as a response to the lack of positive representation of Black women in mainstream media.

I asked Joy how controlling images and narratives affected her as a Black woman in society. She stated that her relationship with these images and narratives had changed

over time as a result of her expanded knowledge about the systems in this society. She explained that these new perceptions also changed her relationship with media:

> "But, the more I've learned, the more I've grown, the more I understand the system around me, I've, I'm mindful of what I watch. I don't support things that I feel don't support the vision in which I'm walking. I don't participate, I don't watch, I don't participate. Now, if it's something that I didn't know and I end up watching it then I'll be like 'ugh' I didn't realize this was going to be like that, so I wasn't *trying."*

Joy described filtering her media interaction as an action that is synonymous with refusing to participate. She refuses to participate in consuming media that she believes does not support her. In this way she is able to take a stand against the portrayals that she views as negative without allowing them to disrupt her personal views.

Sonya explained that she found it difficult to locate movies and television shows that portrayed well-rounded Black female characters. She remarked that representations in both media and literature typically upheld stereotypical depictions of Black women in roles that illustrated controlling narratives. She also expressed that she had greater success in locating strong, and well-rounded representations when she filtered her media:

> I liked Black Panther. I like that the characters there were interesting and fun. When it comes to literature, and maybe I'm very um *deliberate* in what I choose to read and what I choose to watch, I *try* to pick books to read that have strong representations of Black women as their main characters.

Sonya described herself as being deliberate in choosing the media and literature that she consumes. She described looking for specific character traits in the books that she chose to read and preferring "interesting and fun" characters to the one-dimensional roles that Black women are traditionally relegated to. Her practice of filtering allows her to expose

herself to diverse and powerful portrayals of Black women that are otherwise unavailable in mainstream media and literature.

Kiya's description of her personal practice of media filtering was more extreme. She asserted that media *as a whole* functioned to produce problematic portrayals:

> "I guess I'm trying to get away from media just because like its negative as a whole. And so, even though I can see positive representations, it's *still* media and there's still parts of it that are going to be fabricated or you know, exaggerated, or downplayed or something like that."

In order to avoid consuming any covertly negative portrayals, Kiya responded to what she saw as the inherent negativity of media by limiting her overall media consumption. Her response implied a general distrust that any media portrayal could be genuinely positive because of the likelihood that most portrayals have been (or will be) altered in some way.

The overall concept that I grasped from the women who discussed their practices of media filtering was that filtering was an act of agency. The women in my study were unable (to my knowledge) to radically change or effect the common representations of Black women in media and literature that they found problematic. They practiced filtering as a method of managing their intake of problematic portrayals. My study participants were typically aware of several controlling images and narratives that informed common portrayals of Black women in media and literature. It is, therefore, safe to assume that they had already viewed media and literature informed by these perceptions prior to my interviews with them. Hence, the practice of filtering is not likely an effective method for disregarding *all* problematic portrayals. The practice appeared to give the women a sense of control over the frequency of their exposure to the images and narratives that they found problematic.

Media Distrust

Kiya was not the only participant who expressed an overall distrust of the media. A number of women reported holding similar views. This distrust was largely based on the impression that media portrayals of Black women were driven by the ulterior motives of industries and institutions. Among the motives that were mentioned by participants were money and the maintenance of dominant power structures. Many interviewees suggested that money was a motivating factor behind the content that media corporations chose to portray. I had not previously considered that money would be perceived as a defining factor for popular depictions of Black womanhood. But, several of my participants considered depictions of Black women, whether negative or positive, to be extensions of the capitalistic economic system.

Aisha predicted that there would be an upswing of positive depictions of Black womanhood in the near future. She believed media companies would follow this trend because it had recently proven profitable:

> People are going to be excited about it because its new. And that is going to make other people, other corporation, business type things do it because it's what people are buying. Black Panther made all that money and people you know kept going back to see it. You know, it's not in 'good faith' or whatever, its where the money is.

Aisha made sure to point out that mass media production of "positive" portrayals of Black women would not be taken up "in good faith." Rather, these kinds of representations would flourish because of their ability to generate capital. Alicia made a similar remark but asserted that *negative* portrayals of Black women would continue to be mass produced because of how profitable they were.

Alicia argued that the historic monetary success accomplished through the promotion of negative depictions of Black womanhood in media assured that these depictions would remain a mainstay of American media. She did not perceive the depictions as something that could be easily changed. She asserted that the categories and roles used to define portrayals of Black women in media are still what sells:

> And so, if I were to say, I think it's going to be more negative before we see a trend to switch over to positive. Because the categories *sell*…So let me clarify, the portrayal of Black women will depend on what sells and what is making immediate money [that] is controlled by white men. And so, I think because of that it will continue to be negative or consistent of what we are seeing.

Alicia suggested that capital is an important determining factor in the future direction of portrayals of Black women. Additionally, her remark suggests that the primary owners of this capital (white men) play an important role in determining the types of portrayals that are produced.

The general consensus was that media portrayals of Black women served to maintain the dominant power structures. Several women also pointed out examples of portrayals that framed Black women negatively because they lacked important contextual elements. These negative depictions were understood to maintain misperceptions about Black women in society due to their lack of context. The issue of context was commonly discussed in relation to an excerpt within the interview presentation that highlighted health disparities among Black women. Participants described the excerpt as problematic for various reasons.

Raven expressed frustration that the excerpt highlighted disparities but failed to outline *why* the disparities existed in the first place. She revealed her suspicions that this

type of literature was probably produced in order to foster a sense of internalized oppression:

> I was reading a book, I forget what it was called, but it was like "If you make a man feel like he's so low, he won't even have to go out the front door." He'll go out the backdoor, and if there's not a back door, he'll make one. That's what I feel like, they just try to give us this stuff to downplay us so *we* can start to believe and internalize that.

Shannon echoed Raven's ideas. She also perceived the overwhelmingly negative statistics as literature that promoted a defeatist attitude:

> Okay. So, we're all, we're all destined to die! [both laugh] And she gets pregnant. Like that's the only thing we have to look forward to in life. But also, we know that there are like, there are structural things that are like naturally against them. So, like for that to be *our* statistic…because we can't *afford* whatever to fix really *any* of these issues, like this is all money, this is what's jumping out at me.

Raven and Shannon each explained the excerpt in terms of potentially promoting self-defeating prophecies and both pointed out the lack of contextual material related to why the statistics existed in the first place. Additionally, both remarked that they found this type of framing to be characteristic of statistical reports. Jasmine noted similar issues within the excerpt and added that such reports rarely mentioned any real solutions.

> It's like you're just putting this out here to have Black women or people of color feel horrible about the fact that 'Oh guess what, you're at a high risk for this, this or this' or whatever. But we're not talking about the underlying issues. It's nothing that they're trying resolve. I've actually lobbied for this situation. I've been on the hill Blitz (Blitz Hill). So, they just talk about disparities and food deserts. You know, they just talk about what we *lack*, the issues and things like that. But they don't tell us what they're going to do to figure it out, or you know *fix* it.

Jasmine had previously been part of a state campaign that focused on promoting solutions for many of the health disparities highlighted in the excerpt (such as staggering maternal

and infant mortality rates and obesity). She explained that she had experienced first-hand the apprehension of government agencies about actually implementing any of the suggested solutions to the underlying problems that caused these health disparities. The disheartening realization led her to eventually to view the health statistics as an unhelpful form of bragging, a reminder to Black women that they were still at the lower end of most health statistics.

Participants were not only concerned with the lack of context in the statistical excerpt. They also mentioned portrayals of the "angry Black woman" as an example of how the media succeeded in depicting Black women as 'angry' by taking their anger out of context. Oyin and Sasha argued that misrepresentations of Black womanhood were inevitable because all American media was subject to the white gaze. Oyin stated:

> I don't think that there's *any* media in the west, that does not still *completely* cater to the white male gaze. I don't care what it is. I don't think that you can get funding for western media unless you're catering to the white male gaze. And so, no matter what I'm looking at, especially as a person who's seeing things through a feminist lens and then through a *Black* feminist lens, then I, there's always little pieces of it that I can see.

Sasha argued that even the portrayals that she viewed as progressive and positive were still formulated in relation to the white male gaze:

> To me I think it's still pandering to the white gaze a lot. Because it kind of always goes back to that. It goes back to trying to either prove that you're just on the same level as white people or prove that you have some knowledge or love to give them.

The uniting factor between my participants' explanations about their feelings of distrust in the media stemmed from the idea that specific ulterior motives guided the content that was provided by the media. These ulterior motives were perceived to be

directly related to internal biases held by the majority of media producers. The underlying assumption implied by this perception was that most media is owned and controlled by white men and therefore vulnerable to the white male gaze. As a result, some participants viewed the subjugation of Black womanhood in media as inevitable.

Consequences

The final theme that will be discussed here focuses on how negative renderings of Black women in media and literature regularly contribute to uncomfortable real-world experiences. Controlling narratives about Black womanhood promoted by popular depictions of Black women in media and literature, serve to fuel covertly prejudicial actions and opinions that are often actualized in the form of microaggressions. Study participants reported the mental effects of constantly managing microaggressions that they felt were directly related to media misrepresentations of Black womanhood.

Several participants reported undertaking the processes of self-censoring/selfmonitoring in an attempt to manage outside perceptions about their appearances and characters. Participants framed these acts of self-censoring and monitoring as directly related to the effects of outside impressions formed on the basis of controlling narratives about Black women. During the interview processes participants regularly described their efforts to navigate commonplace assumptions about Black women by altering their hairstyles, clothing choices, demeanors, and sometimes even their voices.

Charity explained this phenomenon as a repercussion of constant exposure to the white male gaze:

> A lot of what we see throughout history is a lot of Black women catering to the white gaze as far as like altering their appearance. They feel like they kind of have to hold themselves up to a certain standard as far as like physical attributes, or looking professional, you know what I'm saying? Or kind of presenting themselves in a way that people can digest…. Even toning down like the Black girl attitude. Like in the workplace I have to be professional, I have to kind of like put on this voice as well. Like I can't be too like…you know what I'm saying?

Charity's statement implies that when Black women tone down their attitudes and alter their appearances, they become easier to digest and are viewed as "professional." The underlying assumption here is that "whiteness" is synonymous with professionalism. Sasha made a similar remark. She explained that Black women who are successful at altering their appearances in accordance to the dominant standard sometimes risk developing "misplaced feelings of superiority" when compared to Black women who have failed to achieve this success:

> I think if I think about it *too* much, then I find myself feeling like I have to prove, or when I was younger, I felt like I had to prove that I wasn't one of *those* Black girls. That I wasn't, like I don't talk like *that*, I don't you know dress like *that* …So, it's just like a constant battle between feeding into stereotypes and feeling bad about it, or *not* feeding into stereotypes and feeling this misplaced feeling of superiority over other Black people. That doesn't really help anyone except white men, not even white women.

Sasha's statement also implies that Black women who successfully maintain their appearances in accordance with the dominant standard avoid feeding into stereotypes about Black women. Conversely, the images of Black women who chose not to adhere to this standard (regardless of whatever other standard they may adhere to), fuel stereotypical narratives about Black women (a notion that implies that the unaltered appearance of Black women is the fuel for demeaning stereotypes). Aisha chose not to consciously dwell on negative stereotypes perpetuated about Black women in her daily

life. Her choice was not without repercussion. She explained that her strategy could only partially blind her to projected stereotypes because it did not change the views of others: "I think that once you get past thinking that you have to fall into one of those categories then its, it gets tedious in the way that *other people* are still going to see you as that."

A result of the oversaturation of controlling images and narratives in media and literature, is that Black women have become tasked with correcting these popular misconceptions about Black womanhood. Some of my participants referred to these instances as "teaching moments," others pointed out the growing body of literature and films produced by Black women that served to subvert dominant ideals about Black womanhood. The overall consensus was that this process, albeit necessary, was exhausting. Sonya expressed this sentiment in relation to the portrayals she viewed as negative:

> "Oh, they irritate me. Because then you have to go into the office or deal with your friends later and you have to *correct* their thoughts about what this really means. It's, it's just extra work… It's exhausting because you have that dual consciousness of this is what I'm *actually* feeling, but *also* this is how others are going to *view* me."

Joy reported a similar sentiment, but she related it to the images that she viewed as positive. She argued that constantly creating counterimages and counternarratives was a tiring pursuit:

> It makes us tired. It makes us tired. Even the people who are trying to live a different life. And it's, and they *know* this, they know that we get, that it's tiring. And when you're tired, most of the time when you're tired, you stop. You know? You want to sit down. You want to change you want to acclimate. Cause it's easier.

Joy argued that changing the narrative was tiring because of the outside pressure for Black women to "acclimate" to the normalized standard. Sonya addressed exhaustion as a factor in terms of being held responsible for repeatedly correcting assumptions based on erroneous depictions of Black womanhood. These statements reflect the difficulty of navigating media produced by, or within, a social system that is biased in terms of race and gender. In both scenarios, Black women find that they are required to perform additional labor on behalf of others whose perceptions have been affected by the normalized renderings of Black womanhood. In this way, the experiences of correcting others are interrelated with the processes of self-monitoring and self-censoring in that each factor stems from a desire to be divorced or otherwise distanced from the effects of harmful images and narratives (and the perceptions based on them).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

In my research I sought to conceptualize the common meanings that self-defined Black women attributed to popularized representations of Black womanhood within media and literature. The women in my study defined their experiences in terms of their understandings of US American sociocultural systems based on their dually marginalized positions as both women and persons of color. They described their experiences with media and literature representation as extensions of their normalized expectations and personal strategies for navigating Western society in general. As such, several of the findings produced by this study correlated with research theories that were developed in an effort to generate a more thorough understanding of the experiences of marginalized groups, namely African Americans and women.

The underlying narratives, that participants viewed as influential aspects of the portrayals that they labeled as negative, were perceived as tools employed to repeatedly justify the subjugation of Black women. This perception offers insight into Patricia Hill Collins' speculations about controlling images. Collins argued that controlling images served to ensure "the maintenance of Black women's subordination" (Collins 2000:266) Additionally, Collins contended that the four controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, the Jezebel, and the welfare mother continued to dominate most Western depictions of Black womanhood even following the abolishment of slavery.

My study findings indicate that the longevity of these controlling narratives is owed to their ability to be reimagined and reconfigured in accordance with the present

social climate. This furthers Kretsedemas' suggestion that stereotypes about Black femininity are able to exist covertly in modern media due to the popular discourse of color-blindness. I would argue, that modern discourses not only affect the way that viewers perceive media, but that stereotypes about Black women have likewise been adapted to modern sensibilities. The magical Black character exemplifies a combination of multiple controlling narratives about Black women that have been adapted to more progressive/modern sensibilities. It appears to paint an acceptable, and even empowering portrait of Black womanhood by giving Black women visibility in spaces that were not historically considered their appropriate domains (such as within high status professions). Further examination reveals that this elevated status is only justified because it allows Black women to appear in close enough proximity to their white counterparts to fulfill what is understood to be their truer, more natural purpose…being of service.

The narrative of Black women as "exotic" in modern literature and media, also reflects the primary goal speculated by Collins, of maintaining Black women's subordination. The exoticism of Black women closely relates to Collin's assertion that

"efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression" (Collins 2000: 271). Participants primarily understood the exoticism of Black women to be a narrative that served to justify the media's exploitation of Black women's sexuality through the oversexualization and/or fetishization of Black women's bodies. In this regard, the exotic Black woman appears to be a modern reconfiguration of the controlling image of the Jezebel similar to the manner in which the magical Black character reinvigorates the controlling image of mammy.

Participants perceived a direct link between depictions that promoted the exploitation of Black women's bodies (through exoticism) and their labor (portraying them in a perpetual state of servitude) and the view that the Black female form in its entirety, is inherently wrong and deficient. This wrongness was attributed to the inability of Black women's bodies to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty. This correlates with the findings of the beauty and body image study conducted by Awad et. al (2015), which revealed that incompatible, non-inclusive, Eurocentric beauty standards play an important role in the body image concerns of Black women. In response to such concerns, most participants expressed the desire to see these standards challenged by counter-representations and several reported taking agency in the matter by managing their media consumption.

This agentic attitude toward media consumption reflects bell hooks' concept of decolonization, the process of divorcing ourselves from perceptions of reality founded upon the values of the dominant culture (hooks 2015). The women who reported filtering their media, explained the practice in terms of refusing to consume images and ideals shaped by dominant misperceptions about Black womanhood. Similarly, women who asserted the positive impact of unaltered and diverse representations of Black womanhood, regarded these counter-representations as effective tools of resistance against the white male gaze. The profound implication here is that it is, in fact, a rebellious act for Black women to reject the idea that they require fixing and to view their own bodies and appearances as "right."

In an effort to assert the rightness of their bodies and of their presence in general, these women took actions to resolve inner conflicts that arose when perceptions from the

outside world clashed with their own positive self-definitions. This process mirrors the effects of the "double consciousness" conceptualized by W.E.B. Du Bois. According to Du Bois the double consciousness defines the experiences of Black US Americans, as they must come to acknowledge the duality of their existence as both US citizens and outsiders of the dominant US society (Du Bois 1903).

For Black women, the concept of double consciousness is further complicated by simultaneous experiences of marginalization based on gender. In her book *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* Audre Lorde examined:

> In order to survive, those of us for whose oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers. This "watching" generates a dual consciousness in African-American women, one in which Black women become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection (Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 114).

The resulting outcome of this experience is that Black women must actively shield themselves from attacks levied at them on the basis of race *and* sex. As a matter of course, this protective act of "shielding" can be adapted to practices of media consumption. The "oppositional gaze" conceptualized by bell hooks, is characterized by the shielding strategies employed by Black female spectators of media. hooks contended that some Black women respond to disparaging images circulated in cinema by completely shutting the images out:

> Conventional representations of Black women have done violence to the image. Responding to this assault, many Black women spectators shut out the image, looked the other way, accorded cinema no importance in their lives (hooks 1992).

I discovered during my study that several of my participants preferred an approach to media consumption characterized by deemphasizing the importance of

mainstream media. The commonly reported motivating factor of media distrust appears to be a direct result of the combined factors of the violence that media has done to the image of Black women and an overall distrust of mainstream society to operate in a manner that upholds the well-being of Black women. These suspicions are not unfounded; as Lewis et al. revealed, Black women are likely to experience microaggressions in professional and educational settings based upon stereotypes that are widely circulated in mainstream media and discourses (Lewis et. al 2016). The concepts of double consciousness and the oppositional gaze appeared to inform the overwhelmingly distrustful view of mainstream media reported by women in my study and the consequential strategies the women felt compelled to utilize to combat the real-world byproducts of the systemically devalued image of Black women.

While I found that there were more commonalities overall between participants' responses and interpretations during interviews, there were some variations in responses that appeared to be affected by factors such as occupation and family dynamics. Though my participants' ages varied from 21-47 years of age I did not see as many variations in response between ages as I had initially expected. The main difference that I observed was in the women's interpretations of portrayals that promoted the magical Black character and/or the mammy.

The women who identified positive elements in these portrayals pointed out the value in being loving and nurturing to others and remaining resilient in unfavorable and demanding circumstances. One of the similarities among the women that made these assertions is that they had each worked extensively as caregivers. This work ranged from occupations in healthcare (such as a nurse's aide), child-care (in summer and afterschool

camps), and providing care for sick relatives. It is probable that these participants' responses were influenced by the demands of their respective jobs in which the qualities of nurturance and resilience were both highly regarded and necessary.

The second nuance I observed during interviews was the role of family dynamics in shaping participants' responses. The women in my study who were mothers and those who had close relationships with young nieces and nephews, spoke of the mental and emotional development of their children as strong determining factors in their decisions to filter media content. These women remarked on the importance of ensuring that their children (or nieces and nephews) were protected from images and narratives that could potentially diminish their sense of self-worth. Although these women did report taking steps to limit the mainstream media content that their children consumed, they mainly spoke of ensuring that the children in their care had adequate access to positive representations with which they could identify.

Conclusion

I embarked upon this study to explore Black women's self-defined conceptualizations of the various portrayals of Black womanhood provided by popular media and literature. Additionally, I sought to consider how Black women's perceptions of such portrayals affected their impressions about popular media in general. My findings were relatively consistent with research previously conducted on related areas of focus. In addition, I found that concepts previously developed to address the unique experiences of Black people in the United States, and specifically US Black women, (such as the

oppositional gaze, double consciousness, and controlling images) were especially applicable to the themes that emerged from this research.

This research contributes to an existing scholarly tradition that "demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge" (Collins 2000:221). Additionally, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that centralizes the experiences and perspectives of marginalized individuals and groups in order to generate a more thorough understanding of society as a whole.

The women in my study described their interpretations of popular depictions of Black womanhood in terms of the underlying perceptions that informed these depictions and the effects of these perceptions upon their daily interactions and their relationships with media and literature in general. They perceived these factors as interrelated and typically did not distinguish a fine line between the perceptions about Black womanhood that were encouraged by media and literature and their everyday experiences as Black women. These concepts were presented as though they existed on a continuum, as resulting consequences of the complex relationship between Black women and western society. The popular portrayals of Black womanhood in the media were therefore treated as extensions of the normalized practices of subjugating Black women and were thereby understood to produce similar after-effects.

The major difference that my participants perceived between media perceptions and their normalized experiences of gendered and racial inequality, was that the media representations afforded them a greater level of agency. The women in my study expressed pride in developing measures to protect themselves (and their children) from portrayals that they believed devalued the image of Black women. They described their

choices about media consumption as calculated and purposeful acts of agency. They viewed this agency as a form of resistance of the non-inclusive norms that Black women regularly found themselves measured against.

It is not surprising that my participants conceived the "wrongness" of Black womanhood to be a running theme in mainstream depictions of Black women. This theme was perceived overall as an unavoidable result of the subsuming white male gaze that is typical of mainstream media. What I found interesting was that the wrongness and/or otherness of Black women was recognized by my participants as a valuable commodity to the media industry. A commodity that, whether altered or amplified, allowed corporations to compete in the capitalist market. This concept advances the notion of Black women as commodities by implying that even the characteristics of Black womanhood can be owned, altered, utilized and/or ascribed by parties other than Black women.

The magical Black character, as a popular and controlling narrative, creates similar implications. The underlying message of the MBC, that most women in my study found problematic, is that Black women exist to be of service. Therefore, even unfavorable traits such as anger and aggression, can (and should) be refashioned and contorted to serve this purpose. The exotic Black woman mirrors the MBC in this regard. Both appear to further the notion that Black women do not really belong to themselves; their bodies, their abilities, and even their characteristics are already owned by others. Perhaps this is why the women in my study took pride in the ability to control their own media consumption. Not only was this a defiant act of agency, but perhaps it also negated outside ownership of their own individual values and opinions about Black womanhood.

In all, portrayals about Black women in mainstream media and the correlated after-effects of widespread circulation of these portrayals, were perceived to be extensions of a Eurocentric and capitalistic social system. Depictions of Black women that did not adhere to European standards of beauty and contradicted assumptions based on essentialism (that all Black women look and/or act the same) were interpreted as effective tools of resistance against the underlying idea Black women are inherently wrong and in need of fixing. Finally, the practice of filtering was regarded as a necessary act of self-preservation and an indicator of self-agency. The women in my study described the relationship of Black women and the media as one of push and pull. Mainstream media was regarded as a suspicious, distrustful entity that must be managed and guarded against and scoured for the small amount of good content that it is capable of producing. The media and literary depictions of Black women were described as an occupational hazard, an unavoidable symptom of life as a Black woman within Western society.

Future Directions

My sample was comprised of self-selected individuals who took an interest in my research focus. While it is possible that my study may have achieved more varied results had I conducted my research on a representative or random sample, I purposefully reached out to women who were more likely to have a critical read of the media. I consider this to be a strength of my study as it generated responses that tended not to lean toward mainstream interpretations of popular portrayals of Black womanhood. Additionally, the fact that I am a Black woman helped me to establish rapport with my participants more quickly than if I were viewed to be ‘outside’ of the group (not Black

and/or not a woman). This notion of camaraderie may have affected the types of responses that were given by my participants. The combined effect of choosing women with a critical read of the media and establishing my rapport as an in-group researcher was that my participants felt encouraged to delve deep into their interpretations of the portrayals. As a result, they engaged in discussions that illustrated a combination of the two levels of knowledge that characterize Black feminist thought: shared commonplace knowledge that reflects the everyday experiences of Black women and specialized knowledge produced by Black women who are specialists or experts within a particular area (Collins 2000).

In the future I would like to expand the study to include the perceptions of other marginalized women of color, particularly those who identify as Latinx and/or Caribbean. It would be interesting to explore the similarities and differences between the media portrayals of women from other racially marginalized groups and to compare the strategies used to navigate these portrayals. It could also prove useful to approach the study by narrowing the specific media depictions to just one or two kinds of media (such as images and/or literature from a certain era). I did not find that level of specificity necessary for this study because I sought to gain a more generalized understanding of Black women's interpretations of depictions of Black womanhood in media and literature.

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Sesko, Amanda K. and Monica Biernat. 2010. "Prototypes of Race and Gender: The Invisibility of Black Women." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46(2):356–60.

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Wingfield, Adia Harvey and Melinda Mills. 2012. “Viewing Videos: Class Differences, Black Women, and Interpretations of Black Femininity.” *Race, Gender & Class* 19(3/4):348–67.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please describe your experience with portrayals of Black women in art and literature.
2. Which experiences stood out to you?
3. Which portrayals (from the presentation) do you consider to be controlling images/narratives? Why?
4. Which portrayals do you consider to be empowering images and/or narratives? Why?
5. Whose gaze is being represented (who is telling the story) in these narratives/images? (controlling vs empowering).
6. How do the controlling images/narratives affect your experience as a Black woman in this society? What about the empowering images?
7. Which images/narratives do you believe will have the most impact on portrayals of Black women in the future?

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL

IRB
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129

IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE

Monday, April 08, 2019

Principal Investigator	**Nailah Herbert** (Student)
Faculty Advisor	Ashleigh Mckinzie
Co-Investigators	NONE
Investigator Email(s)	nlh2a@mtmail.mtsu.edu; ashleigh.mckinzie@mtsu.edu
Department	Sociology/Anthropology
Protocol Title	***Black women's views on expressions of identity***
Protocol ID	**19-2211**

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category *(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated below:

IRB Action	**APPROVED for ONE YEAR**		
Date of Expiration	**4/30/2020**	Date of Approval	4/8/19
Sample Size	50 (FIFTY)		
Participant Pool	Primary Classification: **Healthy Adults (18 years or older)** Specific Classification: **General adult self identifies as a "black woman"**		
Exceptions	1. Collection of voice data during interviews is permitted (restriction below). 2. Anonymous informed consent allowed to protect participant identity.		
Restrictions	**1. Mandatory signed (anonymous) informed consent; the participants must have access to an official copy of the informed consent document signed by the PI.** **2. Data must be deidentified once processed.** **3. Identifiable data must be destroyed as described in the protocol.** **4. Any identifiable data/artifacts that include audio/video data, photographs and handwriting samples must be used only for research purpose and must be destroyed after data processing.**		
Comments	NONE		

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (**4/30/2022**) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to **4/30/2020**. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews.

Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study MUST be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

Post-approval Actions

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website. Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Amendments to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. Inclusion of new researchers must also be approved by the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

Continuing Review (**Follow the Schedule Below:**)

Submit an annual report to request continuing review by the deadline indicated below and please be aware that **REMINDERS WILL NOT BE SENT.**

Reporting Period	Requisition Deadline	IRB Comments
First year report	3/31/2020	The PI requested to end the protocol by September, 2019. If not renewed, this protocol will automatically close on the date mentioned in page 1.
Second year report	3/31/2021	NOT COMPLETED
Final report	3/21/2022	NOT COMPLETED

Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Only two procedural amendment requests will be entertained per year. *In addition, the researchers can request amendments during continuing review. This amendment restriction does not apply to minor changes such as language usage and addition/removal of research personnel. .*

Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
NONE	NONE.	NONE

Other Post-approval Actions:

Date	IRB Action(s)	IRB Comments
NONE	NONE.	NONE

Mandatory Data Storage Requirement: All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, investigator information and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study has been closed. Subsequent to closing the protocol, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity.

IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

Quick Links: Click here for a detailed list of the post-approval responsibilities.
More information on expedited procedures can be found here.

IRB
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129

IRBF016: INFORMED CONSENT

(Use this consent INFORMATION AND DISCLOSURE SECTION
(Participant Copy)

Primary Investigator(s)	Nailah Herbert	**Student** ☒
Contact information	615.540.4610 nih2a@mtmail.mtsu.edu	
Department Institution	Sociology/Anthropology	
Faculty Advisor	Ashleigh Mckinzie Department Sociology	

Study Title I Do Not Weep at the World: Examining Black Women's Expressions of Selfhood and the Revolutionary Act of Claiming Experiences and Identity

IRB ID **19-2211** **Expiration: 04/30/2022** **Approval: 04/08/2019**

The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it. Please read this disclosure carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about this study and the information given below. You must be given an opportunity to ask questions, and your questions must be answered. Also, you must receive a signed copy of this disclosure.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are also free to withdraw from this study at any time. In the event new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this research study or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision whether or not to continue your participation in this study.

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance (Tel 615-494-8918 or send your emails to irb_information@mtsu.edu. Please visit www.mtsu.edu/irb for general information on MTSU's research participant protection policies.

Please read this section and sign Section B if you wish to enroll in this study. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this disclosure form for you to keep for your future reference.

1. **Purpose of the study:** You are being asked to participate in this research study because The purpose of this study is to assess how black women interpret or make sense of images and representations of black women in various media.
☐

2. **Classification of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study:**
☐
2.1 ***Educational Tests –*** Study involves either standard or novel education practices which consists educational testing and such studies expose the participants to lower than minimal risk
2.2 ***Behavioral Evaluation –*** Although the study may or may not involve educational tests, the specific aim is to understand behavioral characteristics. .
The following classifications indicate that the participant will be asked to perform or part-take in physical activities or procedures. Examples of such studies simple physical exercises, medical or clinical intervention, pharmaceutical testing and etc. Due to the nature of these studies, you may be exposed risky situations thay may exceed normal dayto-day scenarios.
☐ ☒
2.3 ***Psychological intervention or procedures*** 2.4 ***Physical Evaluation or Procedures***
2.5 ***Medical Evaluation or Clinical Research*** ***2.6 OTHER***

For this study I will conduct individual interviews and one focus group. During each discussion, participants will be asked to discuss specific literary compositions and visual images,
in the form of poems, stories, movie clips and vignettes, that exemplify various portrayals of black women.

3. **What are procedures we intend on doing in this study?**
   In this study I intend to engage participants in interview and focus group discussions about representations of black women within various forms of media. **The interview procedure will be captured on a tape by voice recording your responses. The responses will be transcribed and the actual voice data will be destroyed.** The responses will be further deidentified to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

4. **What will you be asked to do in this study?**
   For this study you will be asked view various clips of media (film, art, literature). Then you will be asked to participate in an interview and/or small focus group to discuss your views about the media shown during the study.

5. **What are we planning to do with the data collected using your participation?**
   This data will be used as part of my thesis research concerning portrayals of Black women in the media.

6. **What are your expected costs to you, your effort and your time commitment?** The only expected costs to you will be your effort and your time commitment.

7. **What are the potential discomforts, inconveniences, and/or possible risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this study?**
   The potential risk of participating in this research project is emotional discomfort generated from either the media content being analyzed or emerging from the subsequent discussions.

8. **How will you be compensated for your participation?**
   There will be no monetary compensation for participation in this study.

9. **What are the anticipated benefits from this study?**
   The potential benefit to science and humankind that may result from this study is a greater understanding about and sensitivity to the effects of positive and negative representations of Black women in the media. The potential benefit to the particpants in this study is the opportunity to enhance the broader knowledge about diverse media representations of Black women.

10. **Are there any alternatives to this study such that you could receive the same benefits?**
    There are no alternatives to this study at this time.

11. **Will you be compensated for any study-related injuries?**
    This study does not contain any components that would cause physical injuries. If you were to become injured during the study there would be no compensation.

12. **Circumstances under which the researcher may withdraw you from this study:** If you become ill or otherwise unable to participate in the study or if you begin to exhibit violent or innappropriate behavior during the study the researcher may choose to withdraw you.

13. **What happens if you choose to withdraw your participation?**
    There is not penalty if you decide that you would like to withdraw your participation from the study.

3. **Can you stop the participation any time after initially agreeing to give consent/assent?**
   You may stop participation at anytime during the study after initially agreeing to give consent.

4. **Contact Information.** If you should have any questions about this research study or possibly injury, please feel free to contact Nailah Herbert by telephone 6155404610 or by email nih2a@mtmaila.mtsu.edu OR my faculty advisor, Ashleigh Mckinzie, at ashleigh.mckinzie@mtsu.edu.

Research Participants Needed

Study Title: Black Women's Views on Expressions of Identity
Protocol ID **19-2211** Approval 04-08-2019 Expiration 04-30-2022

Study Description & Purpose

You are being asked to participate in this research study because the purpose of this study is to assess how black women interpret or make sense of images and representations of black women in various media.

Target Population

In order to participate the person must define herself as a black woman, be 18 years of age or older, and reside in the middle tennessee area.

Risk & Benefits

There is little to nor risk associated with this project. The benefits are that study participants may make a helpful contribution to scientific research that may provide useful information to creating social change.

Additional Information

The duration of the interviews for this study will last between forty minutes to an hour. This project does not include monetary compensation. This project did not receive outside funding

Contact Information

Nailah Herbert, Master's Graduate Student, Department of Sociology, (615) 540-4610 , Nih2a@mtmail.mtsu.edu
Faculty Advisor contact: Dr. Ashleigh Mckinzie, Professor of Sociology, ashleigh.mckinzie@mtsu.edu

APPENDIX C: MEDIA IMAGES, VIDEOS, AND EXCERPTS OF LITERATURE

Below are the images, video clips, and samples of literature to be used in the study.

Images

"Their Eyes Were Watching God." 23 July 2003. *Courses.Washington.edu*. Retrieved 04 April 2019. (http://courses.washington.edu/kgb2lit/harlem/student_projects/hansard/index.html).

"Tip Drill." 08 August 2018. *The Grio.* Retrieved 04 April 2019. (https://thegrio.com/2018/08/02/tip-drill-nelly-credit-card-defense/).

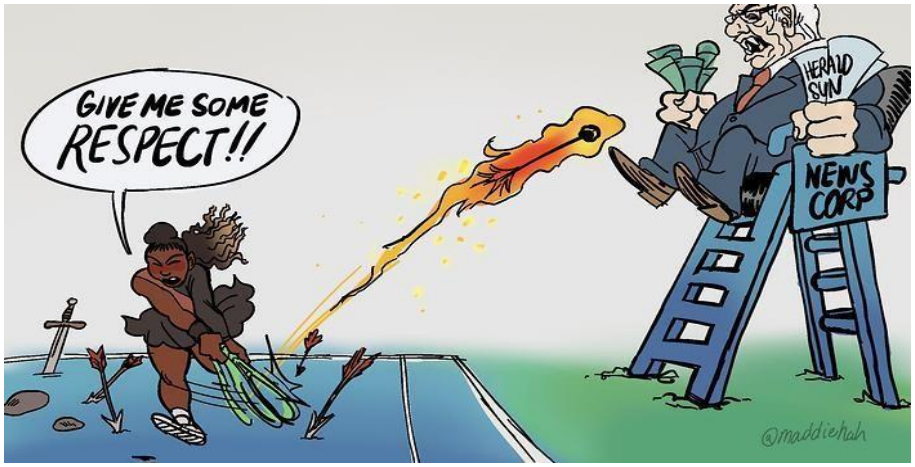
"We Can Do It!" 22 July 2014. *Marie Claire.* Retrieved 04 April 2019. (https://www.marieclaire.com/celebrity/music/a10179/beyonce-we-can-do-it/).

"Zahra the Windseeker." 07 October 2009. *Africa Is A Country.* Retrieved 04 April 2019. (https://africasacountry.com/2009/10/is-africa-ready-for-science-fiction).

"How to Get Away With Murder." 20 November 2014. *Hollywood Reporter.* 04 April 2019. (https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/how-get-away-murdersams-750853).

"Victoria's Secret Ad." 03 November 2014. *Get The Gloss.* 04 April 2019. (https://www.getthegloss.com/news/victoria-s-secret-underwear-ad-comes-under-fire).

"Fenty Beauty Ad." 06 December 2017. *Mic.* 04 April 2019. (https://www.mic.com/articles/186592/rihannas-fenty-beauty-is-more-than-amakeup-line-its-a-community-of-empowerment).



"Serena Williams Cartoon." 20 September 2018. *SBS.* 04 April 2019. (https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/culture/article/2018/09/12/artists-sharealternative-takes-racist-serena-williams-cartoon).

"Serena Williams." 06 December 2018. *Metro.* 04 April 2019. (https://metro.co.uk/2018/12/06/john-mcenroe-serena-williams-nothingapologise-us-open-meltdown-8216774/).

"Belle Movie Portrait." 05 February 2016. *Linda Borromeo.* 04 April 2019. (https://www.lindaborromeo.com/single-post/2016/02/05/A-Story-in-a-PortraitThe-Mystery-of-the-Painting-of-Dido-Elizabeth-Belle-Murray-and-Lady-Elizabeth-Murray).

"Sarah Gadon and Gugu Mbatha-Raw in Belle."2013. *IMDB.* 04 April 2019.

(https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2404181/mediaviewer/rm1232470272).

"Belle Hair Scene." 2015. *Fox Search Light.* 04 April 2019.

(https://foxsearchlightpictures.tumblr.com/post/116404851347).

“Okoye (Danai Gurira), Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o) and Ayo (Florence Kasumba). (Matt Kennedy/Marvel Studios/Walt Disney).” 20 February 2018. *Pop Sugar.* (https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/Female-Characters-Black-Panther44566970)

“The Help.” 11 August 2011. *CNN.* 04 April 2019. (http://www.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/Movies/08/10/the.help.movie/index.html).

Excerpts from Literature

"Tiana works two jobs in order to raise enough money to turn a rundown sugar mill into a restaurant, a promise she made to her now deceased father. As a result, Tiana has become absorbed with her work and doesn't have time for anything else. Tiana finds hope when her wealthy childhood best friend Charlotte pays her a lump sum of money to make and serve beignets at a masquerade ball she is hosting for the handsome but disinherited Prince Naveen."

Wikipedia. 2008. "Tiana (Disney)." Retrieved 02 April 2019. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiana_(Disney)).

"I'm not sad, but the boys who are looking for sad girls always find me. I'm not a girl anymore and I'm not sad anymore. You want me to be a tragic backdrop so that you can appear to be illuminated, so that people can say 'Wow, isn't he so terribly brave to love a girl who is so obviously sad?' You think I'll be the dark sky so you can be the star? I'll swallow you whole."

Shire, Warsan. 2011. *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth.* Manchester: Flipped Eye Publishing.

"According to the American Cancer Society, the death rate for all cancers for black women is 14% higher than that of white women.... Black women are also at a higher chance of being overweight thus making them open to more obesity-related diseases. There is also a racial disparity when it comes to pregnancy related deaths. While there are 12.4 deaths for every 100,000 births for white women, the statistics for black women is 40.0 deaths for every 100,000 births."

Wikipedia. 2017. “Black Women.” Retrieved 02 April 2019. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_women).

“BUT I AM NOT tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world -- I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

Hurston, Zora Neale. 2015. *How it Feels to Be Colored Me.* Massachusetts: Applewood Books.

Video Clip Links

ABC. 2014. “Scandal-I’m Not a Little Bitch Baby.” YouTube Website. Retrieved March 31, 2019. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Id1zIn5_CEA).

PATvids. 2010. “Almost There-The Princess and the Frog.” YouTube Website. Retrieved March 31, 2019. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irEBOfv4Ug4).

Ewa Banisz. 2009. “Their Eyes Were Watching God Best Moments 2.” YouTube Website. Retrieved March 31, 2019. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZZjEjdf4yg)

TV Clips. 2014. “Scandal 4x01 Olivia & Fitz Meet Again Clip/Scene HD.” YouTube Website. Retrieved March 31, 2019. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WfRcOMgt3M)

CBS News. 2011. “"Love Hurts." YouTube Website. Retrieved March 31, 2019. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=24&v=i9HCpX_xSCA)

20th Century Fox. 2017. “Hidden Figures: ‘Give or Take’ Clip [HD]- 20th Century FOX.” YouTube Website. Retrieved March 31, 2019. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAEnv1PvBvw)

Movie Clips. 2017.” Girls Trip (2017) - The Flossy Posse Breaks Up Scene (10/10)- Movieclips.” YouTube Website. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYQXYJIN3Jw).