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# Performing radical black womanhood: Black women artists as critical public pedagogues

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Performing Radical Black Womanhood: Black Women Artists as Critical Public Pedagogues

by

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**Dedication**

I dedicate this project to two women, my mother, Betty Phyllis Carter, and my grandmother,

Annie D. Carter. They are here with me in spirit, and their memories remind me to embody

compassion, love, and wisdom.

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bond that no one can ever tear apart. You have dedicated your entire life to making sure that my

mother's death was not in vain. You have supported me financially and emotionally when you

did not have to. Frankly, you could have left like many fathers do, but you believed in me. You

calmed my soul when cars and computer motherboards crashed, when I could have lost

everything. You reassured me that what was important was "getting this paper," and all else

would fall in place. Thank you.

**Abstract**

This project draws from research on critical public pedagogy to explore the pedagogical experiences of Black women artists and performers from Detroit, Michigan, using qualitative methodological components from autoethnography, ethnography, phenomenology, and art-based inquiry. The researcher used criterion sampling in order to select six of the women who were part of this project. The researcher attempts to explore how Black women counter stereotypical representations of Black womanhood, the role that art and performance play in maintaining or countering those representations, as well as how artistic endeavors transform the social, cultural, and political experiences of Black women. The findings demonstrate that by engaging as Critical Public Pedagogues, the women complicate and expand notions of the private and public sphere. This project provides insight into doing research from Endarkened Feminist and Black Feminist frameworks. The information in this project can provide insight and direction for research related to the role of Critical Public Pedagogy in the exploration of the nuances of the private and public sphere, the creation of an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of place, and the construction of radical subjectivities. The methodological approaches can help researchers who wish to explore forms of inquiry that are artistic, disruptive, and emancipatory.

Keywords: Critical public pedagogy, Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, Black Feminist Epistemology, Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of Place, radical Black female subjectivities

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## Chapter One: Finding Purpose Instead of Problems

I step behind the curtain, palms sweaty, heart racing, stomach cramping, body warm, and I realize I need to pray. Now, I have never prayed a day in my life, well, except on Fridays during Mass in middle school when the nuns would watch over me with their cold habited eyes lurking at this little heathen whose father forced her to attend Catholic school because she was "outta control." I would pray that Mass would end within the hour that was promised. But, this day I pray to my ancestors, specifically to the spirits of my grandmother, Annie Dee, and my mother, Betty Phyllis, that I can nail my lines. It was the annual production of the *Vagina Monologues*, and I will play many roles, but this one has an effect on me like none of the others. Every single time I was expected to say, "It wants to stop being angry" (Ensler, 2010, p. 73) in rehearsal, I would cry. I sobbed so hard that I could barely finish my lines because this was my story, and it was their story, too. So at this moment with one sweaty palm held by my other hand's warm yet nurturing fingers I speak out to Annie Dee and Betty Phyllis so that they might impart to me  their wisdom obtained from enduring more piercing occurrences than this one. And, so through the maroon curtains I appear. Back center stage. I become. With my "Black girl attitude-laced walk." Them. With my hands on my hips, I stare at these nervous, un-anticipating audience members, in this 250-capacity school theatre, dead in their eyes. I scan back and forth, up and down. My mouth dry, but ready. Their stories flow out. "My vagina is angry" (Ensler, 2010, p. 69)! They laugh. "It is" (p. 69, my emphasis)! The audience still giggles. "It's pissed off" (p. 69, my emphasis)! I continue in my stereotypical "Black girl from the "hood" voice. " It's furious, and it needs to talk! It needs to talk about all this shit" (p. 69, emphasis mine) Noticing the seriousness in my tone, the audience finally stops laughing, and so I continue, "and,

it needs to talk to you" (p. 69)! Someone from the audience shouts out, "All right then girl, talk!"
And, I continue.

That was my first time participating as part of the *Vagina Monologues*, but it is the instance I remember the most. This was an embodied experience, a moment when my mind, body, and spirit connected to tell the stories of so many women (according to Eve Ensler (2010), this was a story told to her by a Black woman, but it could be represented in a variety of ways). This was also my story. As I spoke, yelled, rolled my eyes, and paced the stage I was releasing anger. This monologue was a calling out—a way of talking back to those men who had abused me, some too naive to even notice. It was a way of saying that despite the history of the misuse and misappropriation of the Black woman's body throughout history that she was deserving of "gentle kisses…and deep touch" (Ensler, 2010, p. 73). We were one. The audience members' laughs and "call and response" activities were a sign to me that I was connecting with them at a place of pain, sadness, and anger, but at times, this performance was their comedic release. This monologue and my performance of it were not just about stirrups being too cold or the ridiculous creation of thong underwear (Ensler, 2010). Instead, they were about the experiences that women shared in common, and because they were shared in this way, they became common knowledge. My experiences as a painter and less often as a performer have provided opportunities to share experiences, construct knowledge, and engage in democratic communities, similar to that which started with my participation in the *Vagina Monologues*. Therefore, I have chosen to explore the public pedagogical endeavors of women who, like me, have used art to educate others about a myriad of issues including their own experiences as Black women performers.

Concepts related to critical public pedagogy are useful in this exploration as it begins to provide an explanation of our experiences as Black women artists when we perform in public spaces. According to Sandlin and Milam (2008), critical public pedagogy "fosters participatory, resistant cultural production; engages learners corporeally; creates a (poetic) community politic; and opens transitional spaces through détournement (a "turning around")" (Sandlin & Milam, 2008, p. 323). An analysis of my own experience is useful in two ways: first, by looking at my role as a performer-pedagogue, and second, by theorizing about the assumed experiences of the audience members. The *Vagina Monologues*, specifically "The Angry Vagina," served as mechanisms of critiquing the patriarchal culture responsible for the creation of non-female friendly products such as douche, tampons, and thong underwear as well as perpetuating a culture that belittles the woman's voice as a consumer of these products. Therefore, it produced a resistance-centered relationship between the pedagogue and male-dominated consumer culture, while also producing new relationships between the audience and the pedagogue signaled by laughter and tears. Likewise, this performance engaged both the audience and me on an embodied level. Specifically, as I paced the stage I could see the expressions and movements of those in the first two rows; in fact, my performance was based upon the energy projected from the audience. There were tears strolling down one woman's face who sat to the right of me after I proclaimed, "It wants to scream. It wants to stop being angry…" (p. 79) referencing what my vagina wanted. This aspect of my performance led to an engaged pedagogical opportunity for both the audience members and me. My identity as this angry woman was familiar to some of the women in the audience based upon their reactions. Perhaps the emotions displayed from audience members in the front row were due to a shared understanding of the anger caused by a sexist consumer culture. At that moment, I knew that my performance of this character—a

character that was still very similar to my own life—was successful. Thus, the shared understanding elicited from my performance created an effective interaction among us (Goffman, 1959).

Every time I used the profanity that the piece required, I could hear people laugh hysterically even though I could not see more than two rows up from the stage due to lighting. When I spoke to the audience, reflecting on the experience of enduring "cold duck lips" (Ensler, 2010, p.72) at the doctor's office during an annual pap smear or "not wanting my pussy to smell like rain" (p. 70) referencing the marketing of douche sprays that suggested that a woman's vagina was supposed to smell a certain way, I could sense that several of the women in the audience related as they shook their heads in agreement. The men, on the other hand, sat uncomfortably, which could be discerned through their constant fidgeting with their hands, their constant movement in their chairs, and their confused facial expressions. The reaction of the men in the audience did not necessarily signal a negative reaction since their discomfort could have been a result of a heightened understanding. Regardless of the reason for their reactions, as a pedagogue in this space, my understanding of knowledge was transformed by the ability to accept the affirming, dissenting, and ambiguous voices in the theatre at that day, while still maintaining my goal of critiquing the objectification of women. The ability to do so, according to Giroux (1988; Giroux & Simon, 1989) is the essence of critical pedagogical efforts.

As the performer and pedagogue, I learned what it felt like to know when someone had similar experiences. It brought about a sense of comfort that took over my body to know that I was not alone; however, there existed discomfort in knowing that these things were common since they were detrimental to women. In addition, to the affective experiences associated with the connection or lack of connection with the audience, I also embodied a racialized and

gendered  understanding of what it meant to deal with these issues and to perform in a way deemed stereotypical. My performance served as a theatrical public service announcement about the intricate ways that patriarchy enters our intimate lives, therefore shaping our connection with others. Doing so, provided an opportunity for the audience to confront and examine the unequal power dynamic that pervades American society. My performance, which featured political commentary on the intersections of oppression implicit in capitalist culture, served as an act in favor of public and democratic conversations. This opportunity is seldom experienced due to the abundance of hegemonic thinking and the enclosure of public space in our society (Mills, 1956; Mills, 1959). Specifically, my anger, real and performed, demonstrated the problems associated with man-made products to be used by women. In many ways, I maintained the mythical and authentic "Angry Black Woman" who is known for rolling her eyes, raising her voice, while simultaneously having one hand on her hip and one finger in someone's face. What was different, however, is that space had been made to illustrate my embodied experience as a Black woman constantly navigating a "white supremacist patriarchal capitalist society" (hooks, 1992, p. 112).

The pedagogical space was unique because we all existed, at least for that hour and a half that the production lasted, as a collective with differing experiences related to this concept, "the vagina." We all brought with personal and social interactions, viewpoints, and experiences that shaped our understanding and relationship to the production. Together we learn and teach each other. Specific to my performance, this monologue presents a unique opportunity to engage in a community that moves toward a goal of radical democracy as there are points of contention (among men, for example, that experience discomfort) and commonality (among the women who "feel my pain"), but overall there are points where there is a need to connect and understand each

other at least during that ninety minutes that we exist in close proximity to each other. This production also served as a space where traditional discourses of masculinity were challenged by our all-female cast while also providing men who had a willingness to change with discourses rooted in egalitarian beliefs. In addition, a community is formed knowing that all of the performers volunteered their time, and the audience, their time and money, as a way to support women-centered shelters in Ypsilanti and Detroit.

As a mechanism of détournement (as defined by Sandlin & Milam, 2008 as the means of transforming the designated meaning and use of a space or object), the *Vagina Monologues* becomes a way of making fun of and critiquing a pervasive patriarchal culture that attempts (often successfully) to control the minds, bodies, and spirits of women, by creating a need for certain products such as thong underwear or tampons, by critiquing the mass raping of women and girls throughout the world during times of war, or by listening as a grandmother describes the "archeological tunnel, a sacred vessel, a Venetian canal"(2010, p. 78) that is her daughter's womb as she gives birth to her grandchild. The *Monologues* make the hidden and "hideous" visible. Therefore, the many components of the performance of the *Vagina Monologues* become a critical public pedagogical experience for both the performers and the audience. Furthermore, a college auditorium usually used for lectures and performances that are more traditional is transformed as a site where counter narratives were welcomed. Although this experience included participants, who were from myriad racial and ethnic backgrounds, for me, my Black female self directly influenced the way that I performed and experienced the piece, "My Angry Vagina." Experiences such as this one have led to my interest in the activist work of artists, and how that activism constitutes a form of embodied knowing. The discussion of critical public pedagogy helps in situating this exploration as it acknowledges the embodied experiences of

those who produce works that counter hegemonic and oppressive norms that exist throughout American society. Similarly, critical public pedagogy makes space for the experiences of those who are placed at the margins of society, but who, through their activism, have demanded that their experiences take center stage. The Black women in this study have done so through performances such as that described to open this piece as well as through other forms of public art and performance, and in doing so they--we--have attempted to define ourselves for ourselves instead of allowing other definitions of Black womanhood to define us.

## Background of the Problem

*The Day I Found the Lorde*

In 1997, *Seventeen* magazine told me I was only partially good enough.

 My 15-year-old chest was too flat, and my behind--too fat.

Skin light enough to be kinda pretty, but never as beautiful as Them.

Looking in the mirror had become a thing of sadness and disdain.

In 2007, ten years later, a woman's words caused the mirror image to change

She, Black like me, was the only Lorde in whom I believed.

My confidence rose, slowly from the pages of her prose.

And, I found myself when she told me to rid of Their definitions.

She spoke to me at the latest of hours

when Their definitions of womanhood had begun to devour:

 *"If I didn't define myself for myself,*

*I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive*

*(Lorde, 1982, p. 134),"*

and at that moment, I knew I was the one starving

from trying to be someone other than

My light-skinned, Black, woman self.

## On Problems

This particular section of this chapter is supposed to be about problems, and the problem is that we are still discussing who gets to define what it means to be a Black woman, a Black woman artist, and a Black woman pedagogue. The problem is also that certain Black women's voices are left out of those definitions when they actually have a tremendous contribution to make to the genealogy of contemporary Black womanhood. As Audre Lorde suggests, "we were never meant to survive" (Lorde, 1978), and so I recognize that for a Black woman to be doing a project with other Black women that talks about our experiences as something other than chattel goods is paradoxical in a world filled with individuals that would rather us remain invisible. Therefore, instead of continuously discussing problems in this manner, this project demonstrates that Black female artists and performers, particularly those living in, from, or doing this work throughout the city of Detroit are positively providing a multifaceted explanation of Black womanhood. In addition, these explanations contribute to increased opportunities for recognition (Fraser, 2005; Harris-Perry, 2011).

According to Harris-Perry (2011), misrecognition is the erroneous characterization of an individual or a group of people based upon racial ascriptions. Those traits are inextricably linked to other socially constructed or organized identifiers such as gender, economic background, or sexuality. Harris-Perry's work adds to that explored by Fraser who argues that recognition is connected to the distribution of economic capital. Specifically, accurate depictions of Black women can only happen with the equitable redistribution of capital (Fraser, 2005). Therefore, misrecognition blocks the Black woman from attaining full citizenry because that misrecognition leads to our limited participation in the public sphere. These identities are seldom experienced singularly, instead they are informed by unjust power dynamics, which when combined become

the justification for intersectional oppression. Therefore, demeaning and exclusionary discursive practices become the justification for limiting the public representation of Black women. Characterizations such as the overly nurturing Mammy, the promiscuous Jezebel, the emasculating Sapphire, to the Angry Black Woman, which evolved from the Sapphire, are some of the problematic discourses that have been associated with the Black woman in the United States (Boylorn, 2013; Collins, 2000; Morgan & Bennett, 2006; Morton, 1991). Collins (2000) contends that depicting "African American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression" (p. 71). These forms of misrecognition have come in the form of bodily and sexual denigration originating during slavery, but also through the use of stereotypes created by and for the benefit of White Americans as well as through the cultural control of Black women's behaviors and identities through the politics of respectability within the Black community. Black women, however, have taken great effort to counter these forms of misrecognition through various activities. Michele Wallace (1990) argues that Black women must "address issues of representation directly, to become actively engaged in criticizing the politics of the production of culture" (p. 6). Wallace also recognizes that our abilities to do so are immobilized by a lack of access to positions of power that offer possibilities to control or change these representations. When Black women attempt to create our own interpretations of Black womanhood, those representations are deemed as fictitious, and the cultural producers are chastised (Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 1992; Wallace, 1990). Yet, Black women still create cultural productions imbedded with new and counter-narratives related to Black female representation, and have done so inside and outside of hegemonic spaces on purpose.

Morton (1991) contends that "fictional and popular media have played a major role in shaping the culture's image of black women's history" (p.ix), but these forms of media have also been used by Black women as pedagogical tools to counter misrecognition. Existing research (Bartlow, 2010; Brown, 2008; Davis, 1972; hooks, 1992; Pough, 2004) demonstrates how Black women and girls have actively countered misrecognition through various forms of activism. Brown (2008) and Pough (2004) have demonstrated how Black women and girls have done this in artistic and performative ways by using music, poetry, and dance. These performative acts served as spaces where their agency could be realized by interrogating "the gaze of the other" while also developing a critical gaze that could help to name those forms of oppression as a form of resistance (hooks, 1991, p. 116). Adding to hooks' work, Pough demonstrates that the public performances by Black women doubled as pedagogical acts (2004). This research adds to these varying forms of research by demonstrating how Black women continue to use art and performance to not only tell about their experiences as Black women, but also as a way to counter stereotypes about other Black women while also encouraging opportunities for democratic conversation even when public spaces based upon the notion of community and transformation are being enclosed.

## Purpose of the Study

This project began as a means of exploring the pedagogical experiences of Black female artists and performers from Detroit, Michigan, using qualitative methodological components from autoethnography, ethnography, phenomenology, and art-based inquiry. Initially, I used criterion sampling to select the six participants using the requirement that they perform in the city of Detroit, that they be Black women, and that they identify as artists or performers. My own experiences serve as a seventh voice in the project. As the project developed through my own

reflections and through conversations with the women involved, it became a means of exploring how their development as Black females and as Black female artists have led to lives and creative work that counter misrecognition and promote empowerment through public pedagogical acts. The women in this project are "taking back" this public sphere through demanding that they be rightfully recognized on their own terms, which often necessitates the creation of spaces that complicate the dichotomies of public and private. As Foucault (in Foucault & Hoy, 1986) contends:

> …We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is…of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (p. 22)

Therefore, in many ways the idea that the private and public are somewhat separate spheres is an inaccuracy that plagues our understanding of self and our place in the world. The women in this project create and perform at these intersections through creating and performing in public spaces such as open mic nights, urban gardens, museums, and on street corners. In doing so, these women are practicing critically public pedagogic acts.

### Significance of the Study

Theorists and qualitative researchers have discussed how Black females on a more individual level, from children to adults, have defied stereotypes surrounding what it means to be and behave as Black females. Several studies have done so by looking at the artistic and performative methods used by Black girls to defy the odds placed against them (Brown, 2013; Brown, 2012; Brown, 2008, Gaunt, 2006, Love, 2012, Pough, 2004; Pough, 2007). This project adds to all of this research by exploring a very specific group, Black women who have a connection to the city of Detroit, and who create and perform in public spaces. However, even

more significant is the pedagogical value that the lives and work of Black women have. Although I hope that people from various social and cultural backgrounds learn something from this project, a more important goal is to demonstrate to Black women and girls that we are deeply complex, delightful, and political beings and so linear representations of "the Black woman" is not enough.

While exploring the aforementioned research by other theorists about discourses surrounding Black womanhood in general, I wondered how Black women artists might contribute to the existing literature. Three questions came to mind. The questions are as follows:

1. How have Black females in Detroit countered stereotypical representations of Black womanhood?

2. What role has the art and performances of Black females from Detroit played in maintaining or countering those representations?

3. How have Black female artists and performers served as public pedagogues who teach about the complexities of Black womanhood and how has this begun to transform the social, cultural, and political milieu of Black women?

## Research Design

While conducting and participating in this project, there were three areas of qualitative inquiry used: autoethnography, ethnography, and phenomenology. Various components of these all three forms were used to engage in interviews, conduct interviews, and analyze other provided information from the seven women in this project, which includes my own autoethnographic contributions. These women (who have given consent to use their actual names), Leah, Mahogany, Sabrina, Krystal, Rachel, and Ryan ranged in age (22-47), class background, residence (some of the women perform or create in Detroit, but no longer reside in the city), and creative or performative activity. Each woman was asked a set of questions related

to life history, artistic and performative development, and the meanings associated with this development. These questions followed Seidman's (1998) three step, phenomenological, open-ended interviewing approach. In order to begin the autoethnographic component of the project I answered all of the questions asked of the other women using autobiographical journaling which featured epiphanies (Ellis, 1996), poetry, and paintings. I used ethnographic approaches as a means of looking deeply and carefully at various cultural artifacts pertinent in the women's lives.

The interviews with each woman lasted between one and three hours, and took place at different places throughout the Detroit metropolitan area. The observations lasted between one and two hours depending on the event taking place, and sometimes the observations were part of the interview process when women would create as we spoke with each other. Background research and follow-up analysis of artifacts relating to each woman totaled 14 hours. All the interviews were transcribed by me, and reviewed several times depending on the interview. Phenomenological bracketing and explication occurred as well as thematic analysis to create a fuller picture of the varying experiences that follow in chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation project.

In order to complete these varying forms of analysis, Black feminist and Endarkened feminist epistemological framework were used as these two frameworks are centered on the idea that the lives Black women are significant enough to the be the sole focus of academic and non-academic research (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006; 2012). These frameworks also argue that the experiences of women be recognized as being shaped by interlocking systemic oppressions, but also that Black women from all walks of life have theorized about these experiences thus creating knowledge often left out of canonized academic texts. The latter of the two, Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, contends that these experiences are of not only the mind and body, but

also are based upon a spiritual component, which is defined in varying ways and thus deserving

of further exploration. This project employs these two frameworks as supportive tools to assist in

telling the collective stories of the women who were part of this project.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter serves as a preview of the chapters that follow. Likewise, this

chapter is the beginning of a project dedicated to placing the narratives of seven women in

conversation with each other as it relates to growing up in Detroit, developing as artists, serving

as public pedagogues, and ultimately developing radical identities based upon their public

performances of art. What follows in Chapter 2 is a narrative about my personal relationship to

the literature relevant to this project. It doubles as the traditional literature review found in

projects of this nature. The chapter begins with an exploration of critical pedagogy, and explores

its development into public pedagogy, and critical public pedagogy. I continue this narrative and

literature review by exploring the paradigmatic frameworks and methods of theoretical analysis

that support my contention that Black women have served as critical public pedagogues despite

being left out of the research written on the subject. I continue by examining the public art of

various Black women throughout American history from an Endarkened Feminist, Black

Feminist, and critical public pedagogical framework to support that contention. I end the chapter

by arguing for an expounded theory of critical public pedagogy, which accounts for the radical

transformation of the pedagogue herself.

**Chapter Two: A Narrative Review of Literature**

My father constantly reminds me that I was born to disrupt, create discomfort, and push boundaries. Despite every effort to be the world's quiet little Black girl who maintains the natural order of things, I cannot be that. Consequently, the review of literature relevant to this project is more than just "a review." Instead, it is the story of finding my place as an artist and educator within academia. This narrative, which doubles as a review of literature, explores the theories that have led to critical public pedagogy by first exploring critical pedagogy, public pedagogy, and how these fields of inquiry and practice relate to and differ from critical public pedagogy. I situate the creation, performance, and display of the artistic works of Black women as part of the literature on critical public pedagogy. I demonstrate that the use of Black feminist and Endarkened feminist paradigmatic frameworks are useful in exploring the critical-pedagogical works of Black women artists, while adding to these frameworks an exploration of place, space, and time, which I argue can ultimately expand the current literature on critical public pedagogy. Finally, I provide examples of Black women artists who create and perform in public spaces in order to demonstrate that they are indeed critical public pedagogues. By providing these examples, I justify the belief that critical public pedagogy provides Black women with a mechanism for critiquing and countering cultural representations that have been created for them, thus, contributing to the development of a radical Black female consciousness that exists at the intersections of the private and public sphere.

**On the Power of the Critical and Public**

**Coming to Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy is the reason why I lasted in a doctoral program, or any graduate program to be honest. It taught me that my experiences, in all of their complexities, mattered. bell hooks' (1992; 1994) writing in *Teaching to Transgress* and *Black Looks: Race and*

*Representation* taught me that emancipatory teaching should exist in the classroom, but often did not occur for most students, and especially so if you were Black and female. The writings of bell hooks also taught me that learning could surpass and transgress the structures of that aforementioned classroom. Thus, hooks became my own personal pedagogue urging me to develop a critical gaze when it came to interpreting the day-to-day experiences of my life. Through her work, I had begun to develop what she calls a "radical black female subjectivity," through "the sharing of information and knowledge by black women with black women" (hooks, 1992, p. 56), but first, through my own exploration of my experiences. hooks' writing demonstrated what no other person in my life at that time could—that a radical Black female consciousness was only possible when Black women recognized the role that racism, sexism, and class exploitation played in our individual struggles. While I appreciated hooks' naming of my struggles, I was still in need of explanations related to how my individual experiences were complicated by larger institutional arrangements, a term popularized by Mills (1956).

Later on, during my doctoral studies I was introduced to writers, namely Henry Giroux, who explored how pedagogical tools were used to maintain oppressive relationships of power, while exploring how those relationships could be understood and dismantled through pedagogical practices and cultural politics. Placed within a larger sociological and cultural context, critical pedagogy, as proposed in the many works by Giroux (1988;1996; 1997; 2011), taught me that my experiences as a Black female were informed by my relationship with various social institutions and milieu—schools, media, community, family—which presented limitations as well as potentialities. These texts led to my understanding that:

> …knowledge, power, desire, and experience are produced under specific basic conditions of learning and illuminates the role that pedagogy plays as part of a struggle over

assigned meanings, modes of expression, and directions of desire, particularly as these

bear on the formation of the multiple and ever-contradictory versions of the 'self' and its

relationship to the larger society. (Giroux, 2011, p. 2)

Until reading Giroux's words, I had never considered the relationship between power and

knowledge. I knew that many times, and in various spaces, teachers and men silenced me, but I

never considered how significant this silence was in my understanding and transformation of

myself. My introduction to Giroux only strengthened my identity as a radical Black female

because it provided an understanding of the very real possibilities of coming to consciousness

through education as well as how to use that consciousness to construct pedagogical

relationships in spaces other than the classroom. Despite my introduction to these authors in

college courses, my understanding of the relationship between critical pedagogy, consciousness

raising, and resistance did not develop until I could engage the writings of these authors on my

own time and during conversations at hip-hop collective meetings, local cafes, or the living room

couches of friends. The space needed to navigate and understand the discomfort of radical

consciousness raising could not take place in the confines of my college classrooms.

**Coming to Public Pedagogy**

Realizing this created an interest in how critical pedagogy could be used outside of

formal educational spaces. Again, college professors provided information relevant to my

inquiries on education that existed beyond schooling. Giroux (2004; 2005) had again been

provided as a key scholar in this area. His work, which often centered on media and

propagandized messages regarding a combination of cultural politics and political economy,

informed a growing area of research that covered "various forms, processes, and sites of

education and learning occurring beyond or outside of formal schooling" (Burdick, Sandlin, &

O'Malley, 2014, p. 2). Burdick and Sandlin (2013) define three overarching public pedagogical processes. The first area focuses on "understandings of pedagogy that consider the subject as a rational, humanist entity, one that can be acted upon educationally via the introduction of content…either culturally prescriptive or liberatory in nature" (p. 147). Research related to this explores the transmission of content (with a focus on processes, not quantifiable amounts of education acquired).

Burdick and Sandlin (2013) contend, "this strand approaches pedagogy via the Marxian fields of critical theory and cultural studies, both of which take up culture as engaged in a constant, active…pedagogical process of its own reproduction" (p. 148). Formal sites of education such as schools as well as informal sites, such as popular forms of media, have served as apparatuses for the transference of content. Philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) calls these forms of media, "cultural state apparatuses" because of their place in public (at least in theory) as well as their primary ideological function. While many of the researchers who write on these forms of pedagogy focus on the "problematic" influences of these educational tools (Giroux & Simon, 1989; Wright & Sandlin, 2009), others detail the emancipatory possibilities that often arise as part of this strand of public pedagogy (Ellsworth, 2005).

The second strand, which differs from those who view public pedagogy as the one-way transmission of information, focuses on the interactive aspects of public pedagogy (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013). These pedagogues, "drawing from feminist, dialogic, and performance-based theoretical traditions…privilege the intersection of the subject and object of pedagogy—the relational meanings that are generated via active, sensate, and embodied interactions" (p. 147). These authors rely upon and expect the wide-ranging meanings that might come from the content that is illustrated. Public pedagogy as a relational process is centered on the ability of the learner

to "talk back" (Ellsworth, 1988; hooks, 1989) to the information that is being "transferred." Likewise, it "focuses more on embodied, holistic, performative, intersubjective, and aesthetic aspects of pedagogy and sees learning as more tentative and ambiguous" (p. 157).

The third strand of public pedagogy discussed by Burdick and Sandlin (2013) focuses on pedagogical strategies that "call attentions to the arbitrary nature of human ideological and material structures" (p. 148) through critiquing the dualistic (binary implicit) understandings of academic knowledge. Burdick and Sandlin (2013) state that these pedagogues promote a "posthuman imagination," which "helps us break from the already-known by challenging boundaries, taken-for-granted norms, definitions, rules, and even our common sense experiences…" (p. 165). Imagination is of high importance in the pedagogical strand as it is through the imagination that boundaries can be perforated and transcended. Compared to critical theory, posthumanist pedagogies are adamant about "rupturing the divide between cognition and the sensory and with redefining what it means to be critically conscious" (p. 168). My interests in critical public pedagogy led me to explore the commonalities of each of these strands presented by Burdick and Sandlin (2013) since it is my belief that the public pedagogies of Black women aid in disseminating information to their audiences, while also allowing marginalized peoples (the audience and the pedagogues themselves) to "talk back" to domination and oppressive forces. In addition, that which the pedagogical practices of many Black women artists and performers is spiritual which engages in the "rupturing" of the binaries spoken of by the authors.

Theories related to critical public pedagogy were significantly tied to developing my own confidence as a student in a doctoral program composed of mostly elementary and secondary educators. Specifically, critical public pedagogy was like a coming home by validating that pedagogical possibilities did exist outside of formal spaces, and that as an artist, activist, and

community member, I could focus on an area that spoke to me in those roles. Once again, the work of Henry Giroux (2000; 2004) was central to understanding critical public pedagogy. Giroux had become a theoretical father figure who knew exactly when I needed him the most. This was especially true since he (metaphorically at least) had been present during my discovery of critical pedagogy, public pedagogy, and now critical public pedagogy. In an extensive review of Giroux's focus on cultural studies and turn to critical public pedagogy, Robbins (2009) demonstrates that Giroux's initial ideas related to critical public pedagogy explored the usefulness of public culture in the curricula of formal classrooms. Giroux (1988; 1989; 2000) conceptualized critical public pedagogy as consideration of how publically mediated messages or representations carried meanings only understood through considering the social milieu that maintained societal standards through unequal power relationships. By bringing cultural representations that were relevant to students into the formal classroom, could become cultural agents themselves (Robbins, 2009). Giroux would continue to explore the uses of popular culture by focusing on the multiplicity of the "modes and mechanisms by which pedagogy operated in these sites of everyday life" (Robbins, 2009, p.436). Today, Giroux even explores the cultural production of "selfies" as a pedagogical tool that implicitly supports surveillance (Giroux, 2015).

**Finding the Critical in Public Pedagogy**

During one of my many excursions for course research materials, I ran across an article written by Giroux that was featured in the reader on Public Pedagogy by Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick (2009). Within the text, I found a chapter on critical public pedagogy, which I failed to realize, was a "thing" as I believed public pedagogy to be critical enough. However, within this text, Sandlin and Milam (2008) would expound upon the definition by providing examples of how "culture jamming" as part of anti-consumption activism demonstrated the process of

"doing" critical public pedagogy. I was elated that there was a "process" of doing critical public pedagogy. The authors explained, "culture jamming, the act of resisting and re-creating commercial culture in order to transform society…operates as critical public pedagogy through the ways in which it (1) fosters participatory, resistant cultural production; (2) engages learners corporeally; (3) creates a (poetic) community politic; and (4) opens transitional spaces through détournement (a 'turning around')" (p. 324).

I believed that these practices could be relevant to my own work as a performing artist could be examined using these guidelines. I began exploring how performing on stage as part of public productions or painting the faces of "natural" Black women on canvas in front of hundreds of hip-hop fans could encourage resistance to stereotypical representations of Black womanhood through reaching people on an aesthetic and emotional level. Likewise, Sandlin and Milam (2008) led me to examine how these practices strengthened the community and promoted the transgression of boundaries of those spaces. This was especially true since the authors emphasized that the counterhegemonic nature of public pedagogy could be found in the "performative, improvisational, and tentative rather than fixed…," as public actors negotiate the politics of representation (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010, p.119). This focus continued discussions started by Stuart Hall (1997) and Giroux (2000; 2004; 2011). Embedded within this representation is the critical language that aids in enabling "public actors to connect critique to everyday social activity" (Jaramillo, 2010, p. 504). Thus, as a public performance artist it has become important to comprehend the ways that my art and identity as a Black woman dismantle and uphold dominating social norms through language and action. Clarifying these things led to my understanding of the purpose of art and performance as critical public pedagogical tools, which, as McLaren (2010) suggests, is to encourage a "plurality of narratives and conceptions of

what constitutes both consciousness and reason" (p. 649). Therefore, one of the callings of public pedagogical agents is the "need to struggle alongside those voices, making the path as we walk, horizontally and not from a position of ascendancy, not from above…," (p. 650) thus fostering radical democratic community.

This opportunity to be part of a radical democratic community while at the same time contributing to it is what I wanted, and what I felt I had when I did perform. However, I wondered if there was space in this radical democratic community for a radical Black female performance artist especially since I did not see anyone who resembled me in the literature on critical public pedagogy, except when I found the writings on critical pedagogy as proposed by bell hooks. There was nothing demonstrating how Black women engaged in cultural productions as a mechanism of critical public pedagogy. This was despite my acknowledgement of the pedagogical role that Black women had played historically inside and outside of formal spaces. Likewise, my own experience as an audience member at rallies, poetry readings, concerts, and exhibits as well as my own performances in public spaces reassured me that we Black women needed to be acknowledged as contributors to the body of work that was developing into critical public pedagogy.

**Endarkening Critical Public Pedagogy**

In order to begin to demonstrate how the experiences of Black female performance artists were part of critical public pedagogy, it was necessary to employ a theoretical perspective that could account for our absence as well as make space for our voices. Cynthia Dillard (2006; 2012) offered Endarkened Feminist Epistemology as that which could consider varying representations of Black women through the welcoming and examination of the constructions of knowledge shared by Black women in traditional academic texts as well as through narrative, poetry, and visual art. Dillard's work added to that theorized by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) who

demonstrated that though race and gender were socially constructed categories, they both shaped the experiences of Black women in very tangible ways. Thus, Dillard (2006) demonstrated that an Endarkened feminist epistemological stance considered those constructions and resulting experiences as that which shapes the Black woman's involvement in and obligation to her community.

Employing an Endarkened feminist epistemological stance means attending to both the intellectual and spiritual components of teaching and learning. Therefore, an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology challenges processes related to social construction of knowledge. For Black women, these acts create vulnerability due to what Dillard calls a "stepping out on faith" to see one's own experiences, wrought with the emotions and complexities, as worthy of using personal truth as the basis for theorization (2006, p. 21). Dillard (2006) continued to use the work of Hill Collins (2000) in her exploration of the third component of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, the use of dialogue in truth telling and constructing knowledge. Dillard demonstrated "there is value in the telling, in invading those secret silent moments often unspoken, in order to be understood as both participating in and responsible to one another…there is value in being connected, in seeking harmony and  wholeness as a way to discern 'truth'"(p. 22).

The fourth component of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology required that the everyday experiences of Black women be recognized as informing our meaning making. Again, she adds to that proposed by Hill Collins (2000) who demonstrates that wisdom is a necessary component of knowledge since it develops through our material experiences. Without wisdom, knowledge would not exist since the former validates what we know. Next, Dillard (2006) demonstrates that an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology "both acknowledges and work against the 'absent

presence' of women of color" in work dedicated to exploring the construction of knowledge. It suggests that when the voices, experiences, and practices of Black women are not considered for their historical contributions and the future possibilities of those contributions, then it leads to a distorted representation of the research in question, and of Black women as agents of knowledge construction. Finally, Dillard (2006) demonstrated that an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology "has as its research project the vigilant and consistent desire to 'dig up' the nexus of racial/ethnic, gender, and other identity realities—of how we understand and experience the world as Black women" (p. 26). Thus, doing research on Black women in an area of writing and practice that has left us nearly invisible is political just as acting as critical public pedagogical agents is political since both present opportunities to disrupt normative social arrangements that fail to depict the experiences and pedagogical practices of Black women accurately. In Dillard's (2006; 2011; 2013) development of an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology I found the support I needed to disrupt the current writings on critical public pedagogy. I continued to search for tools that aligned with a Black feminist theory that would assist me in considering the historical and contemporary artistic and performative contributions of Black women as political and pedagogical tools.

Approaches to artistic critique that were strictly dedicated for the use by and for Black women were first theorized by bell hooks (1992) through her work on critical black female spectatorship, and Barbara Christian's (1997) work on Black feminist cultural criticism. These theories have aided in exploring the works of Black women through the eyes of those who have traditionally been silenced as cultural critics and creators. bell hooks (1992) proposed a critical Black female spectatorship as a site of resistance in which Black women could employ an oppositional gaze to look as a mechanism of documentation and respond critically as a mode of

opposition. Specifically, exploring the role of film as portraying Black women in conventional and misinterpreted ways, hooks demonstrated that by "[l]ooking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future" (p. 131). Christian theorizes that a Black feminist cultural criticism works in similar ways by making the invisible Black woman artist and artistic subject visible. Christian (1997) outlines the principles necessary to employ Black feminist critique, which she suggests begins with:

> …a primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writings, she would also work from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition. The breadth of her familiarity with these writers would have shown her that not only is theirs a verifiable historical tradition that parallels in time the tradition of Black men and white women writing in this country …Another principle which grows out of the concept of a tradition and which would also help to strengthen this tradition would be for the critic to look first for precedents and insights in interpretation within the works of other Black women. (p. 13)

These theories proposed by hooks and Christian demonstrated to me that exploring the critical public pedagogical endeavors of Black women, specifically Black female performance artists could add to that written on the traditions of Black female radicalness and opposition while also demanding a space be made for the Black woman's experience in the field of public pedagogy. If critical public pedagogy should truly lead to radical democratic practices and communities, then scholars must acknowledge the contributions of Black women to those communities.

## The Significance of Space, Place, Time, and Scale

Using Black feminist and Endarkened feminist critiques and discussions of knowledge construction means that I must always consider the intersections of identity that play a role in the lives of Black women. My own situatedness as a Black woman from Detroit who has resided in this area since the 1980s, urges me to look for those theoretical considerations that relate to the significance of place and time. Therefore, the works of Doreen Massey, Chandra Mohanty, and Suzanne Lacy are useful. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy's (2004) explication of scale in relation to space, place, and time are equally valuable.

Massey (1994) contends that the concepts of space and place are constructed and interrelated, and that they shape constructions of class and gender. A good example of this is the increased presence of women in the labor force in Michigan during the 1940s. During this time, more married women entered the industrial workforce (single women had been working) due to the increased amount of men leaving for World War II. In Michigan, a region highly populated by factories, women went to work in automobile facilities transformed to manufacturers of war materials (Sugrue, 1996). The number of women working in Michigan increased from 24 percent in 1940 to 34 percent in 1943 (Sugrue, 1996). Within this example, a clear relationship can be inferred between place, space, class, and gender. The place relates to an industrialized Detroit, the space is two-fold in that it refers to the increased opportunity for women to work due to the war, but it also refers to the spaces occupied by women, which were at one time occupied by men. However, these spaces were readily available because of the "place" in which these women resided. Gender and class shaped both place and space by redefining the meaning of "women's work" as that which could take place in the factory. These wartime factories became spaces where married women who would not traditionally work were somewhat welcomed. However, class is also relevant since women of certain social classes had always held a space (although

limited) in Detroit's industrialized labor force. Likewise, the place and space constructed new ideals associated with the meaning of womanhood. In the 1940s, working in the wartime factories was now the honorable thing to do for married and middle-class women. The work of Massey calls upon researchers to consider "the ways in which space and place are currently conceptualized," and challenge, "the currently dominant form of gender definitions and gender relations" (p. 2). Mohanty (2003) has answered her call.

Mohanty (2003) challenges feminist thinkers to consider the intersections of identity beyond class and gender, and how those intersections are connected to the "politics of location" or "the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definitions and self-definitions…" (p. 68). Within Mohanty's call to think about cultural boundaries in relationship to geographical lies an opportunity to examine the construction of race and ethnicity as connected to place and space. It is useful to use the same example of women's wartime work in Michigan as this was also a racialized experience that influenced the lives and actions of Black women. Sugrue (1996) demonstrates that Black women were often refused work within these spaces that suggested they were in desperate need for the help of women. When Black women were given opportunities to work, there was vast racial tension on the factory floor (Sugrue, 1996). This relates to Mohanty's contention that there are multiple locations within these spaces. Therefore, Black women maintained a different relationship to place and space. This is not to say that White women did not encounter sexism on the factory floor, but instead this attempt to recognize the intersectional differences in the construction of place, space, class, gender, and race. This signals another relevant factor, which is the concept of temporality.

Both Massey (1994) and Mohanty (2003) argue that there is a temporality that shapes the construction of places, spaces, class, gender, and ethnicity. In her work, Massey argues against the dichotomization of space/time, and argues for the recognition of the relationship between space and time. She likens the traditional dichotomies to those used to position men as superior to women, which is a notion rooted in modernist discourses. For Massey, one cannot exist without the other despite their difference. Mohanty (2003) adds to Massey's idea by demonstrating the significance of time in the history of place and space. When time is considered, an understanding of the constructions of and relationships between place, space, class, gender, and ethnicity can be reached. The example of women's wartime work in Detroit is once again relevant. When temporality is considered, the differing experiences of White women workers and Black women workers are placed in a much-needed context. The opportunity for White women to work in factories during the 1940s was a choice based on class, but it was also only a choice because of the industrial milieu that had continued to develop in the city of Detroit between the 1920s and the 1940s. This choice was also based on the timing of the war. Therefore, temporality shaped the city of Detroit as well as the spaces for women's work while also shaping the class-based and racialized climate of the city. Despite having to deal with a traditionally masculine work environment, these women were seen as doing the honorable thing for women of their class and race by working during times of war. The idea of temporality can also be used to explore the race and class a bit further. The Detroit of the 1940s was one wrought with racial segregation and animosity. Therefore, although the opportunity existed for women to work during times of war, only certain women fit the definition of a viable working woman. Although certain White women had a choice to work during the war as an honorable gesture, Black women had very little choice in the matter. When she was employed, she was often the

victim of both racialized and gendered oppression on the factory floor. I have used this example as a demonstration of the ways that space, place, and temporality have shaped the lives of Black women. I recognize that is one small example, and that the lives of Black women are always impacted by the intersections of space, place, and time. Knowing this has led to an interest in the ways that these three areas, space, place, and temporality, have influenced the public pedagogical and political performance of art.

The public art of Suzanne Lacy is useful in this explication. Much of Lacy's work has been analyzed as providing political commentary on the spaces in which they are situated (Irish & Lacy, 2010). Lacy has also managed to enact these performances as part of an urban landscape, during which her work has provided a much needed criticism of the structural inequalities existent within cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. These pieces also celebrate the variations and intersections of identity of those traditionally marginalized in urban places. Lacy utilized various spaces within these public spaces to demonstrate the complexities of gendered and racialized oppression. In *Three Weeks in May*, for example, Lacy introduced the "simultaneous juxtaposition of art and non-art activities within an extended time frame, taking place within the context of popular culture" (Lacy, 1995, p. 25). During this performance, Lacy provided commentary about the assumed private issue of rape in urban communities by creating a space for dialogue in a public shopping plaza. The concept of place became a significant component of the cultural production of art in this space since Lacy created 25-foot maps on which she pinpointed the geographic places where rapes were occurring, but were underreported. Added to the significance of place and space was temporality.

Lacy performed *Three Weeks in May* during 1977, a time when many women became vocal about the pervasive rape culture within American society. The term was first used to

describe the social and cultural climate that influenced the invisibility of the occurrence of rape and blaming of its survivors. Connell and Wilson (1974) first used the term and Brownmiller (1975) in texts associated with the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Connected to the concept's publication were consciousness-raising groups developed as part of second wave feminism as a means of politicizing the personal experiences of women. Lacy participated in these conscientization efforts through public performance art. The very personal act of rape was presented in a way that engaged people who walked through the public space. Lacy's performance piece encouraged a dialogue, and thus, an attempt to create a community around the discussion of a taboo topic. Lacy also performed various aspects of the instillation over a three-week period in May, which spoke to the consistent yet fluid nature of time (as demonstrate by Massey, 1994). Rape, like time, had been a constant element of American society, but the experiences associated with rape as well as the beliefs surrounding sexual violence were ever-changing. Lacy demonstrated that the ability to create a performance was related to the politics of temporality, which in 1977 made it feasible to perform public, pedagogical, and performative narratives about sexual violence (by stating this I am not suggesting that unveiling such a performance was without its challenges). This politics of temporality was very much informed by the politics of location, which demonstrated the abilities to perform such work based on one's intersectional situatedness. Lacy has spoken about her positionality as a White, middle class, educated woman, and how these experiences have created a privilege that has afforded the opportunity for (and at times welcomed) the disruption of oppressive cultural practices and representations (Irish & Lacy, 2009; Lacy, 1995). Knowing this, Lacy, even in her current work, welcomes artists, performers, and community members into her installations as performers themselves.
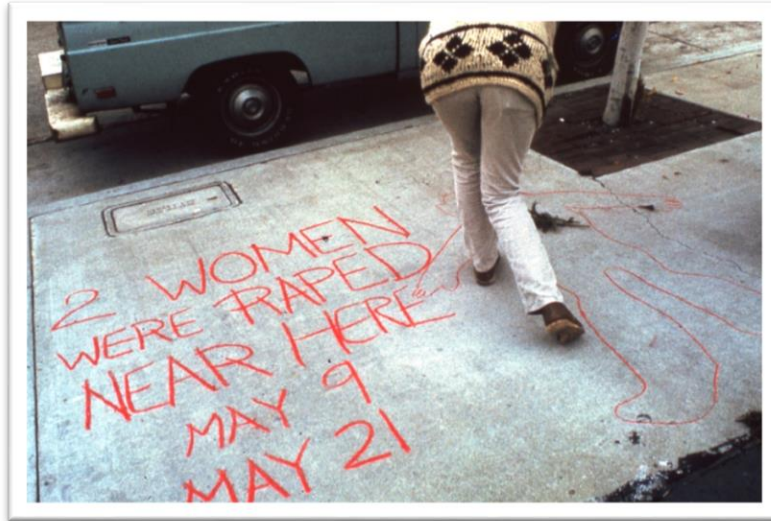
Figure 1: Lacy's Three Weeks in May public art project. Reprinted from suzannelacy.com, by S. Lacy, 1977, http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/three-weeks-in-may/. Copyright 1977 by the Suzanne Lacy. Reprinted with permission.

The work of Couldry (in Couldry & McCarthy, 2004) explores the significance of place, space, and time as it relates to scale, or "the scale on which media are involved in the changing dynamics of social life" (p. 7). Couldry explores the complexities of scale produced by proximity, and draws from Massey's (1994) notion of the "power geometry of time-space compression" to explore how media shapes a particular space as well as how people understand and experience the effect of media in those spaces. Lacy's experiences in the production and performance of *Three Weeks in May* can help to understand the concept of scale. During this performance, Lacy transforms a public shopping plaza by inserting media (pictures, maps, and performers) into that space. She uses these media to take the topic of rape out of the private sphere, where many believe that it belongs, and places it in public space known for leisure activities. She politicizes this place through construction and dissemination of public art. Thus, Lacy manages to disrupt and reorganize power relationships embedded within a culture that

supports rape; fostering the "possibility of developing a politics of mobility and access" (Massey, 1994, p. 150), affording women who were otherwise rendered immobile through acts of rape, to tell their story through the movement of their voices and the performances of Lacy and other performers. Lacy forces those who frequent the space, those who often control time and spaces such as these through economic power, to recognize the existence and scale of rape by establishing relationships through demonstrating the widespread existence of rape and welcoming passersby to participate. These "networks of relationships" (Massey, 1994) created through public art relates to Couldry's exploration of how we experience media when the normalcies of everyday life such as shopping in a plaza, are disrupted. These concepts, space, place, time, and scale shape the public creation of art of the women in this project, and should be explored as relevant to their abilities to participate in public spaces as cultural producers of non-linear images of Black womanhood.

### Examining Black Women's Artistic and Performative Acts through a Critical Public Pedagogical Lens

My recognition of Black female performance artists as critical pedagogical agents did not just begin during graduate school or during the dissertation writing process. Again, after introducing and contextualizing Suzanne Lacy's work on public art in critical public pedagogical theory, I was able to recall memories of variations of public art that interested me beginning with my childhood fascination with the *Josephine Baker Story* (1991). Every Saturday, I would beg my father to rent the movie from Blockbuster Video. I would sit inches away from the television in admiration of this woman's dancing abilities, but also of the way, she exuded confidence in front of entire audiences. Although I learned later that the character was actually played by actress, Lynn Whitfield, this woman on the screen was Josephine to me, and she taught me that performers, specifically Black female performers had the ability to disrupt discriminatory social

structures through their art and their presence. The most obvious area was in her ability to demand respect and racial harmony, even if superficial due to the deeply ingrained racism of the 20s and 30s, when she was performing by refusing to perform in front of segregated audiences. Seeing Josephine on stage in this film signified the beginning of a shift in consciousness for me as a Black girl growing up in the 80s and 90s. Until seeing the film, my racial and gender identities remained ambivalent and disconnected from any material history of struggle and transformation. The film portrayed the disruptive potential of performance while demonstrating that Black women could successfully depict Black womanhood through their own perspective. Josephine Baker demonstrated that Black womanhood could be sexually provocative, and yet professional and political. This portrayal was a counter-narrative to other normative depictions of Black women as innately lascivious. Baker's life as a Black woman and performer collided to demonstrate that sexuality in Black womanhood could be emancipatory, and based upon one's choice to perform sexuality in an empowering yet aesthetically pleasing way. Although Baker performed mostly in Paris, France instead of the United States due to her disdain for segregation in performance venues, eventually her demands to perform in front of integrated audiences led other performers of varying ethnicities to call for integration. Together, these performers created a community of performers who demanded change occur within racist performance venues, and thus in society as a whole. Several of these venues obliged Baker's demands due to the recognition that if she did not perform, then they would lose revenue and the respect of other performers.

As a Black girl seeing these things on screen, I learned lessons about racism, segregation, performance, and the power of community that elementary and later high school history textbooks would never include. In fact, I recall writing about Josephine Baker and her role in the

Harlem Renaissance's influence on Paris, France in an Advanced Placement European History course in high school only to be told that the topic was invalid since African Americans had little to no influence on European History. Experiencing *The Josephine Baker Story* as a ten year old child influenced my educational interests as I grew older as a teenager, and waned as I made other educational choices as an undergraduate and master's level graduate student, but through reflection, the portrayal of Josephine Baker in the aforementioned film has led me to this place. Josephine and I have come full circle. Her life and performances were pedagogical, political, and transformative for me. What I know now is that Baker was not the only Black woman performing and creating as a pedagogical agent, and so before I can add the contemporary voices of Black women who are part of this study, I must first explore, albeit selectively, how Black women have acted as critical public pedagogical agents throughout Western history.

This is no small feat since the only work that exists on Black women performers and artists as public pedagogical agents explores the more recent works of Black women artists. Nichole Guillory (2009) linked the artistry of Black women rappers to public pedagogy. Guillory writes that rap "is a powerful language on its own and a necessary part of the at-large public curriculum," and therefore, rappers, female rappers included, are public pedagogues (p. 62). By examining the lives and music of artists such as Missy Elliot, Lil' Kim, and Queen Pen, Guillory revealed that female rappers have spoken back to traditional racialized and sexualized images enacted within American and Hip-Hop culture. Guillory also demonstrated how sometimes their responses were "complicit in perpetuating the production of demeaning representations and sometimes resistant to their continuance" (Guillory, 2009, p. 220). As public pedagogues, Black women (as demonstrated in Guillory's examination) have first attended to the complexities of their own representations as Black women. Only by first being self-reflexive and aware of the

contradictions in Black womanhood can they begin to develop the radical Black female subjectivity proposed by hooks (1992) that disrupts subversion and leads to transformative public pedagogical acts. This focus on self-reflexivity by Black female rappers, partnered with the author's focus on the radical messages circulated through rap lyrics serves as a catalyst for further examination of how the public performances and artistry of Black women exist as critical public pedagogical endeavors.

Still, it is important to recognize that the public pedagogical acts of Black women do not exist only within Hip-Hop or contemporaneously. Instead, they have existed throughout history. So, to revisit Black feminist cultural criticism, as a Black female scholar-activist-artist, it is important "to intervene strategically in privileged discourses that attempt to undervalue the merits of Black women's creative work; and to advance the cause of Black women and those of others at risk of oppression" (Bobo, 2001, p. xviii). What follows is a non-exhaustive (because it is nearly impossible to write on every Black woman who has served as a critical public pedagogue) exploration of the past performances and visual art displays of Black women who have acted as critical public pedagogues.

As a reminder, Sandlin and Milam (2008) define critical public pedagogy as the means through which a cultural apparatus and/or practice(s) "(1) fosters participatory, resistant cultural production; (2) engages learners corporeally; (3) creates a (poetic) community politic; and (4) opens transitional spaces through détournement (a 'turning around')" (p. 324). As illustrated previously, the artistic practices of Black female hip-hop lyricists have been explored as public pedagogical endeavors (Guillory, 2009). Guillory does not go so far as to describe the lyrics or lives of these women as critical, but any act that leads to self-reflexivity and the disruption of norms, at least in my view, is political. Likewise, Guillory's work offers the possibility of a fifth

essential element of critical public pedagogy, which is its ability to transform the pedagogue through constant reflection and political participation thus leading to growing radical consciousness. At this point, the "contradictions" existent in traditional student /teacher relationships is forfeited in exchange for a discursive relationship that can offer radical consciousness (Freire & Bergman, 1972). Therefore, I use these five components to examine the public lives and public artistic practices of Black women in order to position them as part of a larger body of work on critical public pedagogy.

In an effort to place various forms of art and performance in conversation with each other, I include the public poetics of poet and dramatist, Ntzake Shange, the lyricism of singer, Nina Simone, along with the dance, choreography, and anthropology of Katherine Dunham. Finally, I end with an examination of the more recent (as compared to the works of the previously mentioned artists) visual artistry of photographer, Lorna Simpson. These women are included because the review of their work altered my thinking (much like Josephine Baker did 23 years ago), moved me on an emotional and corporeal level, and served as disruptive and transformative tools in the communities in which they belonged and in a larger society.

**The Pedagogical Possibilities of Black Female Movement**

I have watched clip after clip of performances and techniques choreographed by Katherine Dunham in amazement at the versatility and physicality of her work. Sometimes I would get so lost in Dunham's movements paired with theatrical staging, and her unforgettable facial expressions that I would sit there for hours. Despite Dunham's choreographic and performative genius, all that remains to commemorate her movements are one to two minute video clips. These are in addition to photos and the existence of the Katherine Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities, but as a performer, it seems that the best way to remember her legacy

would be to maintain collections of her performances. Despite this, it is important to demonstrate collectively, her performances, choreographies, and anthropological work position her as a critical public pedagogue who still continues to influence the art world and society at large.

Katherine Dunham transformed American dance beginning in the 1930s by linking traditional choreographic concepts with Black culture, which included folk dance and rituals. She often referred to this practice as the anthropology of dance. Dunham demonstrated that Black culture, that is African American, Caribbean, and Brazilian culture, was deserving of a place in a more Eurocentric dance world. By doing so, Dunham also presented varying forms of culture to a world that pushed those cultures to the margins of society as a means of making them invisible. Although Dunham's work as a performer is significant, her artistry as a politically motivated choreographer and anthropologist classifies her as critical public pedagogue.

The creation and production of "Southland" is one performance that began in Brazil, and that told stories through dance about Black culture and the related denigration experienced by those throughout the Black community. Dunham's performance of "Southland" was an act of protest as it disrupted the notion that the Western world was this happy harmonious place. Likewise, the performance was critical in that it created a space for healing from the denigration experienced through racism. Hill (1994) contends that "Southland" "reveal[ed] the temperament and perhaps the very soul of protest expression rooted in the African American political struggle…both a public act and private rite de passage, affirming how dancing is a healing process as well as a political act"(p. 346). The actual performance of "Southland" is no longer easily available for viewing (in fact the only full length performance that is available in myriad websites and databases is "Shango"(1945) ) and is seldom performed except through commemorative performances within small dance companies, but the descriptions of the

performance and the process of creating the performance have been well documented. Therefore, for the explanation of the performance itself I rely on Constance Valis Hill's (1994) description of the performance along with Katherine Dunham's (2005) reflection on her own process of creating "Southland" in order to reflect on the performance's pedagogical tendencies.

"Southland" (1951) was an hour-long performance, which acted as a "protest as much against lynching as against the destructive powers of hatred…"(Hill, 1994, p. 1). The performance would become a controversial piece for Dunham herself as well as the dancers and the public, which doubles as a sign that people were not ready to deal with the truth behind racialized hatred and violence. The fact that the performance only took place in Chile and Paris serves as another sign that the work Dunham created was something the majority of the Western world was not ready to recognize as problematic. The show is centered on a love scene that exists and manifests around a magnolia tree, which is said to represent the south. The scene begins first with a Black couple, Lucy and Richard, who engage in "square dance and patting jubas [a rhythmic movement involving knee slapping and hand clapping]" (Hill, 1994, p. 5; [my addition] in front of what is made to emulate a plantation house.

This symbolism of love is followed by a White couple, Julie and Lenwood, who are also positioned around the magnolia tree. Lenwood, who is assumed to be drunk, is seen chasing Julie around the tree, and when he catches her they dance in a way that emulates a fight until she is defeated, and left unconscious. Richard finds Julie, and attempts to help her, but when she awakens, she purposely attributes the beating to Richard instead of Lenwood. Julie continues by screaming the word Nigger out to signal to an all-White mob. Hill describes the scene in more detail, "Dancing a habanera, she strips her blouse, whips her hair and then twists it around her neck to advocate his lynching" (p. 350). Richard is figuratively kicked off stage by a mob that

comes to Julie's defense, and then is seen hanging from the magnolia tree. Eventually, Julie

understands the meaning behind her lie after seeing Richard's lynched body. The first scene ends

after Julie takes a piece of Richard's shirt and "meets Lucy face-to face: one woman clutch[ing]

the burnt cloth, the other hold[ing] the magnolia blossom. The chorus, turning into a cortège of

mourners, gather up the remains of the body as Lucy dances a searing adagio [interpretive]

solo…" (p. 351). The second and final scene is entitled "Basin Street Blues" (Hill, 1994) in

which a funeral procession takes place against the backdrop of "a smoky café, inhabited by

couples, dancing, men gambling, and a blind man begging"(p. 351). Lucy is seen being dragged

by the members of the musical funeral procession. In addition, inside of the café, a man is seen

continuously jabbing a knife in the ground, an image that has been read as signaling the

movements to end racialized violence that would soon follow Dunham's "Southland."

The work of Katherine Dunham, (1951) as briefly described by Hill (1994) and above,

depicts the complexities implicit in American culture at the time that "Southland" was

performed. Just as American culture is not homogenous, the techniques used as part of the

choreography are not as well. For example, Dunham first uses an actual written script that the

performers are asked to act out before engaging in what Hill calls "motivated action" (p. 349).

This motivated action is based upon feelings of understanding of the role and themselves playing

that role that arise from acting out the script. One dance is used to portray this story of racial and

sexual oppression (an area that is lacking in its explication as part of Dunham's work), African

American (patting jubas) dance components are fused with Afro-Cuban components (habanera)

to depict a story that is both familiar yet hidden to the Chilean and Parisian audiences for which

her company performs. Dunham attempts to make vivid the connections between love, humanity,

hate, and violence through dance. Her attempts; however, were not widely accepted.

During an interview with Hill, Dunham recalls seeing some people in the audience weeping at the varying aspects of the performance, while others seemed uneasy (Hill, 1994). The display of anger and sadness were indicative of the corporeality of the performance. At that time, very few reporters would do interviews with Dunham due to the overwhelming McCarthyism that shaped not only American culture, but also America's Western supporters such as Chile. In fact, after the first performance, the dance company was forced to leave (Hill, 1994). When performed in Paris, Dunham received mixed reviews, for example, "While Southland marshaled criticism from radio commentators who advised Dunham not to show blacks hanging on the stage, several of the Communist newspapers felt she hadn't gone far enough to show her anger and wanted to see the burning of the body on stage" (Hill, 1994). It is also important to point out the response that the performers elicited after performing such a political piece. Lucille Ellis who played Lucy contended that "'[w]e were not ready to go into anything that was racial because it was back to a history we wanted to rest. Paris had accepted us, we weren't going to change the world'" (p. 355). Julie recalls her feelings when having to proclaim "Nigger" as part of her performance. She shares, "'When the word finally came out, I couldn't believe it was coming from my own body'" (p. 355). Although Julie was hurt by having to say the word because of her relationship with Lucille, many of the other dancers held disdain for Lucille. The other dancers even accused her of really wanting to use the term because of her realistic performance. The complicated nature of this performance made it difficult for the performers on the set because color and racism became "real" as opposed to simply an act like many of their other performances (Hill, 1994).

Hill contends that "[d]ancing is a way of knowing, hence it is an affirmation of self and of one's culture" (p. 358). By understanding this we begin to understand the role of dance as an

embodied public pedagogical tool that critically delves into the most intimate beliefs and feelings, but that also encourages the choreographer, performer, and audience to interrogate their own histories, and hopefully, be encouraged enough to change.

**The Pedagogical Possibilities of Black Female Vocality**

Although I did not learn about the work of Nina Simone until I was an undergraduate student, her words and image in many of her songs taught me to love myself as a Black woman (something I had struggled to do for years). Her song *Four Women* gave me a history lesson that I had not received (which had become a common theme at that point) in school. She taught me of the complicated legacy of Black women in this country, and ensured me through her lyrics that Black women came in a multiplicity of shades, including in my own.

The song and performance *Four Women* (1966) by singer, songwriter, and performer, Nina Simone, came about at the center of the "Black is Beautiful" era that was emblematic of the 1960s in American society. During this time, the Civil Rights Movement shaped American society and culture in a way that led many African American women and men to embrace their natural beauty. The goal was to counter pervasive ideals outside of and within the Black community that depicted European features, skin color, hair types, and styles, and dress as superior to the features of Black people.

The message of "Black is Beautiful" was disseminated using varying forms of media such as newspapers and radio describing images of Black women and men embracing natural features. Song lyrics and performances serve as social, cultural, and political messages of solidarity with the Black is beautiful message, while at the same time serving as a means of transgression from Eurocentric beauty norms (Bobo, 2001). Nina Simone's *Four Women* reads as a performance that shared this message, and thus, was a form of critical public pedagogy.

Furthermore, Simone embodied the message of Black is beautiful as she was a natural Black woman who created and performed lyrics that told stories of the struggles of Black women throughout history—stories that even today are difficult to bear. According to Barnett (2007) Simone was one of the first musical artists to "wear her hair natural, Simone rejected beehives and supper-club gowns, wearing instead short, natural hair, often cornrowed or braided, and African clothes—what she considered a symbolic representations of her racial pride" (p. 143). Simone, during an interview, shared her reasoning behind *Four Women*:

> *Four Women* came to me after conversations I had with black women. It seemed we were all suffering from self-hatred. We hated our complexions, our hair, our bodies. I realized we had been brainwashed into feeling this way about ourselves by some black men and many white people. I tried to speak to this in the song. And do you know, some black radio stations wouldn't play it? It is true what they say: the truth hurts. (Barnett, 2007, p. 150)

The description of the second woman in *Four Women* symbolizes more than one form of Black beauty, and Simone complicates this beauty by telling the very real yet hidden story of the light skin woman's racial ancestry. Simone sings:

> My skin is yellow
>
> my hair is long
>
> Between two worlds
>
> I do belong
>
> But my father was rich and white
>
> He forced my mother late one night
>
> And what do they call me?

My name is Saffronia

My name is Saffronia (Simone, 1996, track 2)

It becomes obvious that this woman, Saffronia, is of a mixed ancestry that has been forced upon her because of the rape of her mother. Although incidences of slavery are not revealed, at least in these lines of the song, the story told resembles the forced relations that existed during slavery as well as during Reconstruction and an era fraught with Jim Crow laws. The listener and the viewer, as Simone often performed her songs, are able to feel the pain associated with the beauty that is often attributed to having long hair and light skin. Simone manages to paint a picture through lyrics of the historical terror that were racial and sexual oppression throughout American history. The lyrical image of Saffronia is written in comparison to three other women, one being Peaches who is described by Simone as:

My skin is brown

my manner is tough

I'll kill the first mother I see

my life has been too rough

I'm awfully bitter these days

because my parents were slaves

What do they call me

My name is PEACHES! (Simone, 1996, track 2)

This woman's description is completely different from that of Saffronia, yet the description is still authentic. The images used to characterize Peaches are those that are often attributed to the stereotypical image of the Sapphire developed to falsely label Black women are angry and bitter without just cause (hooks, 1982). What Simone is able to do with her lyrics;

however, is demonstrate that this anger and bitterness derived from the legacy of slavery—an institution to which Peaches' parents were subjected. Thus, Simone successfully teaches her audience about the legacy of slavery and its effects on the Black women while also demonstrating that there is no one definition of Black womanhood.

**The Pedagogical Possibilities of Black Female Poetics**

Much like the lyricism of Nina Simone, the work of Ntozake Shange has successfully provided ample variations of Black womanhood in her works. Ntozake Shange's work has also influenced my efforts to explore theories and practices that position Black women as multifarious. In addition, her background as a student and teacher of the Black Arts Movement and of Black feminist thought first in California, and later in New York has intrigued me as I often wondered in what way they converged. Shange is representative of this convergence in that she demonstrates that no one movement focused on simply one cause can speak to the experiences of Black women (or at least it should not).

I came across Shange's (1974) work *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* first as it was performed in a college of auditorium, and next as part of Tyler Perry's (2013) questionable adaptation of Shange's work. Unsatisfied each time, I searched for Shange's own performances of it, which I found as part of a live broadcast that is now available on the internet. Regardless of how I experienced the performances, I had always identified with "lady in yellow" because she was from "outside of Detroit" (p. 5) whereas the other women were from "outside Baltimore" or Manhattan. I could also identify with her transitory relationship with men as she moved from being "one of the boys" to "a great catch" to being used sexually, and finally, to being dependent on men for a love that should come from one's self. At other times, I was in absolute amazement by the "lady in red" who managed to

survive after watching her children's father, beau willie, drop their children from a 5<sup>th</sup> story window killing them because of her unwillingness to marry him. However, as I read the text, my attention was continuously shifted to the opening lines by the "lady in brown" who had me resembled a truth seeker and teller throughout the poem. The words:

> "somebody/ anybody
>
> sing a black girl's song
>
> bring her out
>
> to know herself
>
> to know you
>
> but sing her rhythms
>
> carin/ struggle/ hard times
>
> sing her song of life
>
> she's been dead so long
>
> closed in silence so long
>
> she doesn't know the sound
>
> of her own voice
>
> her infinite beauty
>
> she's half-notes scattered
>
> without rhythm/ no tune
>
> sing her sighs
>
> sing the song of her possibilities
>
> sing a righteous gospel
>
> let her be born

let her be born

& handled warmly. (Shange, 1975, pp. 5-6)

These words shifted me from sadness, to anger, but then to a sense of hope due to knowing that Black women artists and performers, such as Shange, were demanding that the stories of a multiplicity of Black women be heard and felt. Each time a Black girl's song was introduced in written and spoken form, Shange sang a song of Black girl possibilities that led to the birth and rebirth of memories once silenced.

Writing and performing this choreopoem at a time pervaded by the influences of radical feminism(s) such as the Combahee River Collective, Shange demonstrated the necessity of centering conversations on the experiences of Black women. Black women were beginning to speak out against the titillating effects of a culture of violence perpetuated by the lingering effects of reports such as the Moynihan report (1965) that used Black single-mothers as the scapegoat in discussions of poverty, the psychological and physical effects of the Vietnam War on the psyches of Black men, and the manifestation of a rape culture that normalized male-perpetrated violence against women through the act of victim-blaming. This culture of violence found its way into the living rooms and bedrooms of Black families and into the streets of Black communities. Shange told these stories of heartbreak, emotional and physical abuse, rape, and even death to audiences unaware of the experiences of Black women. The fact that each woman had a similar yet distinct story of these abuses perpetrated by men, and to the society in which they belonged, aided in situating these women's experiences as radically poetic tools for consciousness raising. For example, Shange's discussion of rape, and consequently, rape culture through the voices of these different women dismantle the racist notion that Black women could not be raped because of the bigoted idea that they were so promiscuous that they were begging to

be assaulted or that no one would want them sexually in the first place. Shange also challenged the naïve assumption that rape only occur by strangers.

*lady in red*

a rapist is always to be a stranger

to be legitimate

someone you never saw

a man wit obvious problems…

*lady in red*

but if you've been seen in public wit him

danced one dance

kissed him good-bye lightly

*lady in purple*

wit closed mouth

*lady in blue*

pressin charges will be as hard

as keepin yr legs closed

while five fools try to run a train on you

*lady in red*

these men friends of ours

who smile nice…

*lady in red*

cuz it turns out the nature of rape has changed

*lady in blue*

we can now meet them in circles we frequent for companionship

*lady in purple*

we see them at the coffeehouse…

*lady in red*

we cd even have em over for dinner

& get raped in our own houses… (pp. 17-22)

Shange (1975) also manages to position Black women as rich, complex beings. The "lady in red" is a mother, "the lady in yellow" a high school graduate, "lady in brown" is a young avid reader, the "lady in orange" seems to be a poet, and the "lady in purple" remains ambiguous as she is in constant search for an identity when attempting to pass for Puerto Rican for an excuse to dance. It is important to point out that the "lady in purple's" story is centered on her experience with abortion, which positions her as different than the "the lady in red." Again, Shange disrupts normative notions of Black womanhood through the creation and performance of these characters.

**The Pedagogical Possibilities of Black Female Visual Artistry**

Like the many theories I have encountered throughout my life, I learned about the photography of Lorna Simpson through a professor who thought that her work would fit the needs of my research. Simpson's work not only fit these needs, but also helped me solidify my own purpose as a visual artist. Likewise, her work specifically that I discuss as part of this review helped me to think deeply about my personal experiences. Born during the 1960s, Simpson's artistic palette developed at a time when the Black woman was active due to the varying movements for Black power and Civil Rights, while at the same time disempowered due to racialized and sexual oppression. In addition, the presence of the feminist movements of the

1960s and 1970s as well as the complicated relationships that women of color have had with feminism has influenced her work. While discussing her uses of the Black female in her work, Simpson (2002) explains:

> Given the generation that I was brought up in, and given the way in which that affects how I see things now, I cannot take that presence for granted. The moment I take that presence for granted the dominant image will quickly return to a kind of monolithic, nonethnic depiction …While in a certain sense my work operates within a feminist critique, it's about negotiating and taking aspects from it that I feel are valuable.
> (Simpson, p. 23)

In sharing these words, Simpson discusses the inherent political character of her work and her decision to align herself with or away from particular movements. Although the works of Lorna Simpson are numerous, there is one piece that spoke to me personally, and so it is used here to explore its pedagogical value. The piece, *Untitled (A Lie is Not a Shelter),* was created in 1989 as part of the Art against Aids campaign in Los Angeles, California. This piece is significant to me as it was displayed at a time when my brother (my mother's son) was diagnosed with HIV, and had coincidently moved to Los Angeles in hopes of becoming an actor. However, because of the stigma associated with the disease at that time, he was fired from modeling and acting agencies, but stayed in California because of the advancements in medical care in the area. When I found this particular piece by Simpson, I was drawn to explore it further because my own family history with HIV and AIDS.

Lorna Simpson's (1989) *Untitled (A Lie is Not a Shelter)* is a photograph of a headless dark-skinned Black woman dressed in a white dress or top with her arms folded. Everything about the photograph reads contradiction from the bright white dress covering the dark skin to

the words that read: "a lie is not a shelter/discrimination is not protection/isolation is not a remedy/ a promise is not a prophylactic" (Simpson, p. 18). In addition, the photograph is part of a public campaign to raise awareness about AIDS, and, by placing the Black woman at the center of this portrait, to question assumptions at that time that stereotyped those with AIDS as white men who were homosexual; ideas of who could contract the disease were transformed.

Simpson alerts viewers to the contradictions and complexities implicit in the lives of those infected and affected by the disease by presenting a woman who is seemingly self-assured and confident with her arms crossed yet vulnerable because of our inability to see her whole self in this public space (this image has been placed in spaces such as a San Francisco bus shelter). The words that are written detail assumptions that people make, often related to one's sexual relationships. Simpson provides us with immediate responses by revealing the truth behind those assumptions. Women and men hide behind lies for protection, they have discriminated as a means of protecting themselves from the truth that anyone is at risk of contracting a disease, they have hidden themselves away to prevent an assumed public shaming, and they have promised or accepted promises as reason enough to engage in injurious practices.

I have briefly reviewed a selection of public art and performances by Black women in American history in order to relate these works to the theoretical conversations on critical public pedagogy. These works fit into the category of critical public pedagogy, and in some ways, move beyond what Sandlin and Milam (2008) have identified as critical public pedagogical endeavors. Sandlin and Milam (2008) contend that critical cultural pedagogues foster "cultural producers and creators who actively resist, critique, appropriate, reuse, recreate, and alter cultural products and entertainment" (p. 331). In addition, Sandlin and Milam (2008) demonstrate that critical cultural pedagogues "interrupt how public spaces are typically used and understood" (p. 331).

Dunham, Simone, Shange, and Simpson have created and presented work in public spaces that served as pushed boundaries. Likewise, their own behaviors as Black women have done the same.

Katherine Dunham, for example, has participated in and choreographed performance pieces that have resisted the bigoted traditions of that time. Her work involved other performers, and audience members, which positioned them as producers and creators of politically potent creative works. This is mostly shown in performances such as Shango and Southland. Likewise, Dunham's uses of her anthropological findings in her choreography changed the state of dance. Likewise, Dunham made a career out of pushing the boundaries of race and gender relations by performing using African and Caribbean styles of movement coupled with classical and modern dance, Dunham pushed racial boundaries in other ways as well by refusing to perform in front of segregated audiences, forming integrated dance companies such as the one that performed in Southland, and performing Southland when warned against it by the Chilean and United States government (Chin, 2010; Hill, 1994).

Like Dunham, Simone and Shange resisted norms that justified the use of limiting definitions of Black womanhood. Their works are participatory in that they place a myriad of Black women in conversations with each other either symbolically such as that done by Simone when she places four different Black women with different experiences in conversation with each other. On the other hand, Shange physically place Black women in conversation with each other through song and dance in "For Colored Girls." As Waxman (1994) illustrates, Shange places a group of women together to "poetically celebrate their kinship and support of each other as they dance the blues or race or gender. They chant in choral poems and dance, solo and ensemble, their personal encounters with racism and sexism that define their individual identities

as Black women" (p. 94). Likewise, both performers shift the way that lyrics heard and performed in public spaces are traditionally used.

Simone, in her life in general and in her music pushed the boundaries of public performance. As Brooks (2011) demonstrates, Simone linked social activism with music by incorporating political messages into her music as a mechanism to "free African Americans from cultural and representational stasis" (p. 178) in a very material way. Shange does the same through her work. Specifically, she disrupts literary traditions through the creation of a new genre of work that links poetry, song, dance, and theatre together. In addition, Shange uses African American Vernacular instead of Standard English therefore dismantling what language can be used in public spaces even when those spaces are artistic (Waxman, 1994).

The work of photographer, Lorna Simpson, demonstrates her ability to push boundaries and resist fixed notions of the private/public dichotomy as well as stereotypes associated with Black womanhood. In her work, *Untitled: (A Lie is Not a Shelter)"* Simpson is able to demonstrate her ability to take a private issue such as AIDS and the sexual acts traditionally associated with contracting the disease in placing it in a public context. Thus, Simpson disrupts the public domain of the public transit system, and forces people to acknowledge, that which is private—illness. Likewise, Simpson's work aids in centering the conversation about the disease on the Black woman. This is critical and disruptive because the conversation at the time that the display was created was centered on the stereotype that the disease was associated with homosexual intercourse. At the same time, Simpson provides a cautionary tale to women of color that teaches that AIDS sees no race or gender. However, rather than just pointing the finger at Black women, she demands that we begin to uncover the intimate details associated with the possibility of being infected. Hammonds (2001) shares:

…the photograph speaks to the questions AIDS raises for any woman: the potential

infidelity of partners; the discrimination that women encounter in the healthcare system;

the silence that accompanies the fear of loss of community and family; and the too-often-

futile hope that 'love' can protect women from AIDS. (p. 243)

Simpson changes the face of the AIDS epidemic through the photograph of this woman as

someone potentially infected with the disease.

Collectively, each of the women presented have demonstrated their abilities to use art and

performance as a mechanisms for resistance. The women themselves become producers of these

artistic tools that have been shown to resist and disrupt normative constructions of identity, and

power association with those identities.

According to Sandlin and Milam (2008), critical public pedagogy also attempts to engage

the whole person—including the body and emotions—in a process of 'becoming'" (p. 333). In

addition, the authors suggest that the corporealness experienced through critical public

pedagogical acts promote a solidarity through being and feeling with others. As mentioned

previously, Dunham partnered anthropological work with movement, and thus, was able to tell

stories by using her body during her performances. Dunham's body became a site where

knowledge was shared; however, the choreography of pieces like *Southland* elicited varying

emotions by audience members and by Dunham's integrated cast. For example, the White

woman, Julie, in her cast for *Southland* discussed how at one point she was disgusted by having

to use the term nigger as part of her role, but that this disgust and performing the piece resulted

in a personal transformation. She stated, "'*Southland* was the beginning of knowing the quality

of life and the human element. It made us all respect life and people. It made you feel you must

do something. And in doing, you finally begin to find yourself'" (Hill, 1994, p. 358).

The performances of both Simone and Shange disrupt binaries that traditionally position the body and the mind against each other. Simone, for example, is known for her emotional and anger-ridden crescendos throughout and at the end of her songs. As Gaines (2013) demonstrates, traditionally emotions are erroneously linked to the inability to successfully share one's political message, but in Simone's work it "is in the drama and emotionality of it that the political critique resonates most stirringly" (p. 256). Gaines also points out that in the performance of *Four Women,* "the place of affect is not located in an individual consciousness, but emerges from the tensions between each of these women, the specific audience, and Simone's performing body" (p. 259). As a performer, Simone is led to embody each of these women's experiences of suffering and pain in a way that also alters the perceptions of the audiences who encounter the performances.

In Shange's work, the corporealness of her work is felt during the call to dance at the end of each of the poems by the individual women:

everyone

come to share our worlds witchu

we come here to be dancing

    to be dancing

  to be dancing

 baya (*African People*) (Shange, 1975, p. 16).

This embodied and emotional ending signals a release as well as a spiritual connection. The collective dances by each of the women symbolize a type of cleansing or "like a cathartic religious ritual" (Waxman, 1994, p. 100) helping each woman unite with themselves, the other women, and the audience. In an interview with Claudia Tate (1983), Shange recognizes the need

to attend to the emotions of her audience, and thus, admits to making this her goal to elicit an emotional response because of the evocative stories shared by each of the women.

In many of the photographs presented in public spaces by Lorna Simpson, the women in them are presented as embodied, racialized, and gendered beings. In most depictions, such as *A Lie is Not a Shelter* the body is the only identifier of Black womanhood since we cannot see this woman's face, and because it is a photograph, we are unable to hear her speak (at least in any material way). In addition, in using the photograph as a statement about the AIDS epidemic, the Black woman's body embodies the disease—albeit not the only body that does this. Likewise, the wording associated with this particular piece speaks to not only our bodies, but to our emotions as people who have been lied to, and those who have chosen to use those lies as an emotional shelter for pain and disappointment. The words used by Simpson, seem to be a call to action or women that can only be acted upon because of the emotional connection with the piece that tells us that we have, at some point in our lives, believed the promises and lies. Collectively, these women demonstrate that art and performance is pedagogical because it connects to us in a corporeal way using emotion and embodiment.

Critical public pedagogy also enable the creation of radical communities through the production of culture (Sandlin & Milam, 2008), which is also seen because of Dunham's productions. The use of an integrated dance troupe who collectively refused to perform in segregated performance spaces is made radical in that they promoted a culture of openness and racial harmony, regardless the size. Unlike Dunham, Simone and Shange seem more interested in producing a culture of Black unity and understanding amongst Black women than ending segregation or integrating audiences. This might be because at the time that their works were released integration had occurred, and for many caused a diminished pride in being Black and in

Black and female. As mentioned earlier, Simone was led to write *Four Women* because of her disdain for media messages that taught Black women to hate themselves. Writing *Four Women* aided in creating a culture of Black men and women who were aware, through Simone's lyrics, of the detrimental effects of slavery, sexual abuse, and objectification.  Simone herself recalls being told how her music inspired community building and Black pride. She explained:

> My friends in SNCC told me that when they got started and had their meetings to discuss strategy meetings which often turned into parties later there would always be Nina Simone records in whoever's house the meeting was held in. (p. 95)

The creation of *Four Women* stemmed from Simone's recognition that the Civil Rights Movement, that she was very much a part of, could stand to end the blatant sexism within it. Thus, *Four Women* was a call to recognize the injustices faced by Black women as well as a call to work together to end these injustices.

Shange's work promotes a culture of women who move towards justice and healing through perhaps identifying themselves in the women represented in the choreopoem. The performers themselves represent a community of women with different stories, but that are connected through the pervasiveness of misogyny as well as their abilities to dance to wholeness, and to a place where they see god in themselves (Shange, 1975). The women in Shange's *For Colored Girls* are able to see the value at the end of the rainbow or the value of community through the recognition of each other's stories. Therefore, the performance itself symbolizes the importance of a radical community of women, and promotes this among Black women in a very real way.

Lorna Simpson's work, as previously mentioned provided an opportunity to realize the importance of community among women, but more so among women of color. The image

present in *A Lie is Not a Shelter* is an attempt to raise the collective consciousness of Black

women about the epidemic of AIDS. Since the introduction of Simpson's work on the effects of

AIDS on the lives of Black women, more images, advertisements, and research studies have

been created in order to demonstrate the significance of the disease in the lives of Black women,

but also to demonstrate that Black women have the collective potential to change its prevalence.

This is not to say that Simpson's work is the direct reason for this; however, it was created as a

primary attempt at transforming the role that the disease played in the lives of Black women

through making it clear that the lies told by intimate partners will serve as a shelter from the

disease. Thus, Simpson's work positions her as a pedagogical agent, and her photograph, a

pedagogical tool much like the women discussed before her.

Sandlin and Milan (2008) also demonstrate that critical public pedagogy provides

opportunities for those experiencing pedagogical acts to experience détournement, a term that in

research on critical public pedagogical works has come to mean "a turning around"(p. 339) or a

moment of transition when the learner is no longer who she or he used to be. This transitioning

could also be illustrative of the space that the pedagogical act is occurring in such as the theatre

or the street. As discussed previously, with the White performer who was part of Dunham's

performance group, practicing and performing as part of the cast of *Southlan*d aided in her

transition from a complicit performer and citizens who did not necessarily like racism, but that

tolerated it to someone who appreciated the opportunity to speak out against the unjust society in

which she was part.  Both, Simone's lyricism and Shange's performance foster opportunities for

audience members and the performers themselves to transition into more politically conscious

beings. Simone's work was used by members of Civil Rights Movements, and continues to be

used to today as the muse of many contemporary rappers from Jay-Z and Kanye West to

songstress Lauryn Hill as the motivation needed to transgress the boundaries of inequality, racism, and self-hate. Shange's work threatened Black patriarchy in such a way that she was verbally attacked for her focus on the experiences of Black women (Staples, 1979). However, while Shange's work ruffled the proverbial feathers of Black males like Staples who attempted to once again take the attention away from Black women, her work aided in transforming the public's view of the Black female experience.

Clearly, Lorna Simpson's work has aided in the consciousness-raising of women of color as well as in the presumed collective action. Just as she has transformed public thinking, she has managed to transform the genre of photography through her ability to politicize its use. Simpson contends,

> When I was growing up in photography, photography departments and their views of photography were very narrow. Photography was something that went in a frame, was kept to a certain scale, and didn't have text or any other element. A lot of the support for my early work came from institutions that focused on painting and sculpture, or institutions that didn't insist on the separation between genres… I experiment with many different mediums for the sake of coming to experience different processes. (Arperture, 2013)

Simpson's use of photography for political means and in non-traditional ways provides her with an opportunity to transgress the boundaries of the art form. In doing so, she has demonstrated that photography can be used to provide varying representations of Black womanhood while also disseminating a political message by the use of the written word. Thus, Simpson has aided in turning the world of photography away from its traditional uses. As a result, Simpson has

positioned herself as part of a legacy of other Black women artists and performers who have disrupted in a very permanent way, the creative uses of various artistic genres.

Connected to the idea of détournement is what I offer as critical public pedagogy's ability to foster a radical subjectivity in the pedagogue through one's own reflection of participating in such acts. Specifically, critical public pedagogy can lead to a radical Black female subjectivity through opportunities to discuss Black female representation in public discursive spaces instead of inside of their homes during intimate conversations. Radical Black female subjectivity develops through the ability to dismantle dominant narratives created about her by those who are not her by looking inward first, and then to society by offering representations of Black womanhood that are fluid, complex, and diverse (hooks, 1992).

For Dunham, this radical Black female subjectivity developed because of her visual (though distant) encounters with the lynching of Black people in the South. In the prologue spoken to the audience during the first performance of *Southland* Dunham proclaims, "Though I have not smelled the smell of burning flesh, and have never seen a black body swaying from a southern tree, I have felt these things in spirit.... Through the creative artist comes the need to show this thing to the world, hoping that by exposing the ill, the conscience of the many will protest" (Dunham in Hill, 1994, p. 1). Therefore, Dunham developed a radical consciousness that was not necessarily developed when engaging in ethnographic studies throughout the world, but only when seeing those in her country of birth being persecuted because of racial hatred.

Like Dunham, the works of Simone and Shange reveal the development of a radical Black female subjectivity. Simone, as mentioned previously, wrote and performed *Four Women* because her feelings of the misrecognition of the wide spectrum of Black female beauty in American culture during the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise, Simone developed a certain disdain for

society's failure to recognize the plight of Black women in American. *Four Women* acted as an opportunity to demand people remain attentive to the struggles associated with Black womanhood in American culture. Although Simone denies being part of any radical women's movement, and more in line with the Black Liberation Movements of the time, she admittedly wrote and performed *Four Women* based upon her own intimate relationships with men who kept her insecurities at bay in attempts to use her sexually (Simone & Cleary, 2003). Her memories about these experiences as well as her ability to position these experiences as part of a history of sexual oppression faced by Black women led to a newly established radical Black female subjectivity. This identity and the experiences related to this identity aided in producing this song. When the song aired in 1966, it was banned because Simone suggested that people, but more specifically men, were fearful of the truth "that along with everything else there had to be changes in the way we (women) saw ourselves and in how men saw us" (p. 117).

Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls" originated from a similar place. The creation of this choreo-poem and performance originated from her consciousness-raising that developed as part of her teachings within the feminist and Black Arts movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Like Simone, Shange's development of a radical Black female subjectivity came from the radicalness associated with these movements as well as her recollection of the personal experiences she endured as a child and adult, which left her feeling worthless because of her race and gender (Tate, 1983). Those experiences, which led to depression and suicidal ideations only passed when she discovered poetry and dance, which combined led to her own awakening (Shange, 1975; Tate, 1983). This awakening was discovered through the power of bodily movement, and her ability to collaborate these movements with her emotions and the natural rhythm of her body. Shange (1975) identifies these movements of that which led to create more meaningful poetry,

but that which led her to value her body and whole self as an African American woman. For Shange, this radical Black female subjectivity is also spiritual and corporeal. Thus, adding to hooks' notion of the radical Black female subjectivity by involving the spiritual and bodily realities of coming to consciousness.

Lorna Simpson's work has often been used to describe the meaning of "radical Black female subjectivity" as well as "radical Black female spectatorship" by hooks (1992; 1995) as something reached by the audience who encounters her art. However, hooks (1995) also demonstrates the importance of reaching the radical Blackness through learning before being able to create that which fosters opportunities for radical Black female subjectivity. hooks explains:

> Creating counter-hegemonic images of blackness that resist the stereotypes and challenge the artistic imagination is not a simple task…artists have to engage in a process of education that encourages critical consciousness and enables them as individuals to break the hold of colonizing representations. (p. 96)

According to hooks, Simpson is able to create images that disrupt traditional notions of Black womanhood because she has engaged in opportunities for reflections and education related to her position and role as a Black woman creating this art. Simpson adds to the collective of Black women artists and performers who have demonstrated the significance of developing a radical Black female subjectivity when creating art and performances that teach critical lessons about being and belonging in American society.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented a review of literature that follows alongside my narrative of finding and comprehending theories that fit my interests in informal pedagogical spaces, radical Black female identity, and public performance art. In doing so, I have demonstrated that there is

a relationship between critical pedagogy and critical public pedagogy, but frameworks that speak to the cultural experiences of Black women are needed in order to determine their usefulness in the lives of Black female pedagogical performers. By exploring the current research on critical pedagogy and critical public pedagogy from a Black feminist and Endarkened feminist perspective, I have found that the conscientization (Freire, 1972) of the pedagogue herself matters, but that also that a consideration of place, space, and time must be accounted for in order to accurately explore Black women's performance as critical-pedagogical acts. What follows this chapter is an exploration of the forms of inquiry that have assisted me in expanding the research written on the critical public pedagogical endeavors of Black women performance artists.

## Chapter Three: Finding Methods That Fit

Growing up, there was a phrase that was stated and even more frequently acted upon in my family, "Each one teach one," which was an African-American proverb used whenever there was a lesson to be learned. This phrase was spoken and embodied by members of my family. Specifically, my father and grandmother often told stories with embedded lessons of struggle and survival. Through their stories, I was taught many lessons related to growing up Black and female, and what that meant since I had been born into a world that was and still is organized based upon an "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2004, p. 17). Continuing this adage, this project is my attempt to teach other Black women and girls about the complexities of what it means to have grown from a Black girl into a Black woman in America. This project also adds to the body of work that has already been written concerning the varying experiences related to Black womanhood (Boylorn, 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jewell, 1993; Morton, 1991). This work demonstrates that the interests of others cannot control our experiences along with our images, behaviors, and choices.

In addition, this work specifically explores the experiences of women who create art and perform in public spaces throughout the city of Detroit. This experience has never been explored in this capacity because either people have not taken an interest in the collective experiences of Black female performers and artists who are from Detroit or they have not been in a position to explore that interest. As one woman interviewed as part of this project, Rachel, stated, "No one cares about Black female artists." Therefore, doing this work is a large task; however, writing about our individual and collective experiences is important work, and I am dedicated to doing this work from a place of sincerity and love. This project is a declaration to these women, and to

myself, which demonstrates that somebody cares not only about the work of Black female artists and performers, but also about our lives.

During an interview with one of the women, I was encouraged to think about why I was doing this work, and for whom I was doing it. At that moment, I realized that this work was not to appease or fill the gaps in knowledge of those who control academic or artistic spaces. Instead, this project is an opportunity to tell stories of our development as Black women and as artists using painting and creative writing. This project is a cultural product itself and is therefore, public, political, and pedagogical. In addition, this project explores how we act as teachers and political agents who are transgressing boundaries through emotional, corporeal, and discursive practices. In order to complete the tasks mentioned above, there are various questions that should be answered. The questions are as follows:

1. How have Black females in Detroit countered stereotypical representations of Black womanhood?

2. What role has the art and performances of Black females from Detroit played in maintaining or countering those representations?

3. How have Black female artists and performers served as public pedagogues who teach about the complexities of Black womanhood and how has this begun to transform the social, cultural, and political milieu of Black women?

The use of various modes of qualitative inquiry has been employed to assist in answering these questions.

## On Qualitative Research and Its Uses

Denzin and Lincoln (2005; 2011) define qualitative research as a "set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible… by attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). These practices are different

from those that lead to quantitative hypothesis driven, generalizations. I came to qualitative research because of my need to hear and tell the stories of women whose experiences were similar to my own. I was also interested in how, despite our similarities, we interpreted those experiences in varying ways. These things could not be done quantitatively. As I explored varying forms of qualitative research, I also became interested in forms of inquiry that would lead to "strategic disruption" (Brown, Carducci, & Kuby, 2014). This is especially true since I have been a rabble-rouser since I was a young child. In adulthood, I am still known for my inability to hold my tongue and the necessity to speak my truth even when it is not necessarily welcomed. I, however, welcome disruptions—those forms of scholarship and research that necessitate "conviction, a healthy disregard for tradition, and a willingness to explore unchartered methodological territory" (Brown, Carducci, & Kuby, 2014, p. 3). I will assume that because of my disruptive tendencies, I found solace as a researcher and participant, in techniques that are often pushed to the periphery of academia. Qualitative research that disrupts traditional forms of inquiry and scholarship also provides an opportunity to disrupt normative beliefs about those surviving on the margins of Western society. It provides a space for them at the center of research and life. Learning this has led to my decision to select varying modes of inquiry that trouble certain qualitative traditions and paradigms.

I use three methodological approaches, autoethnography, phenomenology, and ethnography, in this dissertation, which have been chosen based on their ability to assist me disrupting traditions of scholarship and research, that often produce stereotypical notions of Black womanhood. These approaches also provide a space for Black female ways of knowing to be acknowledged and shared. This is possible when coupled with guiding principles that help to organize the way that research is practiced, interpreted, and presented. Denzin and Lincoln

(2005; 2011) refer to these guiding principles as part of a feminist paradigm. More accurately, and in alignment with this work, is a Black feminist paradigm. Such a paradigm is concerned with research that recognizes the racialized, gendered, sexualized, and economic (among other social stratifiers) complexities extant in the lives of Black women, and how these things shape their experiences and subjectivities leading to both empowerment and disempowerment (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2012; Few, Stephen, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003).

Two specific Black feminist frameworks are of relevance to this research, Black Feminist Thought as proposed by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Endarkened Feminist Epistemology as proposed by Cynthia Dillard (2006; 2012). These frameworks support modes of inquiry that see the lives of Black women as valuable and worthy of further understanding. Using a Black feminist epistemological perspective like that proposed by Collins (2000) means that researchers must recognize the interlocking systems of oppression that shape the lives of Black women while also demonstrating this for their audience. This perspective acknowledges the ways of knowing generated and shared by Black women that can be found in not only traditional academic scholarship, but also in other genres such as through storytelling, poetry, song, dance, and visual art. Black feminist thought also stresses the importance of an ethics of care and responsibility that must be adhered to when working with other Black women. Dillard's (2006; 2012) writing on an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology takes the ideas of Black feminist thought a step further by calling upon the researcher to be a surveyor and bearer of the deep memories of Black women, which includes the researcher's own memories. These memories are recalled through storytelling and conversations with other Black women. Like Collins, Dillard stresses that we handle these memories with great care since these memories serve as our connection to the past,

present, and future. As bearers of memories, researchers and participants are engaged in a spiritual practice, which is a central component of an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology. The concept of the spiritual as proposed by Dillard (2006), however, does not necessarily relate to any particular religious practice. Instead, it relates to a feeling of connectedness to something higher than oneself. Dillard suggests that doing research that is spiritually grounded is transformatively connected to a heightened consciousness and connectedness to those who we are doing research with as well as those whom will be affected by the research. For some, like Dillard, this might mean a connectedness to a higher power such as a Creator. For me, this means that the work that I do is directly connected to those who I share a kinship and friendship with such as my ancestors. My stories and experiences are a continuance of their stories and experiences. As a researcher, it is equally important for me to recognize the connectedness between the stories shared by the participants as well as my own. Therefore, it is important for me to engage in inquiry that acknowledge the experiences and perspectives of Black women as legitimate, while remaining aware of my position as both a researcher and participant, and the power dynamic that is at play even when an ethics of care is maintained. Throughout this project, I have made an effort to recognize my role as a Black woman doing research with other Black women, and my power-laden responsibility of portraying the experiences and knowledge of the women who have agreed to partake in this project. I view our connections and this research as a spiritual, embodied, healing process, and so, I have made it my goal to reflect upon my position as researcher-participant, friend, colleague, and stranger to some of these women.

## Shapeshifter: On Positionality and the Uses of Reflection

*The Researcher Who Is Also Black and Female*

Black woman

Bridge builder

Telling stories,

while sharing my pain

Shapeshifter

As mentioned previously, I am interested in forms of inquiry that disrupt normativity. The aspects of this project that are disruptive are my roles and practices as a researcher. In many forms of traditional research, there is an underlying myth that that suggests that research is somehow objective by separating the experiences of the researcher and those being "researched" as a means of promoting validity and reliability. Questions related to the level of objectivity, validity, and reliability often appear when those from marginalized groups do research with members from that same group or within a community in which they belong. Merton (1972), for example, cautions that when "insiders" who write about and study the groups in which they belong their writing is equivalent to ethnocentrism in that doing so is similar to promoting the superiority of that particular group while, at the same time, pushing "outsiders" to the margins. Maykovich (1977) and Zinn (1979) do not completely rule out research conducted by those belonging to the group or groups being researched, but both scholars suggest that "minority" researchers must proceed with caution. They argue that the issues that arise are more than about the objectivity, validity, and reliability of the research, but instead about a researcher's responsibility to her participants as a member of that group. Two issues, the quality of data and the researcher's presence after the research is over, should be attended to by researchers who are also insiders (Maykovich, 1977; Zinn, 1979). Feminist researchers have written about avoiding these issues as well as about the complexities of women of color doing research with other women of color. Scholars Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2004) provide a guide for Black women who engage in what they call "sister-to sister-talk" (p. 206). In their work, they attend to

the challenges proposed by Merton, Maykovoch, and Zinn in multiple ways. For example, in order to attend to issues related to the quality in data, they suggest that researchers use a different approach to triangulation—the use of multiple forms of data collection in order check the findings of a study from different angles. The suggested approaches include being creative throughout the data collection process, asking questions in varied ways in case one way is unclear, collecting nontraditional sources of data such as personal journals, and music, and creating or recreating a map of experiences, stories, or histories that are based upon the informative shared by the participants.

Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2004) attend to the second issue raised by Maykovich (1977) and Zinn (1979), which is the tendency for researchers to disappear completely once the research is over. Few et al. suggest that providing an explanation of the boundaries and expectations of the researcher and the participants at the beginning of the researcher will prevent the expectation that the researcher will always be there for the participant. On the other hand, some researchers have made the decision to maintain some type of presence in the lives of their participants or they cannot help but maintain a presence because they belong to the same organization or community. Other researchers have focused on the affirmative aspects of having insider status in one's respective field and in research.

In speaking about the Black woman's experience, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) contends that Black women within the academy have a special standpoint, which positions them as "outsiders within." Specifically, Black women who are trained in their respective academic fields have special insight into the rules and expectations of that field; however, they are still outsiders because they have still only recently been accepted into these White male dominated spaces. Congruently, most of the work about people of color, and specifically, Black women has been

done about them, which has allowed the perpetuation of dominant and often erroneous interpretations of Black womanhood. According to Collins, the outsider within standpoint is important to embrace despite its challenges because it allows the Black woman an opportunity to use the knowledge gained in the field, at the same time that it affords her a type of insider status. This provides an opportunity to represent Black women in a more authentic manner. However, as a researcher who also identifies as an artist, I am not quite an insider. Few et al (2004) contend that regardless of similarities in race and gender, there are other barriers that might exist that challenge our abilities to engage deeply with the women who participate. Therefore, in this project my positionality is one of closeness and distance (Simmel, 1971), and of scholarly and creative inclusion and isolation (Bauman, 2000).

The work of Cuban-American scholar, Ruth Behar (2003) is also relevant here as she continues the conversation about being part of academia while also being a cultural insider. Her discussion of the researcher as a border crosser or cultural translator is relevant to this project because throughout it I have felt like the bridge between two worlds. Behar explains that the "feminist ethnographer is a dual citizen, who shuttles between the country of the academy and the country of feminism...she speaks in a tongue bristling with seductive promises that she will not be able to keep" (p. 297). Behar asks how it is possible to appease those in power inside of the academy, and avoid being a sell out to the women who have agreed to be part of our research. This aspect of my life remains troubling yet necessary. There is always this feeling of belonging to two worlds, and being pulled by both. Bauman (2000) contends:

> One needs to live, to visit, to know intimately more than one such universe to spy out
> human invention behind any universe's imposing and indomitable structure and to
> discover just how much of human cultural effort is needed to divine the idea of nature

with its laws and necessities; all that in order to muster, in the end, the audacity and the

determination to join in that cultural effort knowingly, aware of its risks and pitfalls, but

also of the boundlessness of its horizons. (p. 84)

Reflecting on my role as a bridge builder and shapeshifter has led to a greater understanding of

my role in this project, and in future research. The first world is that of the doctoral student or

scholar striving to simply make it through this dissertation process by writing in a way that is

clear and accepted by the academy. The second is the world of the Black girl from a single

parent home in Detroit who learned early not to trust those in control or attempt to appease those

within that "said" academy for they or the unjust structural organization of the academy would

always remind me of my identity as an outsider.

During my interviews with the women in this project, I found myself tangoing between

these two worlds. In the beginning of most of the interviews, I found that I took on a more

academic persona, but as the interviews continued, the Black, working class woman from Detroit

came out. This provided opportunities for the women to access a different academic perspective,

one that some of the women had not been privy to, but others who traversed higher education

had. At other times, I felt like a voyeur attempting to sneak a view into their worlds. This was

especially true when topics related to family came up. My tangled identities complicated the

insider/outsider dichotomies. The work of De Cruz and Jones (2004) demonstrates that our roles

as researchers fluctuate from insider, outsider, and a mixture between the two, and despite this,

we must reflect on our positions because as part of the academy, they are connected in power.

Therefore, even though I know that there are many connections between these myself and the

other women, I also recognize that there is a certain amount of power associated with my

academic status even when I feel powerless. This power, as long as I am associated with an

academic setting as I do this work, will always exist; however, through reflection, and the uses of care as promoted by Black feminist thought and Endarkened Feminism, it is possible to prevent the intentional misuse of that power. Instead, I can rely on our common experiences, points of commonality, and opportunities for transformation and healing in all our lives. According to Boylorn (2013), the ability to reflect allows Black women to work through and articulate how our experiences as Black women shape our choice of research process and product.

## Methods of Qualitative Inquiry

The methods of qualitative inquiry that I have chosen to use for this project are the result of constant personal reflection about my role in academia and my belief in what the role of academic research should be. There are three forms of research methods used in this dissertation—autoethnography, phenomenology, and ethnography—which demonstrates my attraction to research that, is connected to disrupting normative ideas about identity and that have the potential to heal. These three forms of inquiry also offer possibilities to explore the lives of Black women. In an effort to do so sufficiently, the research paradigms discussed earlier, Black Feminist Thought and Endarkened Feminism informed each method of inquiry. Doing autoethnography from an Endarkened feminist perspective treats the researcher's voice as equally valid to the voices of the participants within the project. An Endarkened feminist perspective asks that I explore and write about my own intricate vulnerabilities through recalling memories and discovering new intimate experiences. In doing so, I am able to cross the borders, symbolic and real, of academia to engage in much needed conversations with women in those spaces outside of higher education. This is true, despite the realization that in many ways I am still an outsider intruding on these women's lives. The use of phenomenology is important here as well as other points of were made through the exploration of meanings association with both individual and shared experiences. By researching and analyzing the narratives shared during the

interviews as well as my own autoethnographic writing, a deeper explanation of our connectedness and our differences were understood. In addition, explorations of the meanings associated with growing up in a city like Detroit as Black women who eventually developed into artists was also better understood giving credence to phenomenological methods as significant components in this project.

The use of ethnographic methods, specifically methods such as observation and the analysis of other forms of data such as videos, newspaper articles, and websites, helped me to understand certain concepts brought up during the interviews with the participants. Together, these methods will lead to "structural corroboration" as mechanism to develop consensus on the research (Eisner, 1991, p. 55). By examining some of these artifacts beforehand, I was also able to inquire about these findings during the interviews. For example, during my interview with Mahogany Jonz, the rapper and poet, I listened to her newest album before our interview. By doing this, I was able to have her explain certain songs and put them in the context of the interview questions. While autoethnographic and phenomenological forms of inquiry helped me to explore the individual experiences of the Black women in this project, the ethnographic assisted me in developing a more holistic understanding of how these women narrate and understand their development as Black women. Ethnography also afforded me the opportunity to explore their development into Black female artists and performers, who consequently teach about representations of Black womanhood through that art and performance. The use of autoethnography in addition to components related to ethnography and phenomenology were combined to explore the embodied knowledge expressed by Black female artistic performers.

**On Autoethnography and Its Uses**

Autoethnography allows researchers to use their personal experience as a means of understanding cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). As a process, researchers use "epiphanies" or points of remembrance in the researcher's life as a means of exploring a particular cultural experience. Autoethnographic researchers engage in telling about their personal experiences related to the phenomena being studied, while also analyzing those experiences through reflection, academic literature, and relevant artifacts. Autoethnography is useful as a product because it integrates research, writing, and multi-genre forms of story-telling, making the researcher a subject in the project as the researcher's experiences becomes valuable data (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011).

This research uses principles of two aspects of autoethnography. The first, indigenous/native ethnographies (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011) provide an opportunity to engage in research that dismantles traditional power laden forms of research, and gives researchers from marginalized backgrounds the opportunity to tell their stories as they relate to the topic of research. Those who support autoethnographic writing recognize the connection between power, scientific writing, and knowledge (Richardson, 2001; Wall, 2006). By writing in this way, I am intentionally asserting a form of writing and a way of knowing that has become more common, but that is still questioned even in some so-called progressive institutions.

The second, personal narratives (Boylorn, 2013; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011), give researchers an opportunity to tell detailed stories about their lives in relationship to the subject of interest. Both native/indigenous ethnographies and personal narratives afford opportunities to detail the complexities of Black womanhood as it has presented itself and has been experienced

in my life. When partnered with other forms of inquiry, a mapping of definitions and experiences related to Black womanhood occurs. The work of Robin Boylorn (2013) links her experiences as a woman growing up in Sweetwater, South Carolina with the experiences of other women who mothered and mentored her in the same town is a great example of a project that combines these two forms of autoethnographic research with traditional ethnography, and interviewing that explores meaning making such as that which takes place in phenomenological research. In doing so, Boylorn has presented evocative tales of rural Black womanhood. By using similar forms of inquiry, I have set out to present a similar collection of experiences from an urban perspective. I have also present these experiences as a counter narrative to traditional narratives about Black womanhood.

**On Phenomenology and Its Uses**

Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010) contend that the purpose of phenomenological research is to clarify and expound upon the meanings associated with the lived experiences of the participants in our research, which can also include ourselves. In this project, I use phenomenology in its most basic sense, to explore the meanings that the women in this project associated with the varying encounters in their life. These encounters range from girlhood, adolescence, and adulthood. I also use, phenomenological forms of data collection and interpretation to explore the essential meanings associated with publicly creating, displaying, and/or performing art as Black women living in Detroit.

During the analysis of the interviews, I was attentive to how the participants described their development as Black girls, women, and artist/performers, and how they understood their development as connected to socially constructed definitions and perceptions of Black female identity. I was also attentive to how much of the performances of Black womanhood as well as

the portrayals of the Black female in their art and performances were based on how others in the world saw them or felt they should be seen. Specifically, the work of Charles Cooley (1922) and Irving Goffman (1969) was useful. Cooley advances the idea that the looking glass self relates to our continuous monitoring of how others see us, which leads to feeling of either pride or shame. Based upon Cooley's conceptions of the self, subjectivities are connected to social interactions. Goffman (1969) discusses ways that other's view and judgement of the self leads to embarrassment. Both Cooley and Goffman see pride resulting from "intersubjective attunement" (Scheff, 2003, p. 13) or the congruence of personal understandings of the self and the social perception of the self. Intersubjective conflict, on the other hand, results in shame (Cooley, 1992) or embarrassment (Goffman, 1969). I was also interested in the ways that the participants used art as a counter narrative in the face of misrecognition (Harris-Perry, 2010). bell hooks' (1992) theory related to the development of radical Black female subjectivities realized through enacting an oppositional gaze. According to hooks, the use of the oppositional gaze is political, and leads to agency because we are able to manipulate gazes or perceptions based in domination. Therefore, in cases of intersubjective conflict, the oppositional gaze offers an alternative reading of the self in the face of social interpretations.

Furthermore, I was even more interested in how these women defied these perceptions and constructions of Black girlhood identity and performance through transgressive acts thus relating to hooks' concept of the "oppositional gaze." By using these concepts to analyze the information gained from the interviews as well as the information gained from my autoethnographic reflections, a narrative of resistance has developed which is further explicated in the last two chapters of this dissertation project. For me; however, the written and oral narratives were not enough. There was a need for more observational measures in order to

complete this project. As a result, I employed components of ethnography to paint, if you will, a more colorful and holistic picture of the experiences of these women.

**On Ethnography and Its Uses**

Harry Wolcott (2007) describes ethnography as "a way of looking" (p. 46), and honestly, every method of inquiry and analysis has been a way of looking or seeing the experiences of the women in this research, including my own experience as part of a larger legacy of experiences of Black women. This is the case even as I acknowledge that many of our experiences are our own, and are interpreted through an individual lens. Components of ethnography were used to gain a deeper insight about a specific Black female cultural experience—that experience that is related to an association to the city of Detroit and that experience that is related to being part of another culture—the culture of creation through art and performance. Observation, which included activities that ranged from attending various events sponsored by or featuring the participants in this project to examining filmed performances and or public art displays, provided a heightened, but not always a complete, understanding of what these women did in their creative lives. By analyzing written documents related to these performances, I was able to understand a different perspective, that of one or more audience members. These two ethnographic components are exactly as Wolcott explains, a way of looking deeply, and for the purposes of this project, completely. These ethnographic components are like the sealant on a newly painted canvas or a curtain call or bow at the end of a performance—they are what led to the completed collection of information, and what made analysis fully possible. Together, autoethnography, phenomenology, and ethnography substantiate the experiences of a very specific group of Black women possible.

**Gathering the Stories of Black Female Artists and Performers**

**Setting**

The setting for this project with Black female artists and performers is a Midwestern city, Detroit, Michigan. This city is the place of my birth, upbringing, and it remains my current place of residence. Detroit, its history, and its contemporary state is central to this project, and it is significant in various ways to the women who are a part of this work. As a result, I begin this chapter with historical information related to Detroit in order to provide an awareness of the circumstances surrounding the city and the women living and working in it.

*Detroit: A Canvas, a Song, and Memory*

This is not a clean slate & we cannot start over.

Midtown arenas and espresso beans cannot dilute this colorful,

Deeply layered metropolis.

The images of gentrification began long ago.

They forgot.

Indigenous realities masked by French dualities of capital and consumption.

Vivid fires told truths of native lives forsaken.

Within the bright orange and yellow lightning were the faces of Ojibwa, painstaking.

They remember.

Their blood flows through the cemented roads

to the Maple trees that align the city streets.

All 688,701 of us are indebted to their sacrifices.

We remember.

This is not a clean slate & we cannot start over.

Corporate realty schemes and railway installations cannot dilute this colorful,

and deeply layered metropolis.

Migration flows through this city's veins.

Ebony colored mothers carried children on her shoulders

and the South on her mind for brighter days to come.

Ebony colored fathers joined olive skinned men on the factory floor in hopes to provide

Ebony mothers with reasons to stay in a place divided by race.

Mothers and fathers watched as their children died in the name of racial uplift on that

sunny afternoon.

As their children lined the bridge of Belle Isle to dispel rumors of sexualized hate.

They listened as the silence strong enough to paint pictures of words left unsaid.

About what happens when the thought of a

White girl and Black boy together emerges in one's head.

Detroit's two worlds ain't nothin' new.

Along with their forgetfulness too.

The poor and weary built this city, and not on rock and roll,

but on the speakeasy blues, Bessie Smith and John Lee Hooker too.

This is not a clean slate & we cannot start over.

Government officials giving financial hand jobs in the name of privatization

Bridges. Water. Earth. Schools.

They cannot dilute this colorful, deeply layered metropolis.

Brown and black minds pregnant with purpose

Brainstorming ideas for transformation.

They collect rainwater for those affected by administrative carelessness and disdain.

They paint pictures of change to line the pockets of residents in need.

They write poems in vivid colors

along motor city freeways so that you will dream about their stories.

They plant seeds of hope in fields left abandoned in the name of mid and downtown

expansion.

They study the history as to not repeat the same thing twice.

They revisited the site of the People of Three Fires,

Spoke with Ebony elders to write their own songs

so that the so-called "New Detroit " will remember while drinking their  pour overs to the

tune of some cool new artist they admire.

Detroit is not a clean slate & we will not start over.

Detroit is often defined as an urban city that is progressively being marked by blight in

certain areas and development (gentrification is another way of labeling this said development)

in others. Historian, Thomas Sugrue (1996) depicts a broken Detroit that has experienced drastic

changes. The images that he shares are still existent today. Sugrue contends:

Today, the city is plagued by joblessness, concentrated poverty, physical decay, and

racial isolation. Since 1950, Detroit has lost nearly a million people and hundreds of

thousands of jobs. Vast areas of the city, once teeming with life, now stand abandoned.

Prairie grass and flocks of pheasants have reclaimed what was, only fifty years ago, the

most densely populated section of the city. Factories that once provided tens of thousands

of jobs now stand as hollow shells, windows broken, mute testimony to a lost industrial

past. Whole rows of small shops and stores are boarded up or burned out. Over ten

thousand houses are uninhabited; over sixty thousand lots lie empty, marring almost

every city neighborhood. Whole sections of the city are eerily apocalyptic. Over a third of

the city's residents live beneath the poverty line, many concentrated in neighborhoods

where a majority of their neighbors are also poor. (Sugrue, 1996, p. 3)

More recently, a White male who decided to buy a home in Detroit's Poletown neighborhood

described a bifurcated Detroit:

There's this Detroit of bankruptcy, obviously. I think everybody's heard about that, which

is kind of the rest of the city. And there's also this core that's going on in the middle - in

Downtown and Midtown. So we're starting to see a split where a lot of young, white,

educated people, like myself, are moving in. But then there's also this rest of the city - the

city of bankruptcy and the emergency financial management. (Philp, 2014, para. 22)

I am familiar with these descriptions of Detroit. Having grown up in this city for the past 33

years of my life, I am vividly aware of this "tale of two cities." I see the vacant lots with spirits

of once fully functioning homes. I can literally look through my blinds and see the boarded up

homes. At the same time, I travel to work almost every day and see the complete opposite. There

are downtown streets buzzing with sightseers and young White college graduates walking to and

from their newly furnished lofts. Yet, despite the divisions and dilapidations, I have decided to

use this city as the backdrop of my research because Detroit has a deeper history than the current

gentrification and division. This history is one that can only be truly understood by hearing and

reading the experiences of the people of Detroit. This project places the stories and experiences

of Black female artists and performers who live in the city or do their work in the city at the

center of writings related to Detroit and about performance, art, and public pedagogy. These

stories are often left untold, but are significant since these women, which include myself, have

intentionally chosen to perform and create here in and throughout the city.

*Detroit Women: A Poem*

Detroit women are gritty and proud

We wear D's on our chest and on our baseball caps too

Old English etchings tattooed upon our bodies

We see the defamation and declare hope

We are fluent in despair,

but learning to speak the language of our ancestors

*Survival*

Detroit women fight the good fight

In response to corporate and hippy takeovers we sing,

"This is our city, not yours."

We own the night and the wee hours of the morning too.

When others are mourning what's lost, Detroit women

Transform into lyricists at night and paint canvases under the moonlight

Even Detroit River fish flies fear us

Being from, growing up in, working in and living in Detroit becomes part of who we are

as Black women. We have chosen to stay, create art, and perform in these spaces. We see

through the dilapidation, and instead we see hope.

## Research Sample

For this project, I selected seven Black female artists and/or performers, including me,

with varying ties to Detroit, Michigan. At the beginning stages of the research process, I used

criterion sampling (Jupp, 2006; Patton, 2002) in order to find individuals who met a

predetermined criterion related to race, gender, occupation, and geographical place. The sample

size was small because the purpose of this study was to explore the meanings associated with the experiences of these women as they developed as Black females and as they developed into artists in a particular community. Another purpose was to explore the meanings associated with the artistry and performance of each of these women. The aim is not to generalize, but instead to add to literature that demonstrates that Black women are defying and teaching about alternatives to constructions of Black womanhood created by those other than Black women themselves. This research project does not promise generalizability as it only features the stories and experiences of seven women, but there are aspects that can inform future research on critical public pedagogy, representations of Black womanhood, and performance art. As Janesick (2000) shares, there is an overwhelming obsession with generalizability or the applicableness of a sample to a larger population, among other factors, which she suggests leads to the separation between experience and knowledge. Therefore, in this project, I was more concerned with carefully exploring the relationship between Black female identity and the development of art that serves as public pedagogical tools. I was interested in the quality of the interviews and the experiences shared, not the quantity of women who agreed to take part in this project. However, I also acknowledge that those who encounter this work other than Black women and girls might be transformed by the experiences that are shared.

The women who are part of this project were associated with one or more of Detroit's artist communities. Others were friends of other artists within those groups. I am associated with a group called the Foundation, an all-female Hip Hop collective based in Detroit. Therefore, I have befriended some of the women who frequent Foundation events. I am also a member of several listservs for Detroit artists and activists, and so I used these connections as a means of recruiting women to take part in this work. I contacted the women via email, social media, and

through suggestions of other participants. Each email and advertisement I used on social media provided an explanation of the research project and a request to participate. Once the women agreed to participate, I sent a consent form electronically which I collected at the interview. Some of the women did not have the copy that I sent to them before the interview; therefore, I supplied them with a new copy to sign after carefully going over the consent form with each participant.

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**Data Collection**

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In order to collect the data for this project, I sent emails as well as advertisements on social media sites in order to recruit participants for this project. As part of this process, I submitted and received approval from Eastern Michigan University's Institutional Review Board in order to work with "human subjects." I sent emails to two listservs that I am also listed on. The first was an activist listserv for Detroit-based activists. This listserv features those committed to social justice and Eco justice work throughout the city of Detroit. The second listserv features artists and performers associated with a Hip-Hop gallery located in the city. I then sent individual messages via Facebook and Instagram, which included a flier describing the project. There were no responses to the emails and six responses to the individual messages sent using social media. Consequently, the selection of participants would include opportunistic sampling (Jupp, 2006; Patton, 2002) in addition to criterion sample because I solicited the participation from certain women that I knew were performers and artists in the city of Detroit as well as women that were referred to me by other artists. There was one connection made after interviewing the third participant, which led to the last outside participant. Each of these seven women agreed to be interviewed and observed in various spaces over a period of a month and a half.

Interviews

The interviews with the six women in the project usually began extemporaneously. Even though my intentions were to meet in a private space such as the participant's home or in a library meeting room, we met in spaces selected by the women themselves. Sometimes we met in a preset location at a preset time like in a library at 3:00 p.m., but then the room would require us to sit literally inches away from each other. Our closeness would require us to breathe each other's air and smell each other's fragrance. Sometimes the interviews were scheduled one day, and completed the second day. At other times, interviews would begin only after being rescheduled week after week, but when they finally occurred they lasted for up to four hours in a comfortable home smelling of *nag champa* incense. Regardless of where the interviews took place, in libraries, coffee shops, or in homes in front of fathers suffering from dementia, they all began the same way, with me explaining the project, going over consent forms, and explaining the structure of the interview.

For every interview, I attempted to follow a preset list of questions (found in the appendix) that followed the three-part process representative of phenomenological interviewing. The questions that I prepared before starting any of the interviews follow the design outlined by Irving Seidman (2006) who shares that phenomenological interviewing is a combination of life history interviewing and in-depth interviewing that uses open-ended questions to explore, ultimately, the meanings a person associates with certain events. The interviews always started with the initial question about the participant's demographic make-up, "Can you tell me who you are, where you are from, your age, etc.?" Many of the women explained who they were with long answers lasting anywhere from ten to thirty minutes. Other women stared with looks of confusion, and then would state, "You know it is very difficult to speak about one's self, I don't know what to say." After statements such as these, I felt like an intruder, like someone who was

only there to poke and probe into the very intimate details of their lives. As a result of this feeling of invasion, I would share information about myself in an attempt to equalize the space. I would share, "If it were me, I would just begin by saying, "My name is Nicole Carter. I am 33 years of age. I identify as African American. You can say things like this if you want." Usually, after a slight pause, those who were reluctant at first would begin talking.

The interviews would continue sometimes effortlessly, and other times I would have to nudge for more answers or more of an explanation. As the women spoke about their experiences growing up in Detroit, and other nearby places, the need to engage in full-fledged conversation about our similar experiences overwhelmed me because we had so many similar experiences, yet our lives proved to be different. I found myself sharing my own experience as the women told me about their experiences. Although, I felt a bit reluctant about inserting my experience into their discussion of their lives, doing so seemed to lead the women to be more relaxed as this generated a sense of comfort as the women would begin speaking more freely, they would relax in their seat, or move closer to me as if to tell me their secrets—secrets they did not want anyone else to know.

One woman, Sabrina, for example, started her interview as if she had already prepared to answer questions about her art. Every answer was given in a methodical way. She never looked up from a painting she was finishing for a project beginning the next day until I told her, "I find it interesting that your mother died at a young age because my mother did too." She then looked me in the eyes, as if to find out if I was telling the truth, and started to share the details of how it felt to grow up without her mother. These were details she had started to skip over until I shared a similar experience with her. Sharing my own experience with Sabrina seemed to break down some of the barriers that existed because of my role as an academic researcher. Few, Stephens,

Rouse-Arnet (2003) illustrate that academic research "[s]haring certain identities is not enough to presume an insider status. Idiosyncrasies are embedded in our identities that inevitably create moments of intimacy *and* [emphasis added] distance between the informant and researcher" (p. 207). The experience of losing a mother during our childhood helped to dismantle a barrier caused by our different roles in the research.

**Observations**

The observations were completely different. In each of the observations of these women, they seemed to be extremely comfortable. They were doing the thing that they found an ease in, creating art and performing. A sense of reluctance was nowhere to be found on the stages, or in the arms contouring against blank canvases. I was no longer an intruder; instead, I was expected to be there. Listening. Looking. Learning. Feeling. During these performances, the stories told during the interviews came to life. During one performance, for example, I saw the childhood insecurities caused by colorism discussed in her interview surrender to sultry movements to a room filled with downtempo beats and to hip-hop lyrics about embracing one's imperfections because those imperfections are perfect in their own way. During the observations, a similar feeling of common experience arose just as what happened during the interviews, but this time they happened without any prompts from me. One woman's need to paint pictures of Black women with afros came, as she explained in public, from the ease of painting something quickly in a public space, but also from the reality that these women were out of the norm, and needed to be seen. Her use of this public space to paint these figures connected to my own. One, I had painted these images so many times in my own home and in public that it had become easy to do so with a limited amount of time, but it was also important to have these images created in a public space to demonstrate that Black women come in all different shapes, sizes, and with

varying styles of hair and dress. During another observation, the one mentioned previously, I felt that the lyrics about being perfect the way that we were born as women spoke directly to me. I was so moved, that I stood up and danced along to the song, something I rarely do out of shyness.

**Autobiographical Reflection**

As part of the data collection process, I wrote narrative reflections about my own experiences as well as the experiences with the women. These reflections led to many epiphanies about my childhood. I kept a journal in an effort to record my memories and experiences. I also would ask my father if he remembered these memories from my childhood in the same way I did. Often he would clarify information by providing a different location or a name that I did not recall. Other times he would not remember the event at all. I also used poetry as an autoethnographic device as a form of reflection. At other times, I used narratives.

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**Transcription Procedures**

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I transcribed each of the interviews in their entirety. In doing this, themes continuously emerged, but also, varying meanings associated with various experiences shared at different points throughout the interviews were understood. Transcribing the interviews as well as listening to the interviews while reading the transcriptions afforded me with an opportunity to understand the silences as purposeful instead of unused recorded space. Field notes were also used during and after each interview as a means of jotting down additional questions, my experiences connecting with the women, and my reflections on how I felt the interviews turned out. I documented nonverbal reactions of the participants such as when they maintained eye contact or when they would look away. I also documented my own nonverbal reactions such as when I felt a sense of nervousness, which led me to look away from them, or when my heart would begin to race after I shared a similar experience in an attempt to establish rapport. The use

of field notes were also helpful during and after the observations that took place as part of the project. The notes taken were similar, except, I would also notate the audience's reaction to a performance, for example.

## Data Analysis

### Phenomenological Analysis

There are various steps involved in phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The first aspect, known as phenomenological reduction, called for me to explore my own preconceptions and judgments about the varying phenomena being explored through this project. Those phenomena are the development as Black girls and women, the development as Black female artists and performers, and the experience of performing in public spaces. These experiences and the meanings associated with them were analyzed through my own reflections related to those experiences. In addition, I tried to examine my assumptions and how those assumptions were formed related to these experiences, which I did again through narrative and poetry. The next step used in this project is bracketing, which involves identifying phrases and statements within the interview data, field notes from observations, and other forms of data that relate to the phenomenon or phenomena being explored, and interpreting the meanings by examining phrases and statements used by the participants (Creswell, 1998). This interpretation was done by using secondary data that had already been written on critical public pedagogy and performance; by asking the women in the project clarifying questions about the meaning of particular experiences; and by my determining the importance of a particular phrase based on the number of times the phrase or words were used. The next step in the phenomenological research process is the creation of a written description of the experience based upon the findings from bracketing. During this step, I used Clifford Gertz's (1973) notion of thick description as a way to write extensively about one or more cultural experiences. During

this step, I attempted to paint a picture, literally and figuratively, of the experiences of the participants including my own experiences in order to put those experiences in a larger social and cultural context. These descriptions contributed to the final step, which was to <u>synthesize</u> the overall meanings, thus transforming the events as described by the women and myself "from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted" (Geertz, 1973, p. 19).

**Creative Explications**

Personal reflections were significant in the analysis of the interviews, observations, and my own autobiographical accounts featured in this project. I reflected at the end throughout the entire project, but mostly while reviewing the transcriptions, and relating the narratives of the women to my own experiences. I also used phenomenological bracketing to establish themes. First, I determined if three or more women mentioned similar topics and phrases, and placed those expressions were possible themes. Second, I asked clarifying questions about statements made in order to understand the meanings associated with particular topics, phrases, or words at the end of the initial interview or during a second interview. My close readings of the passages associated with the general themes in the interviews, the field notes from the interviews and the observations, as well as my own autoethnographic reflections led to sub-themes. Third, I settled on the selected themes by assessing their frequency throughout the data collection process, but also by exploring research that existed on my overarching topics. Through reflection, I found that although I assumed that our collective experiences as critical-pedagogical agents fit within the framework of Black feminist thought, Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, and critical public pedagogy, there were themes that moved beyond these theoretical constructions by suggesting that place, space, and time were intertwined with Black womanhood.

In order to exhibit my findings, I use paintings, poetry, and layered narratives (Ronai, 1995) because uses of the creative help to provide a more holistic narrative of cultural phenomena. The use of art is an area that is useful and disruptive, as it is still not always accepted as a valid form of qualitative inquiry; however, others such as Eisner and Barone (2006) have stressed that art based research helps to illuminate that which has been hidden away. In chapter 4, there are paintings inserted next to biographical poems about each of the women. These images were drawn first at various points in the research process, and painted later as a means of creating cultural representations that can exist beyond this project. The images and poems are based upon the findings in the interviews, observations, and other artifacts. In my interview with Leah, for example, she describes herself as afflicted with depression, yet outgoing demonstrated through her makeup, dress, and behavior in public spaces. I attempted to show this in one of the drawings of Leah.



*Figure 2: Drawing of Leah before Completed Painting*

I used poetry throughout the chapters as a means of personal reflection, a form of analysis, and a way of introducing readers to the women in the project. This was important since poetry has the ability to "point to 'more than words can say', to express the inexpressible, to make grief somewhat easier to bear, to help us see what we are looking for as crystals, as prisms, as rainbows, as understandings that 'shine through'" (Prendergast, Leggo & Shameshima, 2009,

p. 8). Poetry is also useful because it mimics the conversational style of everyday women outside of academic settings (Boylorn, 2013). In "Poetry is Not a Luxury" Audre Lorde reminds us, poetry (and art) has a politically charged purpose for Black women. According to Lorde (1984) "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives" (p. 38). Therefore, introducing these women in traditional academic form would not fit my personality or theirs.

Continuing along these nontraditional lines, I develop layered conversations (Ronai, 1995) (found in Chapter 4) between each of the women. My voice is included in this conversation in three parts: as *Nicole the Researcher, Nicole the Artist,* and *Nicole's Reflection*. Explicating my narrative in this way was useful since I served various roles in the project. My voices, as mentioned previously, served as a bridge between the participants, academia, and my own transformative experiences.

## Ethical Considerations

The women who agreed to participate in this project were treated with respect not only because it is my duty to do so as a researcher, but also because I value their existence and contributions as Black women and as artists. These women, regardless of their ages, are my teachers and my inspiration. Respect was given in a number of ways. First, I respected their time and allowed them to dictate their availability to me. Second, they were reminded at various points throughout the research that their participation was voluntary. Third, they were given the opportunity to use a pseudonym as opposed to direct identifiers to which each of them declined. Fourth, the transcriptions and information written throughout this project are authentic, and have not been modified to simply enhance the research. Finally, each woman was offered a small

$20.00 gift card for their participation; however, not all of the women accepted the stipend

because they felt that the opportunity to share their experiences was enough reimbursement.

## Conclusion

My purpose in conducting the research, data collection, and analysis was to add to the

current research that exists on constructions of Black womanhood by Black women. Specifically,

I set out in this project to demonstrate qualitatively how Black female artists and performers

create and disseminate alternative conceptualizations of Black womanhood though their work.

By doing so, I hope to have shown that these women teach lessons in public spaces that can

potentially give a voice to other Black girls and women. Finally, I hoped to show that forms of

inquiry that disrupt traditions are useful, as they present opportunities to write about and present

experiences that are often left to the peripheries of society. What follows in the next two chapters

are the results of this very fruitful qualitative process.

## Chapter Four: Performing Radical Black Womanhood

Being an artist was unheard of for the women in my family. Instead, we were expected to be schoolteachers, nurses, or mothers—you know the nurturing type. As an act of desperation, I found art when it was supposed to remain hidden. Ironically, art did for me what these women were expected to do. Painting became an act of survival. It was a mechanism for dealing with depression onset by thoughts of failure as a student navigating the tensions between academia and everyday life. At the same time, art nurtured and sustained me. I started with circles on a blank canvas using "Do It Yourself" patterns I found on Pinterest. This was three years ago. Moving the paint around in circular motions was similar to meditation for me. I would sit there for hours painting continuous circles along with smaller dots that connected them. With each circle came a clarifying thought. When the circles became monotonous, I found images of items I could emulate with acrylics. I painted abstract trees and Buddhas until I saw an image that connected with me on a deeper level--a Black woman with an afro. I decided to use her as the subject of my paintings from that moment forward. I began to create my own multifaceted images of Black women by using elaborate colors and textures.



*Figure 3: Pick Yo Afro*
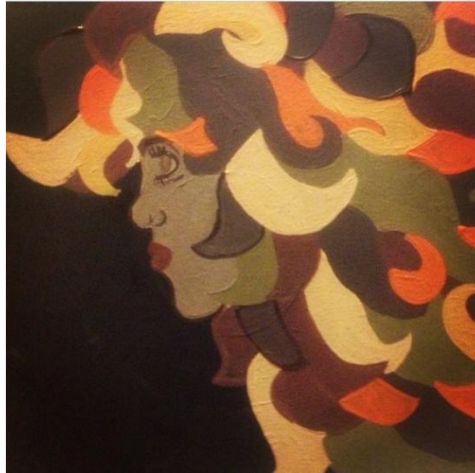
*Figure 4: Warrior Woman*

I was encouraged by family members to enter my paintings into various art shows, and reluctantly I did, which was a difficult decision. Art, for me, was catharsis, not competition. Surprisingly, the pieces I entered were selected to be part of various showcases throughout the city of Detroit. Also around this time, I was invited to be part of a hip-hop collective, The Foundation, to serve as one of the scholars in the group. However, when these women saw my artwork, they encouraged me to begin creating art as part of the weekly open-mic nights. This would entail engaging in the simultaneous creation and performance of art. I conjured up memories of performing on stage years prior in order to regain enough confidence to paint Black women on canvases while female rappers and poets would "spit" for the audience. I used their experiences shared through their lyrics as well as the beats that they performed over to inform my work. At some point, the women in the collective began to refer to me as a performance artist—an identity I had yet to claim for myself.

*Figure 5: Performance Painting at Open Mic*



*Figure 6: Finished Performance Piece*

This, and other performative moments, reassured me that the public world of art was a world that welcomed me as a developing artist. These moments fed my soul in ways that the academy and my mundane Detroit experiences could never do. Art became a consistent component of every area of my life because it provided clarity about and shelter from an exploitive world. Art served as a form of empowerment, and an opportunity to counter confining representations of Black womanhood constructed by "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1992). Reflecting on these moments, I wrote these words:

I was supposed to die

on multiple occasions.

Most recently, two weeks ago,

But art swept in and wiped the tears.

Soothed the aching soul.

Slowed the palpitating heart.

Saved me.

bell saved me.

*Sisters of the Yam*

Calibri saved me.

*Black & Brown Erotic Bodies*

Jessica saved me.

*Detroit's Daughter*

I Saved Me.

*I Am Art.*

The women, who are part of this project, have pushed me to create a space for myself as a creative person and as a scholar. They demonstrate that regardless of one's introduction to art or level of expertise in the world of art and performance, there will always be challenges. For these women those challenges led them to become better artists, while sharing that art in a way that challenges others to think outside of the social and cultural constructions. What follows are poetic biographies that introduce each of us since poems mimic the realistic conversations had by women outside of academic settings. Fitzpatrick (2012) acknowledges that the use of poetry is "an overtly creative mode of representation; it doesn't pretend to be objective" (p. 12). Likewise,

I acknowledge that these poetic introductions are based on my interpretation of the information shared with me during the interviews as well as my observations of the public works and performances of the participants. Next to each poem is a painting that is meant to accompany the biographies, but that serves as a commentary on my belief that these women stand in juxtaposition to discourses that position Detroit as overwhelmed by blight, and at the same time, gentrification. Layered narratives (Ronai, 1995) follow the poems, and are organized in themes and sub-themes found through my analysis and reflections. Layered narratives have been used as a means of dismantling the binaries often created in research between the participants and the researcher by placing them in conversation with each other. These narratives are an attempt to demonstrate my status as both an insider and outsider who exists in the spaces in between. I have done so by using three voices: *Nicole the Researcher*, *Nicole's Reflection*, and *Nicole the Budding Artist*.

**Our Collective Voices: The Poetic Biographies of Seven Women**

**Krystal the Poet**



*Figure 7: Krystal the Passionate Poet*

I was an angry child

Writing angry poems to escape

Boredom--

Disdain--

Demands to be "daddy's little girl," when,

in my mind I'm a fuckin' queen!

My name—a prism of ionic properties

But this world ain't nothing pure, and so...


An angry child becomes an angry woman

Blackness becomes a thing since

I can't find my reflection in a sea of whiteness

In college classrooms, reading about Hegel and Marx

When I would rather philosophize about hooks and Cesaire


Or write poems.

Angry poems.

About Renisha

Aiyanna

Eleanor

Yvette

 and Tarika...


Who all looked like me...

Black

Female

Young

Yet, invisible


I write and breathe as part of a community of poets--

They saved me.

They are my family--


We stand together,

our Black and Brown bodies

performing our dreams.


Yet, I'm still angry

Yes, I'm still angry.

And, Black

And, Woman

    And an Artist damn it, and I'm sensitive about my shit! (Badu, 1997)


**Leah the Fashionable Scribe**



*Figure 8: Leah the Fashionable Scribe*

Hijabs should not be required for beautiful,

voluptuous women with dreams.

Who would rather read Harry Potter than Vogue Magazine.

But, my momma,

oh my momma

couldn't for the longest time decide

who she was until Islam called,

and called me too.

On second thought,

hijabs keep the two hemispheres of the self whole.

Joined by illustrious jewels and colorful knitted spools

symbolic of Allah's love.

Keeping within them

stories of childhoods ridden with parental unions

separated by a laying of hands,

and not the Godly type either.

Memories of family gatherings

voided by religious,

and spiritual separatism…

bigotry

Allah's coverings

Kept my diverging selves intact.

At least until my childhood

could stop being remembered

as a place of attack.

Even with the hijabs of protection,

I was lost between two worlds of sadness

and the facade of the American Dream,

but when I found the union of art and performance,

only then did I find me.

Beneath the colorful threads lay stories

of women protagonists robbing banks

in the name of survival.

My stories fill me with a satisfaction

Left idle when I look to the East in prayer

They tame my internal holy war

of which I am forever mindful.

Now, on any given Sunday,

you can find me elaborately designing runways

filled with neon hijab-clad women

with so much color it might remind you

of an old-school Black Christian revival.

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist**
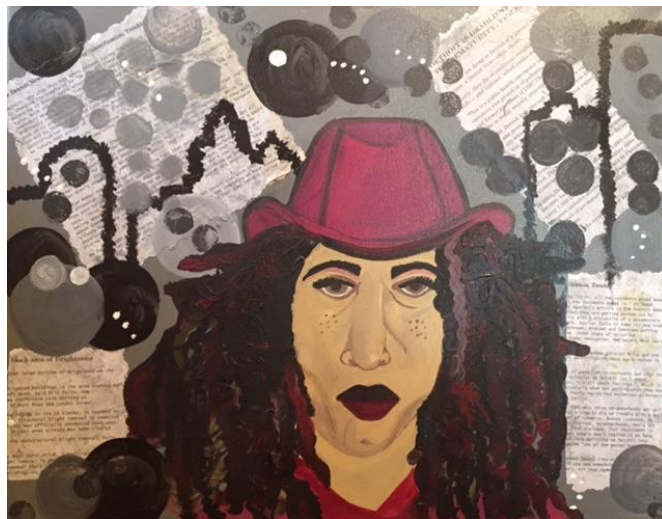


*Figure 9: Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist*

Do you know what it means to survive?

In the 60s

In a city

filled with

hate

violence

war

No father to speak of

A mother dead due to smack.

Livin' with her mother and her mother's mother.

A mother myself, at 15, at 18—

These loves from my womb

Taught me to love without conditions.

Teaching me to signal my inner Oshun.

     African goddess

Reaching deep within my soul

To heal myself through carrying memories

In my African seas.--

Memories

of Alabama red dirt conception

of bookish women

with blue-collar mentalities

of Motown blues women

     singing songs of defiance

With these women on my mind

one child on each hip

a head full of locks

Hazel eyes cocked to the sky

I learned to paint the world with my colorful dreams.

With a yearning for freedom as my guide.

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer**



*Figure 10: Ryan the Democratic Dancer*

In the 80s, dark black faces were an aberration

*Black is Beautiful* was a thing of the past

Nina had stopped singing Black girl songs

White America had had enough

of our thinking we were somebodies

Reagan had single-handedly

placed Black people behind the cell

of addiction


Women who resemble queens of entire continents

were made to believe they were slaves

Waiting in welfare lines hungry and depraved


But, when you are born to single-mothers

Who inform you that your beauty should never be deprived

And, you are part of a community

That urges you to never hide

You learn to dance when no one's looking

You hold your sister's hand,

and dance your way to freedom

Remembering your mother's struggle to survive.

**Mahogany the Enlightened Rapper**



*Figure 11: Mahogany the Enlightened Rapper*

I learned early on

to navigate the two

extremes

Of the gentry of Harlem

And the grittiness of the "D"

Of city wide diversity

And familial colorism

Of a mother's musical genius

And schizoid paranoia

Of private schooling

And pastoral indiscretions

Of relationships with God

And sexual sacrilege

Poetic inscriptions helped to decipher that between each dichotomy

existed a cipher of love.

## Rachel the Conscientious Provocateur



*Figure 12: Rachel the Conscientious Provocateur*

I am six feet of

Unapologetic

Dark girl pride.

Discovering myself

Even when mother's die

And so there are no mirror images

Even when single fathers

hope for feminine complicity

Even when others demand I model or play ball


Discovering myself

Through obtuse images of

First Black Grandmother

Librarians

Teaching me to peruse the stacks

Filled with books of lanky

Women just like me...

Young, Black, and Beautiful

Their stories helped me to discover myself

I learned to be unapologetically Black

Seeing Josephine control seas of white faces

With a whip of her hip and a smile

I learned to be unapologetically Black

Creating my own definitions of femininity

mixed with Detroit swagger

controlling sees of White faces with a whip of my hip and a smile.

**Nicole the Budding Artist**



*Figure 13: Nicole the Budding Artist*

I want answers

I want to know why I always feel undone

Who created these identities that never fit?

Seriously, who created this shit?

To think I was once so naïve.

Blinded by the American Dream.

I should have known I wasn't meant to survive.

My mother never made it to 50.

I was seven, motherless, and expected to be happy.

Called white girl because my hair wasn't "nappy"

And my skin was too pale to fit into these boxes.


I used my fists to beat blackness into my skin.

Black like my daddy, Black and beautiful like the girls in my class.

Not realizing my own beauty until many years later,

My own aunt couldn't bear to look at me,

A small child,

and she couldn't bear to look at me.

Maybe she was confused too,

pretending to be an ethnicity she could never live up to.

I chalk it up to anger

or self hate


And then there's my attempt to navigate an academy

Secondary and beyond

Whose doors didn't make room for the complexities of my

Black. Woman. Hood'.

And Detroit, not just a city but a way of life

Teaching girls like me that educational attainment was kinda trite.


Friends constantly reminded me

that hood mentalities are embedded deep

in the most articulate of women

You know the saying,

"you can take the girl out of the hood,

but you can't take the hood out the girl".

And how am I supposed to choose

when I am both all of the above

and none of these things at all?

I am learning to find beauty in my Black girl quirkiness

And, these women

Sabrina

Mahogany

Krystal

Leah

Rachel

Ryan

have held my hands steady as I filled canvases with

self love and Black. Woman. Pride.

Beautiful acrylic images of a love like no other.

And, these poems.

Yes, these poems have taught me that finding art is like finding

Home.

## Coming to Art: A Conversation about Artistic Development

**Nicole the Researcher:**

"Creativity is both a skill set, and a unique and individual character structure that is developed throughout childhood and fine-tuned in adolescence and adulthood" (O'Connor, 2012, p. 1). The seven women in this project demonstrate that various components have contributed to their creativity…

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist:**

My first introduction to art was sewing. I didn't have art from 5th grade all the way through high school. Then when I got in high school, I had sewing. I was making all the clothes, and suits and swimsuits, and

baby clothes and

everything…

**Ryan the Dancer:**

I was always, well I won't say

always, but I was definitely a

performer from a really young age

from like seven or six. Um, I

would like make little plays, and

just act them out, and do little

dance shows for people. I think I

just always knew that I was going

to be in the arts. I was like

dancing, and choreographing

*Nicole's Reflection:*

things in middle school…

*I wonder where I would be*

*if I had attended a school*

*that supported art or even*

*if knew that being an artist*

*was a thing…*

**Leah the Fashionable Scribe:**

Well, when I was homeschooled,

we'd have a full day of school at

the library. So, when I'm going to

libraries I see this pic – not

picture, but like an advertisement

for a writing contest. I'm like, "Oh, my God, this is my time to shine!"... I had to step on stage of the little library, and we said our names. They were so enthralled. I don't even know what I wrote about...

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*I wasn't encouraged to engage in art in school, but I did enter into similar contests like Leah. I found many of these same contests in the back of magazines.*

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Other times, people

within schools helped

the women to develop

in a creative way…                    **Mahogany the Enlightened**

**Rapper:**

I never considered myself to be a

musical person...I was just a writer.

I was always a writer. I love

writing. I have to say it is because

of my English teacher, Sister

Mahogany Jones. She had a great

impact on me, just always pushing

me…                                              **Krystal the Passionate Poet:**

When I got to [college], and I

joined the Poetry Society my

idea of poetry changed. When I

first started, I would tell them,

I'm not a poet, I'm a writer, and

I just so happen to write poetry.

**Nicole the Researcher:**

There are times;

however, that certain

students are not

encouraged to

participate in the arts at

all, but led to instead

focus on more

traditional subjects.

This focus can

sometimes lead to

resistance…

**Rachel the Conscientious**

**Provocateur:**

I went to a private high school. My

dad was paying 9 grand a semester

for me to be there, and I was…very

very resentful as a teenager...

**Nicole the Budding Artist:**

I went to private school for my

entire K-12 career. In fact, I

even received two degrees from

a Catholic college…

**Rachel Continued:**

I was a dreamer. I was always like

10 steps ahead of them and it

was…like stupid having one way of learning and nobody learns in one way, you know what I mean?...And it's just like they really really -- in Michigan, one of the things that my frustration has been with-- is the need to strive for mediocrity…Art wasn't even a thing…

**Nicole the Budding Artist:**
Within these spaces, art was nothing to be taken seriously; at least, it didn't seem to be, but I rarely managed to take any type of schooling seriously at that point in my life. School was mostly boring and pointless at that time. Art was no different. I didn't see the act of shading pears as significant to who I was...

*Nicole's Reflection*

*After reflecting on my introduction to art and my views of school, I'm amazed at the similarities between Rachel and myself. It reminds me of*

*a quote by Frida Kahlo, "I used to think I was the strangest person in the world but then I thought there are so many people in the world, there must be someone just like me who feels bizarre and flawed in the same ways I do. I would imagine her, and imagine that she must be out there thinking of me, too. Well, I hope that if you are out there and read this and know that, yes, it's true I'm here, and I'm just as strange as you" (Kahlo, 1995).*

*Discovering that our identities were so similar (motherless, daughters of single fathers, athletic, private school educated, and unyielding to curricular normativity), was like a breath of fresh air. There was a connection between Rachel and I—a*

*connection found in another*

*woman's story too.*


*After hearing, after hearing another*

*woman's story, Ryan, I am equally*

*moved as she reassured me that*

*schooling could nurture students in*

*a way that was truly creative*

*instead of mundane. She also*

*demonstrated that others played a*

*role in shaping ones artistic*

*future…*

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer:**
My mom couldn't afford
private lessons or anything like
that, but I took violin starting in
elementary school, and
continued violin into middle
school…My mom *could* afford
the art classes for children
because she got a discount
because she was a student at the
college that sponsored it. From
there, I went to a performing

arts school. I took dance like 3-4 hours a day…For 3 hours a day; you are doing what you really love. It was just like really different…It was very supportive.

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Other women

demonstrated that artistic

influences could occur

outside of formal

educational spaces…

**Rachel the Conscientious
Provocateur:**

One of the things that really got me

into burlesque was my sister… she

could dance circles around Misty

Copeland and it's not because she's

my sister. But then she ends up not

dancing because the teacher says

she don't look like a ballerina…then

I watch that destroy this poor girl

who could dance. Every freaking

day you couldn't stop her from

dancing. I did the same classes with

her…

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer:**

My grandmother was very

creative…she made dolls like

custom dolls and she made clothes.

She's an amazing seamstress. I get

**Mahogany the Enlightened Rapper:**

I think my family being in the music industry shaped or had a great deal to do with my interaction with music… I've always been attracted to art ever since a kid, when I was a kid, definitely performance art, like I would write plays. I wanted to be in plays. I was in a few plays. I love writing words. I'm used to writing stories…

compared to her a lot. People would say, you know, you are just like Rosina because you are the creative one. It was good to be able to look up to her. A lot of people who are artists are maybe the oddball in their family you know, where their like, you shouldn't do this or whatever…

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist:**

Once I reconnected with my father and his family [at 15]…I found that the whole side of the family, the paternal part of me that I'd never known until after my mother had passed they were all very creative. And so he [my father] is an artist and his whole family was an artist and not that I felt like I didn't belong in my maternal side but I was always the odd one. I was the one who wore the mismatched socks, or the polka dots with the stripes and just thought it was beautiful…And then when I come on this side of my family, it was like, "Ah ha."…

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*After hearing Sabrina reflect on connecting with her father's side of the family as a mechanism for her creative understanding, I started to remember that my father was*

*creative. The number of Luther*

*Vandross and Barry White vocal*

*renditions were copious. He also*

*drew the Malcolm X figure on the*

*chalkboard in our basement that is*

*still there. My dad was and is an*

*artist. This proclamation is*

*invigorating for me.*

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Attempts to seek out

artists who were similar

to them was an

influential factor…

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist:**

I had some really strong influences

and I was very hungry to find out

what artists who look like me were

doing… I was eager to find out what

black artist were saying, and so

Gilda…she was like a big influence

on me. I just wanted more

information about where are the

black artists, how come I am not

learning about them…she just told

me. Look them up…They're in the

library. She was my mentor and she

just was a black woman that I was

like, she just makes art all the time.

That's freaking dope…

**Krystal the Passionate Poet:**

When it comes to poetry um, all of

the people who I worked with when

I first started performing were

Black. So, a lot of my inspiration
when I first started getting into
performance and stuff was watching
Def Poetry Jam, with mostly
minority poets, and then working
with poets in person. All of them
were Black.

**Nicole the Researcher:**

For some of these women coming to the type of art that fit them was due to many overwhelming and discomforting circumstances. Some of those circumstances were more overwhelming than others…

**Mahogany the Enlightened Rapper:**

So, one day when I go to this open mic, this host is like "When you go' stop reading poetry with that paper in your face…you scared?" He's like, Stop playing. This is what you do. Do this," and I was like, "Okay". I was scared though…I think my artistry and my performance art began to merge and I could just start seeing the beginning of me just having

vision because of him pushing

me…

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist:**

My grandmother connected me with this guy named Rob who was a graphic designer, he was like, "Why don't you think about going to [art school]?... He made an appointment for me…He said, "Bring a collection of your artworks." And, I brought some of my drawings with me and a little sketchbook that I had in the house …

An art school admissions advisor…kind of looked at my portfolio and they were like, "You ain't ready to come in here." … "You're cute but you're not ready to come in here"…

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer:**

While taking extra-curricular
dance class at a local private
college…I walked in thinking,
"I'm going to rock this class!"
Then I got there and I'm like "Oh
no. I'm not, like I don't have the
advantage here…And, it was like
the teacher…really singled me
out. Maybe it was because I was
black too that he wanted to give
me an eye opener.

He was just like, "higher, higher,
higher"…screaming at me, and I
was just like…I can't do it…ballet
is just different for Black people .
That's why I stopped [pursuing
dance in college], but more
because of the financial reasons. I
just kind of decided that I wanted
to do more modern or that I
wanted to do film you know

…and so that was kind of just like

the transition that happened

there…

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist:**

When I was talking to my father about being denied admission to art school, he was like, "You can paint signs. You don't have to go art school. I can just teach you everything you need to know.  You don't have to go to art school"…I was like "No"! And he was like, "Well, then be broke".  And I was like, "I ain't going to be broke"… I ended up going to the community college and then coming back to CCS when I was ready, when my portfolio was ready…

*Nicole's Reflection*

*I see myself in each of these women. Their stories help me to connect my own struggles to a larger conversation about the uses of familial memory, community influence, and personal perseverance. It is irresponsible not to use these creative gifts for greater purposes.*

## Creating as a Critical, Public, Pedagogical Endeavor: A Conversation

**Nicole the Researcher:**

The seven women in this

project demonstrate that their

artistic practices have

pedagogical and

transformative potential.

They contribute to the

writings on critical public

pedagogy, while also

pushing its boundaries.

Within a critical public

pedagogical framework,

cultural production becomes

"a defiant notion that

individuals are capable of

and should be responsible

for their own entertainment"

(Sandlin, 2008, p. 331).

These women actively

counter mainstream cultural

products and forms of

entertainment by creating art and performances that disrupt...

**Rachel the Conscientious Provocateur:**

I've already had it planned how I was gonna address it [burlesque]. Like, I was young, I was experimental, and it's actually a legitimate art form…

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*This reminds me of one of my committee members who questioned the history and significance of Burlesque as compared to other forms of dance…*

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Burlesque performance, was and often still is viewed as "visual spectacle" assumed to be solely performed by White women, and seen as a morally repulsive act by Upper Class Americans. (Rella, 1940; Allen, 1991).

To others, burlesque was by definition, an act of defiance to normative American cultural norms as well as to the behavioral prescriptions of White womanhood (Allen, *1991*)….

**Rachel the Conscientious Provocateur:**

If you really want to learn about Black Burlesque then you should start with Chicaya Honeychild's piece on black burlesque performance. Those white writers do us no justice…

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Chicava Honeychild (2012) a Black burlesque performer, has written extensively on the history of Black women in this field of performance. Honeychild documents the history of Black burlesque beginning in the late 19th century, and being more than

"visual spectacle" as suggested by academic historians, but as political performances that critiqued American foreign policy among other topics. Rachel's story and performance serves as a continuance of the retelling of the significance of burlesque in the lives of Black women. While doing so, Rachel demands that the separation between burlesque and stripping be critiqued…

**Rachel the Conscientious Provocateur:**

A lot of burlesque performers are like, "I'm a burlesque performer, and I don't strip"...

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*Well, because stripping is seen as low-class while*

*burlesque is often seen as*

*"classier"…*

**Rachel the Conscientious**

**Provocateur:**

Burlesque gave birth to stripping

and what they—you're a stripper,

you're taking off-- you're

stripping off your clothes, you're

stripping in a different way but

you're a stripper and I don't think

that people should deny

strippers…

So don't give me that moral bull

shit, okay. I still call myself a

stripper because, I don't run away

from stigma, I run to it…

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*Rachel's story is*

*empowering, and at the*

*same time, she is very*

*intimidating. This woman is*

*22, I am 33, and I am in awe*

*of her honesty, intellect, and*

*powerful demeanor. I mean,*

*she is 6 foot, and I can't*

*believe she wore heels to the interview. She is talking about "dismantling racism and ridding of the stigma of stripping" in a suburban coffee shop filled with White folks. She is also speaking rather loudly for us to be in an extremely quiet space. It is like she wants people to hear her story. In fact, the two girls behind her, look up at me with a grimace, and put their earbuds in. I can't help, but think that our meeting is a performance for her. I'm left thinking that Rachel believes that she is the cultural product and the producer of radical Black womanhood…*

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Like Rachel, several other

women work to transform

their area of art …

**Leah Fashionable Scribe:**

I'm so anti-urban fiction…I know

for me personally that when I

write, I don't want the people to

identify race. I'm not saying that

it's bad for you to be Afrocentric

or whatever you want to be in

your life...but this transcends.

This is just basic morals and

values and stuff. That's what

people see, not the main

character's mulatto, or the main

character's black or white. That's

not what I want to do....

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*The whole idea of*

*transcending race is*

*problematic to me. I mean, I*

*get the allure of it, but race*

*is embedded into everything*

*that we do. It is dangerous*

*to assume that it is not considered at all by one's audience. I'm also bothered by the determination to write in a way that is*

**Leah the Fashionable Scribe:** *raceless…*

Well, that's my goal to establish a connection across these boundaries when I write...

**Nicole the Researcher**: The concept of racelessness is not new. Fordham (1988) explores racelessness as a concept used to avoid the assumed stigma associated with Blackness while also creating opportunities for "vertical mobility" (Fordham, 1988, p. 58).

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*Despite my own feelings, which are situated in a very academic discourse and my own struggle to come to terms with who I am*

*racially, I admire Leah for demanding to make these connections…*

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Leah's determination to push boundaries is similar to Ryan's efforts…

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer:**

I started doing more experimental performance instead of like kind of Broadway showy stuff. I started doing things that were about places and about social concepts and really started getting interested in art as a way of communicating about women about minorities about our experience other than some of the more famous things…like Black history or like spirituality or you know Black people in church or whatever...You know there is more to the story besides like slaves,...and the typical inner city experience and church because I

feel like my experience is never

reflected.

**Nicole the Researcher:**

The women in this project
also demonstrated that there is
something embodied about
their creative process. This
relates to Sandlin and Milam's
(2008) contention that critical
public pedagogy engages on a
corporeal and emotional level.
In fact, these women take this
component a step further by
demonstrating how the
audience, but also the women
themselves, "feel" art in their
bodies in a way that is
spiritual. This relates to
Dillard's (2006) work that the
pedagogical work of Black
women is inextricably linked
to the spiritual or the
"uncovering and constructing
truth as the fabric of everyday
life" (p. 20). Therefore, by

exploring art as a pedagogical endeavor, I am also exploring its spiritual components…

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist:**

Well, I feel like it's disrespectful for me not to do artistic work…there's a ritualistic part of it that is like praying…

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*Ah, painting is also like praying for me. I often refer to as a form of meditation…*

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist:**

I think for me, because there's so much pain in like living in an urban, in a city, and I hate the word urban but living in a city full of black folks that are blue collar that just don't quit. I still feel like there is still a lot of hurt here and so my task, I believe, is to create beauty in this city where there is

ugliness, but also not just beauty but also prayers. So when you see my pieces, they're like visual prayers…

**Krystal the Passionate Poet:** Performing to me is more like acting…I have to act out what I was thinking or feeling when I was writing. I have to act it out so that the person who hears me can be put into that place…It all comes back to embodying the character. It's just playing your part so that they can get what you are trying to do. For them [the audience] listening is maybe spiritual, and for me it is trying hard to embody the character in the right way…

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer:** For some reason when I'm dancing I feel like it's therapeutic for myself and so

it's spiritual in that way. It's
spiritual because you know its
cleansing is like meditation.
When I can perform it when
the choreography is done and I
can just perform it I don't
know it's just like it's like
getting rid of all the junk that's
in life … like all the worries
and the cares.

It's like all I am is this art and
I don't know why that is...but
for me performing is that relief
from the stress of life. And I
think that puts me back in a
place where I can more easily
hear from God or receive from
God or just like be in a better
place mentally… and I don't
know maybe it's because
dance is kind of about your

body that it happens like

that…

**Mahogany the Enlightened Rapper:**

I love how my body gets engaged. I love that because there's freedom. Being spiritually free as a performer allows your body to be and allows you to see, to help free other people. It's the little things. When the crowd throws their hands up, you just feel it. Yeah. I think the two marry each other…

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*For a long time, it was difficult to grasp the concept of embodiment until I heard the stories of these other women. It was difficult for me to understand because the whole self does not just relate to the mind and the body working together, but it also speaks to*

*the spiritual realm, being connected to more than the physical. This is equally important. Understanding this helps me to tell my own story…*

**Nicole the Budding Artist:** My work, painting, singing, and acting, are a conflation of the body and the spirit. For example, when I am painting the act of putting the paint to a blank canvas is like creating something new repeatedly. It is meditative.

Singing and theatre require that I embody the stories of the women that I am characterizing. For example, in my performance of *Four Women* (1966) by Nina Simone, I imagine myself as Saffronia, this light-skinned woman who belongs in two

different worlds. I become her, but mostly because I can identify her with her. Saffronia as well as the other women in Simone's song are representative of my many selves, but also my ancestors who are here with me in spirit.

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Embodiment and spirituality seem to lead to the creation of communities formed through witnessing and interacting together with creative texts and performances (Sandlin & Milam, 2008). These experiences are best described as reflections that followed observing several live performances…

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*Last night, Mahogany performed as a fundraiser to end violence against women. Out of all of the songs she rapped last night, this one moved me in a different way. As I'm sitting there on this bar stool moving to the catchy beat next to my friend Erica, I all of a sudden*

*become tearful. I mean, I am*

*at a bar listening to a rap*

*song for goodness sake, and I*

*am trying to hide tears!*

*I think the tears are caused*

*by the lyrics, "Mirror mirror,*

*on the wall, I wanna be the*

*fairest of them all. I wanna be*

*the girls in the magazine. I*

*wanna be anyone, but me."*

*Those words took me back to*

*a time in my life that I felt*

*that everything about me was*

*flawed. It was a time when I*

*couldn't look in a mirror*

*without becoming appalled.*

*The next lines were*

*comforting to me: "what used*

*to make me weak became a*

*source of my strength,*

*everything about me is right*

*even my less…I love who I*

*am, an image of God extended…" I will admit that I am usually challenged by Mahogany's music because it is Christian rap, but these words felt like a hug from my momma or something.  It didn't help that she looked directly at me when saying those words. I still can't believe I was crying! In a bar! But, then I looked to my right, and I saw a single tear rolling down Erica's face. Perhaps she had felt the same way I did. Regardless, that comforted me too…*

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*Mahogany's lyrics, and the performance as whole, had allowed us to connect across religion, skin color (Mahogany is dark-skinned, Erica is White, and I am light-skinned) in order*

*to form a community of women simultaneously witnessing our past while using our similar experiences to move toward self-love…*

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Ryan participated in performance that celebrated women in a way similar to Mahogany's performance. "The Modern Woman" (2015) was a production that is put on by the theatre collective, A Host of People. The show was described as a celebration to "highlight the achievements of women artists that for NO GOOD REASON get less acknowledgement than their male counterparts but also because we had met so many amazing women artists in this community that we

wanted to work with…"Azab

& Hooker, 2015, p. 1)…

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*It ironic that Ryan was*

*selected to characterize*

*Katherine Dunham out of all*

*the women she could have*

*embodied…*

*The dramatic ending left me*

*with a feeling of exhilaration.*

*Each woman seemed to*

*represent a feeling of being*

*"wound up" by the pressures*

*to conform to the traditions of*

*dance of their time, and their*

*simultaneous collapse onto*

*the floor represented a sort of*

*freedom—a release of the*

*constraints…*

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*During a dance performance*

*dedicated to the work of*

*Katherine Dunham, Ryan--*

*dressed in an African headdress*

*and black leotard, starts*

*swinging her long locs around in a circular motion as the music played a single drumbeat—boom…boom…boom. As the beat sped up—boom, boom, boom--Ryan continued to swing her head around continuously. She did this as a Latina dancer portraying German performer, Mary Wigman, dressed in a white mask and black wig, moved in sporadic circular motions with her entire body. Each woman sped up as the beat crescendoed, and each collapsed at the very peak of the beat…*

**Nicole's Reflection:**
*Dance is so different from singing or rapping to me. It's so abstract. My understanding of the performance is still developing, but the quiet drive home helped to think*

*things through. I feel a*

*connection with Ryan as well*

*as her co-performer. I also*

*feel some connection to the*

*dancers they represented.*

*The connection is due to an*

*overwhelming need for*

*release felt during that*

*performance. I feel fine now,*

*but I needed it then because I*

*drove around in my car*

*trying to find the venue for a*

*total of two hours, only to get*

*there, and be told it was too*

*crowded for me to stay. Like,*

*I can't believe this woman*

*was serious. I wonder if she*

*was racist. She probably was.*

*The only reason I got to stay*

*was because a White man*

*gave up his spot for me. Look*

*dude, I didn't need you to*

*save me…*

**Nicole the Researcher:**

The "Metro Times" describes
Noir Night as a production
put on by the "International
Black Burlesque Company
[Rachel's company] as they
embark on a journey to the
days of Paradise Valley," and
present the "insightful and
bawdy commentary of
Sinnator Charlotte [Rachel's
stage name], and classic
bump and grind from very
talented ecdysiasts" ("Noir
Night 2015", 2015)…

*This space was extremely
stressful. I was among
strangers. I was one of three
Black folks there, and let's be
real, they probably didn't
even identity as Black. The
space was super
uncomfortable. It was like a
walking tour, and we moved*

*from room to room for each*

*different performance, and I*

*felt pushed to the side or back*

*of the room each time. I mean*

*this place had me so wound*

*up. I was uncomfortable. So,*

*I guess, when these women*

*collapsed on the floor after*

*the music and movement had*

*reached its very peak, I*

*wanted to fall out on the floor*

*with. It was like they were*

*releasing my frustrations for*

*me. The three of us became*

*this unspoken community—*

*although imagined on my*

*part. The three of us existed*

*as part of this larger*

*community …*

**Nicole's Reflection:**

*Rachel opens Noir Night by*

*walking confidently on stage.*

*She begins with an introduction*

*of each performer. She adds,*

*"these women came from across the country. Show them some love!" In between one performance, she educates the audience about Harlem Shake, the first Black burlesque troupe. She then provides commentary on Detroit's rich Black arts community.*

**Nicole's Reflection:**
*I'm amazed at Rachel—this 22-year-old woman is doing things beyond her years. Tonight, she managed to get more than 250 people who varied in age, ethnicity, and gender in a ballroom on Detroit's desolate Milwaukee Street. I was also very uncomfortable when I walked in the theatre because of the all-Black female cast of Burlesque performers, and the large amount of White*

*men in the audience. Can we say White male gaze? Why are they here in such large numbers?*

*Rachel ends the night with her own performance as Sinnator Charlotte. She sensually moves across the stage to some jazz song I can't identify at the time, and is dressed in long red gloves, a black dress, back seemed stockings, and black open toe shoes. Eventually all of that comes off to reveal red-tasseled pasties and black thong underwear. She confidently moves across the floor lip-syncing the words to the song while maintaining contact with the audience. She ends the performance just as one of the pasties almost falls off. She handles the mishap well along with the yelling and side-*

*commentary from the drunk people in the audience. Her response to them ends her performance, "Well, thank you for your comments and your patronage"…*

**Nicole's Reflection:**

*Although at first I was turned off by the number of White men in the audience who seemed to be gazing at these women, Rachel's confidence changed that and I guess you can say changed me. Each of the women taught me that is okay to love my body, and to dance as if no one is watching. They were proud of their bodies regardless of size.  So how come I have such a hard time loving my own self even when alone? I guess they pushed me to be happy with my body and the*

*way that I look. I am struggling to be as confident as them. Perhaps, when I begin to look in the mirror and attempt to turn away, I will think of their confidence…*

**Nicole's Reflection:**

*Without explicitly acknowledging it, we, the performers and the audience members, became one community of learners in tune with our sensuality. Now, granted, there were times when people got up and left in a hurry indicating some sort of embarrassment or disgust, but those of us who remained there were connected.*

**Nicole the Researcher:**

Emotional connections

between members of a

community can lead to a

heightened political

consciousness, which in turn

can lead to action

(Hemmings, 2006; Lorde,

1984; Sedwick, 2003). The

women in this project have

provided spaces for these

connections to take place,

while also encouraging

disruption of traditions or

norms that are usually

attributed to particular

venues or art forms…

**Ryan the Democratic**

**Dancer:**

I dedicate my time to doing

site specific performance…

something where take for

example the community

garden at Artist Village in

Detroit, a site-specific piece
for the garden is a dance
piece or a theater piece that is
made to happen in a garden
so it usually takes the garden
into account. So, it might be
about the garden it might be
about nature or it might not
be about it at all, but it takes
into account that there is no
stage and there are no seats
so you have to make the work
fit for that and so the same
with like an alley. So, it's just
about reforming the way that
we think about where we can
see performance and where
performance belongs…

**Rachel the Conscientious**

**Provocateur:**

One of the reasons why I created
Noire Night is the fact that
whenever a black person is
depicted historically in Detroit it

is Motown. Not the first black teacher that came over here, nothing about the underground railroad, nothing about the Black multi-million dollar community that was built after reconstruction. Not the highly educated black middle class, you know what I'm saying? Nothing is there 'cause all we are is Motown…

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer:**

My work is also democratic…like Sidewalk Festival [Ryan's annual festival on the Westside of Detroit], the reason we do it there is because there is a lot of gatekeeping around performance. In Detroit, not everyone is going to go downtown to see you in like a ballet or go to like a museum

or whatever the new thing

is… I feel like there is a lot of

stigma in terms of like who

should be at these places and

who has access to…that is

why we do a neighborhood

festival street performance so

that everyone can see art…

that is why we do a

neighborhood festival street

performance so that everyone

can see art… Detroit doesn't

have to be that segregated

and I think Sidewalk shows

that.

**Nicole the Researcher:**

In doing this work, these women are not only transforming people's thinking about a particular venue or genre of art, but they are transforming thoughts surrounding who can do what within those spaces. As a reaction, these women seem to exemplify a radical Black female identity…

**Rachel the Conscientious Provocateur:**

I produce shows with black people in mind-- not just history but just in being benevolent, it's a very powerful thing. It builds my strength, it builds my mental capacity… it's mission to showcase and tell the black story through burlesque and

showcase black entertainers

of all walks of life and I think

it has done tremendous things

in the black community in

terms of like, you know,

inspiring other women to get

up and do whatever the hell it

is they want in terms of the

black burlesque

community…

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Painter:**

At shows, The boys will be like, "Did they do that work or did somebody else do it?" So I think performance painting for me the idea of creating into a public space so that it takes the mystery out of did she really make ? Oh yes honey, I made it! The fact that you can see me make it right there on the spot makes people think like, "Oh. Shit. She's really doing it." But

you're not really watching me

the whole time.  You're

watching the performance.  So

you'll look over and you feel

white canvas, then you look over

here and you see some color,

then you look over again and

you be like, "She's really doing

**Krystal the Passionate Poet:**  it"…

With my poetry, I am

breaking that stereotypical

mold you are trying to get me

to fit into. Because if I'm an

artist, I don't think it is

anything wrong with being a

Black artist. Or, a Black

woman artist. Like, I don't

mind if people add those

adjectives because it is true.

So, with poetry it is like it is

like informing people of

issues in the Black

community and shedding

light on the positives in the

Black community through my

Black female voice…

**Leah the Fashionable
Scribe:**

Together, my writing and

fashion demonstrate that as a

Black woman that it is really

good to break racial molds.

And, as a Muslim woman

there are molds you have to

**Mahogany the Enlightened
Rapper:**

I think being a woman, being

black, being Christian, all three

of those things are reasons to be

marginalized and so when they

all come together through hip

hop…I think hip hop is the voice

of marginalization. It's the voice

of people who feel suppressed

and pushed down. Knowing this

I write unapologetically, and

when I let myself go, I rock

unapologetically…

break too like, "Oh, she gets

beat by her husband" or "she

can't wear colors or she can't

wear makeup. Her husband

doesn't want her to; she can't

do anything because she's

Muslim." So I'm breaking

two molds at once. So I feel

like it's very empowering to

do that, being empowered

myself, and empower people

by making them feel good

about themselves…

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer:**

When I talk about Sidewalk

people will say like who do you

work for, and it's like *I produce*

*sidewalk!* They are like but who

produces, they will ask you, but

who, you know they just can't

believe that I am the one. And, I

don't know if it is because I am

female, soft spoken, black, or

whatever, but it happens a lot

when people can't believe that it's me….those things happen to me all the time and it is just...it happens so much that it doesn't even bother me...it's like I already know that they don't think I can do this so they already, So, I come on strong in the beginning like no matter how many times people say, "Oh, you...?" I will flat out say "Oh, you don't think I can produce Sidewalk, well let me tell you all the things about me". I'm really blunt about it. "I'm sorry you're ignorant". It does happen a lot, but whatever!

**Leah the Fashionable Scribe:**

I think I have a duty to show other girls and women that art and fashion isn't just one type of thing... And that they should never feel the need to conform to the point where

they are hurting themselves like many of us do. Through fashion, we [Leah and the women she models with] have built up some type of platform…People, like white old people, gay old white men, come to me like, "Oh, you're so fabulous right now." I don't even – and I'm speechless I don't know what to say. My friend brought that up as well. She is like, "You know, we're like the only Muslims who are African American who are doing it…

*Nicole's Reflection:*

*No matter how many times I see these women perform or just "be" in a space, I am inspired by the energy that surrounds them, the confidence that they exude, and the barriers of*

*womanhood they defy. These are all things that even as I write this I struggle to do. However, knowing their stories assures me that even the most confident woman has challenges that she works diligently to overcome. And, so, as Black women performers we are constantly becoming. Part of this becoming is through the recognition of our own significance as Black women who are also radically changing the world around us. We are pedagogical agents by our own definitions. Our collective voices offer new possibilities for expanding the conversations on critical public pedagogy.*

## Chapter 5: Critical Public Pedagogy: Discussions and Considerations

The stories and experiences shared in this project demonstrate that Black women artists have distinct experiences colored by varying, complex, and intersecting identities. My personal narrative is transforming through daily reflection on the similarities and differences between our collective experiences, and as we continue to foster relationships during outings to concerts in the city or just as friends on social media. These women were successful in transgressing the many oppressive forces and debilitating circumstances that threatened their survival. Likewise, this project illustrates how Black women, specifically from Detroit, use variations of art to engage in critical public pedagogical endeavors by creating radical and collective cultural productions, using their bodies in pedagogical and spiritual ways, creating radical communities, providing opportunities for detournement—the subversion of traditional media artifacts with radical ideas--, and developing radical Black woman subjectivities. Therefore, as pedagogical agents, these women disrupt normative understandings of everyday life (Biesta, 2006; Ellsworth, 2005; Wildemeersch & Vandenabeele 2007).

In this chapter, I revisit Sandlin and Milam's (2008) conceptualization of critical public pedagogy as well as the writings on public performance art by contemporary women artists in order to contribute to and expound upon them using the experiences shared by the women in this project. To do so, I use additional data obtained during my interviews with the women that offer another opportunity to position their voices within the critical public pedagogical framework. This is in addition to the experiences shared as part of the conversations in Chapter 4.

### Expanding Critical Public Pedagogical Theory

Engaging in conversations with the women in this project about their development into and existence as artists, observing various forms of performance by these women, and engaging in continuous self-reflection about the project and my experiences as an artist have helped me to

consider and offer new directions in the field of critical public pedagogy. Currently, the components of critical public pedagogy speak to the creation of disruptive and transformative cultural products, the recognition of the significance of embodiment and emotion as significant in critical public pedagogy, which also involves spirituality at certain times, the creation of creative political communities, and the disruption and transformation of particular spaces in which pedagogical acts take place. In this chapter, I wish to explore yet another component of critical public pedagogy—the transformative experiences of the pedagogues themselves. The women in this project encounter transformative experiences because of the amalgamation of the subjective and the public, which is shaped by what I am calling an "Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of Place." These experiences help to teach discourses related to Black womanhood while providing spaces for the development of Radical Black female subjectivities (hooks, 1992) in the pedagogues themselves.

Roberts and Steiner (2010) have explored the pedagogues' experience within critical public pedagogy as that which is nuance and liminal. The authors suggest that the role of the critical public pedagogue resembles the historical *paidagogos*—educated slave-- who maintains the role of the servant-leader (McLaren, 1986). Although I am weary of using the concept paidagogos to refer to the women in this project given the obvious contentious nature of the term, the women in this project act as both teachers and citizens. Therefore, they are affected by the pedagogical endeavors in which they engage. In addition, these women have developed a rather insurgent identity by performing pedagogically.

The women in this project have come to this radicalness in various ways, which parallels the experiences of other women artists. Becker (2014), for example, explores the complicated relationship that exists between the artist and her audience by demonstrating that although an

artist might have intentionally set out to educate her audience about a particular idea; many times the subjective nature of the art renders the message misunderstood by the audience. Adding to this is the work of Coco Fusco (1994) and Suzanne Lacy (1995; 2007) who contend that art, and its message is understood differently based upon the gender, ethnicity, and class of both the artist and audience. Likewise, the place in which this art is displayed or performed is also a significant factor. The women in this project have made a decision to situate their art in the city of Detroit. Therefore, the city shapes their lives and the work that they create. Therefore, the subjective experiences of each woman become part of their public performances as often the performance itself is based upon a need to disrupt or transform certain inequities that might exist in a given public space. This is similar to Coco Fusco's (1994) critique of Western culture's public exoticization of people of color throughout history in her work *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit…,* and Suzanne Lacy's (1977) public shaming of violence against women in the public interactive performance, *Three Weeks in May*. Despite the possibility of being misunderstood, these women recognized the urgency of performing the private experiences of marginalized people in public spaces. The women in this project use their subjective experiences and beliefs to shape their performances in public spaces, which is a radical act. Again, as the pedagogue and the participant, the women in this project develop, and many times strengthen an already developed, radical Black female identity (hooks, 1992).

**Making Space for the Private in Critical Public Pedagogical Efforts**

Roberts and Steiner (2010) contend that the "critical public pedagogue recognizes that critical social agency is developed within those cultural spaces that connect the private sphere of self-understanding to the institutional world of politics" (p. 27). The narratives shared in this project demonstrate an understanding of the usefulness and connectedness of the private and

public. The art that we create derives from a place of intimacy, emotion, and spirituality, which is situated in the "private sphere of self-understanding." For example, my willingness to paint a variety of Black women on canvas when at spoken word events are directly related to emotions I feel when I look at myself in the mirror at home. Painting these images is my way of reconciling thoughts of self-doubt and personal disdain. I see beauty and strength in these images, and since they are a reflection of me, then I embody beauty as well. Therefore, when art is performed in public, it is intrinsically personal. Mahogany describes this inextricable relationship, "I feel like art is very personal because it's like taking all your clothes off. It's like, this is who I am. Let me show you who I am. I don't have any place to hide...I wrote this and this is who I am". Krystal shares a similar sentiment, "When I do like open mics sometimes I'm just like, 'I got to get on stage. I gotta let it out.' Sometimes I just feel like you gotta tell somebody and so if I'm a poet, and it's an open mic, then ya'll gotta listen."

Sharing one's most intimate experiences in public spaces becomes a political act—a form of truth telling. My experience performing Nina Simone's (1966) *Four Women* supports my contention. Although Simone wrote this song, each time I perform it I embody the characters of Aunt Sarah, Safronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches. When I first started performing this song in public spaces, I only identified with Safronia the "yellow" woman living between two worlds. However, as I continue to sing this song during different events, I am able to see myself in each of these women. For me, this is a personal and vulnerable act since I am often overwhelmed by tears during the performance due to the feeling that I am revealing too much about myself by telling their stories. Singing this song divulges the complexities and intimate details associated with Black womanhood. The reality is that I am buoyant like Aunt Sarah despite continuous inflictions, that being light skinned or multi-racial like Safronia is not as free of oppression as

many in American society assume it to be, that like Sweet Thing, I have pretended to be happy in the midst of sexual abuse, and finally, like Peaches I am angry, an emotion that Black women are warned not to display. However, I have come to learn that the personal is political (Hanisch, 1970), and by revealing our collective stories, I maintain that our experiences as Black women are varied yet similar enough to establish epistemological standpoints that are still ignored or belittled almost fifty years after Simone first performed the song. Within the public spaces that I perform these pieces I insist that the audience members look at me, not as spectacle, but on my own terms. This is a political act.

For Sabrina, creating art in public spaces takes the "magic that happens in private," and places it in public to "take the mystery out of making." Therefore, creating and performing art in public space uses the most private details of one's self to share wisdom through art. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) contends for "most African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences" (p. 256). These personal experiences substantiate that which we claim to know as Black women, contextualizing the "magical" in material experience. Many times our abilities and knowledge as Black women is either discredited or attributed—so much so, that when we display our creative abilities in public spaces, we are met with looks of astonishment. These public displays are important since there might be other Black women or girls in the audience who see these performances educational and inspirational. Thus, as Black female critical public pedagogues, personal experiences cannot be separated from their public interactions. Our performance of Black womanhood as well as the portrayals of the Black female in various forms of art based on how others in the world perceive us (Cooley, 1922; Goffman, 1969); however, conflicting intersubjectivites incite attempts to

produce diverse representations of Black womanhood. One's public experiences are equally shaped by the politics of place.

**Towards a Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of Place**

The significance of geographic place, space, temporality, and scale are under theorized in research on critical public pedagogy as well as in the research on Black knowledge construction, but are extremely relevant. The works, as discussed in Chapter 2, of Massey (1994), Mohanty (2003), and Couldry (2003) are useful in the development of what I call an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of Place. An Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of Place draws from the theorized relationship between place, space, temporality, and scale as well as Dillard's (2006; 2012) Endarkened Feminist Epistemology. To revisit their ideas, collectively, Massey, Mohanty, and Couldry contend that place, space, temporality, and scale are power-ridden concepts, and that they collectively inform social relationships and experiences. Looking at these concepts from an Endarkened Feminist Epistemological perspective means recognizing that intersectional constructions of identity and intersectional oppression shape ones relationship to and understanding of place, space, temporality, and scale. There is a necessity for democratic, public talk between women that begins to use private experiences as means of understanding that which is political, thus building on the idea mentioned previously about the need to recognize the connections between private and public spaces. Central to this is Dillard's (2006; 2012) idea that the spiritual components of Black women's lives shapes what they know, and therefore, " '[o]nly when spirit is at the center of our work can we create a community of love'" (Dillard, 2006, p. 37). Dillard has defined the spiritual in various ways, and I will add to the definition by suggesting that spirituality can be the felt connections with people and things beyond the physical self.

In Chapter 1, for example, I describe an experience when I am about to perform, and my sudden feeling of connectedness with my mother and grandmother. When I performed, there was an overwhelming sense of confidence in knowing that the stories told that night were their stories too. Both the physical and spiritual connections serve as epistemological tools since they aid in forming the knowledge of Black women. These tools help in contextualizing our existence and agency varying settings. Thus, an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of Place is useful in exploring the creation and performance of art by Black women. This is especially true since we create and perform in a city overwhelmed by both blight and gentrification, concepts that complicate the use of art in public spaces. As artists, who have decided to create and perform throughout the city, we have simultaneously protested the denigration of the city, while at the same time contributing to the gentrification in an attempt to survive. Yet, our narratives demonstrate that despite the prevalence of industrial capitalism and neoliberal development-- structures that have promoted ideologies that nurture consumer culture as opposed to communities for production and collective action (Robbins, 2008)--the working class and grassroots culture of Detroit informs their artistic and pedagogical endeavors in a way that is inclusively democratic.

Massey (1994) sees place as "networks of social relations" (p. 120) that differ based upon geographic location, and that transition over time. Consequently, these social relations are shaped by previous relationships throughout history, and are contingent upon the creation of cultural representations and exchanges by public actors. Within and beyond place exists space, "a pincushion of a million stories" occurring simultaneously (Massey, 2013, para. 3). Likewise, Massey posits that social space develops from our social relationships with each other, and those relationships are power-ridden (both equal and unequal). The concept of temporality is related to

both place and space since spaces exists due to the simultaneity of our experiences, and places exist due the historical accumulation of these experiences. Intersections of identity complicate these experiences (Mohanty, 2003). Scale, specifically as discussed by Couldry (2003), helps to conceptualize the extent to which certain cultural productions and performances transform the social relationships that make up place and space. Together, these things inform the knowledge constructed and shared by Black women therefore conceptualizing an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of Place. Several women in this project acknowledge the intricate ways that power is distributed throughout the city of Detroit, which shapes their public performances. They acknowledge their significance in redistributing power, retelling, and redefining the history of Detroit by fostering opportunities for connectedness in the public spaces that endure throughout the city.

Rachel, for example, sees Detroit as the only platform to present her movement toward a positive retelling of Burlesque performance. Part of this determination and defiance is her demand to tell a multiplicity of stories of the history of Detroit. She explains:

> I'm always going to teach about dancers like Lottie the Body and Toni Elling….Noir Night has inspired me to want to have a review because people don't know about the brilliance of this city. I will always have that show and it will always be in Detroit so long as I'm alive to get people to know that there is more black history in Detroit than Motown.

In Chapter 4, I recall my experience attending one of Rachel's performances during which I was both bewildered by the number of White men in the audience preparing to see an all-Black burlesque revue because of my knowledge of the history of what happens when Black women are gazed upon by White men in particular spaces. On the other hand, I was hopeful about the

possibilities of telling the history of Detroit from a Black woman's perspective. Also significant, was the realization that outside of this art gallery turned theater on Milwaukee Street, Rachel might be judged for her profession, but also because she is a Black woman. However, in that space Rachel had the power in that she had orchestrated the entire event as a mechanism to teach about an alternative history of Detroit as well as what it meant to be a Black woman who just so happens to be a burlesque dancer, a business owner, and a public historian.

Sabrina also demonstrates how an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology of Place can be used to explore her critical public pedagogical endeavors. One of the first things stated by Sabrina during our interview was that she was "a Detroit artist born in 1967." She recalled how she was born during the race riots and the popularity of Motown music. Motown resonated with her because the artists worked tirelessly at their craft. The work ethic of the many Motown artists as well as the racialized climate of the late 60s and 70s in Detroit shapes her artistry. She describes:

> Detroit makes me want to continuously work...there's a blue collar mentality like you just don't stop. You just don't stop. Never stop. So I feel like that's a part of that Detroit thing and then when you do it with that whole Motown sound and that whole like when you think of like the Motown museum and how they talk about like you know how they rehearsed and what they did like they just worked. They worked and you don't stop like you don't let anything get in your way.

Sabrina demonstrates that the culture of work throughout the city--a culture existent even during deindustrialization--influences her dedication to creating continuously. Thus, she uses the history of this place (organized by unequal distributions of power as well as a dedication to music) as a medium, which informs her knowledge and dedication to art. As mentioned in Chapter 4,

Sabrina's dedication is also spiritual, as she considers her art to be equivalent to prayers that can

uplift the city, and connected to her ancestors. Together, Rachel and Sabrina, as well as the other

women in this project demonstrate that a knowledge of place, space, time, and scale are

connected to our identities as Black women, which shapes not only what we know, but how we

share that knowledge. Collectively, the synthesis of that which is personal and public as well as

the geographic relevance associated with Detroit's history and changing milieu has made way for

the creation of radical Black female subjectivities.

**The Radical Possibilities of Critical Public Pedagogy**

The narratives shared within this project necessitate an exploration of the development of

radical Black female subjectivities (hooks, 1992). The experiences shared support hooks' view

that subjectivities form "in the embrace of all the quirky conflicting dimensions of our reality…

a space of radical openness on the margins where identity that is fluid, multiple, always in

process could speak and be heard" (hooks, p. 24). Creating and performing art in public present

opportunities of radical openness, fostered through public pedagogical realities. hooks' work on

radical marginality has been critiqued as limiting the possibilities of radicalness due to an

assumed failure to grapple with spaciality, therefore ignoring the complexities of marginality

(Harvey, 1996). I see hooks' work not as a failure or as incomplete, but as the beginning of a

conversation about the fluidity of radical Black female subjectivities--a fluidity that makes room

for the recognition of Black women who recognize and embrace the intersections of identity

through using their own characterizations and definitions. Mahogany shares:

> Being a woman is always tough, no matter what stage I enter into, automatically, before I
>
> even open my mouth. They will be like, "Okay, cool, you go' sing somethin'" I'm like,
>
> "Do you know I rap? Oh, I can sing a little bit, but I'm a rapper. I also think being black,

female, and Christian affected me being a performer… my personality is dynamic. I mix

everything up. You know what I'm saying? I mix my food up. I just mix crazy stuff. I like

crazy combinations. This is just how I am and I want to be able to do that with my music

and with who I am. I'm not just going to fit like...You can't just check the box for me.

Mahogany demonstrates that despite attempts to judge her talent based upon her intersecting

social identities, she has managed to develop a radical perspective that is specific to her

experience. More specifically, adopting a Christian identity within an industry pervaded by

pseudo secularism is an act of defiance within that space. Mahogany's experience serves as a

poignant example since she is part of a musical culture dominated by men and secularism

(Cheney, 2005). Despite a push to behave as hypersexualized for the satisfaction of men or to use

the male braggadocio emblematic of mainstream rap, Mahogany manages to produce and

perform in ways that embraces a femininity of her own—one that promotes sensuality, body

positivity, and spirituality.

This is the case for Leah as well:

> So like my husband's masjid, they're conservative….I have black lipstick on, and
>
> eyeshadow with gold trim, a turban, which is not a hijab… my friend's mother came up
>
> to me...and she kept looking at my lipstick as if I was an alien. It was kind of – I wanted
>
> to burst out laughing...I'm like "It's just black lipstick." I like to elicit responses out of
>
> people. I just feel like "Why would you be so moved by someone who's wearing popping
>
> pink lipstick or red lipstick or black lipstick? Why is that so crazy to you to see a Muslim
>
> wearing that? I don't understand why that is a problem." So maybe I enjoy bothering
>
> them a little bit and pushing *status quo*.

Within Leah's conservative religious space, her makeup and clothing--that which she also wears during fashion shows--become tools of defiance. Leah's acts of defiance are similar to women of color who have defied norms through fashion through wearing jeans when expected to wear skirts or dresses, or by wearing afros when processed and straightened hair was the norm (Bose, 2010; Davis, 1998; Ford, 2013). By refusing to completely embrace her sect's Muslim conservative ideals or espouse American ideals of womanhood, Leah asserts herself on the hyphens of both cultures (Dubois, 1903; Fine & Sirin, 2008). By doing so, Leah is able to find a place that affords opportunities "to invent new versions of the self" (Fine & Sirin, p. 21). Leah's hyphenated selves are directly connected to her experiences as a Black woman, thus elucidating multiple forms of consciousness. Leah's defiance is intersectional in that her religious, national, racial, and gender identity are inextricably linked. Leah adds to this intersectionality with radical forms of representation exemplified through her fashion and make-up choices.

Leah also demonstrates that Black female radicalness changes based upon the context. In fashion shows, for example, she considers her wardrobe to be modest as compared to the other models; however, as demonstrated her pops of color are not welcomed during the masjid ceremony. This complexity relates to Leah's blog writing as well during which, as mentioned in Chapter 4, she purposely attempts to transcend racial boundaries. Ryan also complicates the idea of a radical Black female subjectivity by demonstrating that these subjectivities are often unrecognized by the pedagogue, and come to fruition through social interactions with others. In one instance, Ryan shares:

> I don't think I have any deep insights and even though a lot of my work is about race, I
> feel like I just want to present these issues just as they are, and I feel like I'm dealing with

them by the nature of being a Black female regardless if I realize it or not...It is informing

the way people perceive me.

Some of her experiences, such as those shared during the conversation portion of Chapter 4,

create a very material reality associated with Black womanhood, but Ryan is part of many spaces

during which race is not problematized. Adding to her development of this complicated identity,

she explains:

To make matters more complicated, I married a white guy, and so it's just like what does

that mean. Suddenly, that changes the way even Black people see me and like I'm some

type of betrayer, but some people are like, "Oh, how are you talking about race, and you

married to a White guy?" So race matters to everybody, but it's like subconscious you

know. I think it is really subconscious for me.

Her experiences with racial ascription, as opposed to her own individual identification as a Black

woman has led her to create pieces that create opportunities for conversations surrounding race.

For Ryan this results in choreographic disruptions:

I just want to explore like, you know, what does race mean. And, a lot of times I just do

that literally just by putting a black girl and a white girl next to each other doing like the

exact same dance and just explore that or two different body types like uh a curvy girl

and like a really skinny girl.

Mahogany, Leah, and Ryan have demonstrated the creation of radical Black female subjectivities

happen under varying circumstances. Sometimes, they are created as a direct commentary on the

traditionalist practices with a particular community of Black people. During other times, it

happen in an attempt explore the ways that race and gender intersect in subconscious, discursive,

and material ways. These women add to the stories of other participants in this project who have demonstrated a relationship between art and radical identities.

## Future Directions

There are various directions that I foresee this project taking. These directions include creating a digital space, which has already begun, to document the artistic representations and productions of radical Black womanhood in public spaces. I will continue to explore the role that spiritual and embodied experiences play in our engagement in critical public pedagogy as Black women. Likewise, I will address the role of space, place, temporality, and scale in these pedagogical efforts. The "meaning of certain places and spaces is bound into particular configurations of power and resistance; locations may become significant through often violent attempts to control them, or through the painful struggles of the exploited for a place of their own in which they can become themselves" (Rose, 1990, p. 395). Our experiences, which were shared in this project, demonstrate that we have managed to make a space for ourselves in venues traditionally designated for those in power, but I believe that these struggles can be illuminated through further research and practice. In order to do so successfully, the critical public pedagogical framework must be partnered with frameworks created in support of the experiences of Black women such as Black feminist and Endarkened feminist epistemologies— those epistemological perspectives that have been explored throughout this project. This project is unique because it expands the concept of critical public pedagogy to include the spiritual, the radical, and the geographic.

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## Appendix A

Interview Questions:

<u>Part One: Life History</u>

Tell me about growing up Black and female in Detroit (early childhood/adolescent/teenage).

How did your family contribute to your development?

How did other people/occurrences contribute to your development?

What other aspects contributed to this development?

Tell me about becoming an artist/performer.

How did you develop into an artist/performer?

How did other people/occurrences contribute to your development as an artist/performer?

How is this art public?

How is this art pedagogical?

How is this art spiritual/embodied?

<u>Part Two: Identity</u>

How has race and gender shaped your development as an artist/performer?

How has race shaped your art/performance?

How has gender shaped your art/performance?

<u>Part Three: Lessons/Meanings</u>

What lessons have you learned from living as a Black and female in Detroit?

What lessons have you learned from creating art and performing in Detroit?

How does creating art/performance relate to your experience as a Black woman?

<u>Part Four: Additional Thoughts</u>

Do you feel that a project that explores the experiences of Black female artists from Detroit is useful?

**Appendix B**

More about the Participants

**Krystal the Poet**

www.instagram.com/knikolart

**Leah the Fashionable Scribe:**

beautyandthemuse.wordpress.com

**Sabrina the Mixed Media Artist:**

https://sabrinanelson.carbonmade.com/

**Mahogany the Enlightened Rapper:**

www.mahoganyjones.com/

**Ryan the Democratic Dancer:**

www.ryanmyersjohnson.com/

**Rachel the Conscientious Provocateur:**

https://sinnatorcharlotte.wordpress.com

**Nicole the Budding Artist:**

www.nicoleaprilcarter.com

www.performingradicalblackwomanhood.com