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In Pictures and Words: A Womanist Answer to Addressing the Lived Experience of African American Women and Their Bodies—A Gumbo of Liberation and Healing

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IN PICTURES AND WORDS:

A WOMANIST ANSWER TO ADDRESSING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF

AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN AND THEIR BODIES—A GUMBO OF LIBERATION

AND HEALING

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by

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This dissertation, by Yolandé Aileen Ifalami Devoe,
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ABSTRACT

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AND HEALING

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Whether it is claiming a radical self-love for one's body or dissatisfaction of one's body, the experiences of African American women and their bodies cannot be divergent from the sociocultural contexts in which they live. Seeking to reveal how gender, race, and sexual orientation impact the lived experiences of African American women and their bodies, this study will bring attention to and provide a more nuanced understanding of the historical and sociocultural ramifications of the Black female body. Historically, inadequate attention has been given to an intersectional approach to understanding the experiences of the Black female body. It is understood that Black women are a marginalized population. This marginalization is rooted in race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and class. What influence do these interlocking oppressive forces have on the way African American women live and view their bodies? Utilizing a participatory research model, participants chronicled their experiences with their bodies in pictures and words through interviews, narratives, and photographs. Addressing body image from an intersectional approach, this research adds to existing literature and gives womanist breadth and depth to this discussion of body experience framed within the sociocultural context.

The women, "sisters," in this study shared stories of liberation, healing and resistance challenging assumptions of Black womanhood. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA: Antioch University Repository and Archive, http://aura.antioch.edu/ and OhioLINK ETD Center, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/

Dedication

This is dedicated to my granddaughters,

Brielle Aileen

Brooklynn Lei-LaJoyce

Mariah Arletta-Justine

Kennedy Azéron-Michelle

And the granddaughters, grandsons, great granddaughters, great grandsons and those that

follow.

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Prologue: The Budding Womanist

When I was growing up, I was admonished by female family members to "stop acting fast," or "grown," or "mannish." Finding boys and girls fun to play with and look at, or swirling and dancing through the house simply with a short little nightgown on, or "sashaying" with my hands on my hips, all of what I thought was innocent behavior, was clearly not seen as such by the elders in my family. I realize these were colloquialisms used to halt my inquisitive, free spirited, flirty and vocal nature in an effort to keep me in a little girl's place. I can hear my grandmother say, "Little girls don't need to be fast." Little did I know that I was just a budding womanist. I know now that "manish" is short for "womanish." Forty years later, I embrace Alice Walker's definition and have become that womanist; who acts womanish. Alice Walker (1985) coined the term *womanist* in her collection of essays, *In Search of My Mother's Gardens.* A womanist is one who boldly searches for deeper meaning and greater truths counter to what is considered good for one. She loves, appreciates, honors, and celebrates the beauty, strength, vulnerability of women. She connects with spirit, mind, and body and is committed to the survival and wholeness of humanity.

I am a womanist.

Chapter I: Introduction

We, my Brown and Black skinned sisters have known that our bodies have not been our own.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,

We, my Brown and Black skinned sisters have known that parts of our bodies should not be shown.

It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes —

We, my Brown and Black skinned sisters have come to know that some or most of our features should be altered so that we can be pleasing in "their" sight.

We, my Brown and Black skinned sisters have known that to be beautiful is to look White.

This debt we pay to human guile;

We have been

girded and bound up;

stuffed inside of unstretchable,

unforgiving, pieces of material

which to this day holds onto years of oppression and acculturation?

With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties.

We, my Brown and Black skinned sisters must know our roots to move towards liberation.

Why should the world be over-wise,

In counting all our tears and sighs?

Nay, let them only see us, while

We wear the mask.

We, my Brown and Black skinned sisters.

I wrote this poem as a reflexive response to my life experiences and the many readings I engaged with in the course of preparing for this study. The poem seemingly emerged like a turtle out of its shell. Peering from left to right, I wondered at how easily these words escaped my lips as my fingers began to feverishly type. As I quickly typed, I began to hear the words of Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1922) poem, "We Wear The Mask;" in the above poem his words are

italicized. Analogous to the plight of the African American woman, it became fitting that I would juxtapose the words of this great lyric poem that could describe the pain and the oppression felt by African Americans having to submerse their true feelings. Due to years of marginalization, oppression, and acculturation attempting to mask the pain of their own beauty and identity not being recognized, celebrated, or valued, African American women submersed their true feelings. From body dissatisfaction, to body surveillance, to body dysmorphic disorder, the residuals of wearing the mask have led to a myriad of issues related to one's body image. These issues are not new and are deeply rooted in the historical trauma of our past.

Historical Roots

Speaking of the female body, Gates (1997) asserted,

The Black body has, of course, been demonized in Western culture: represented as ogreish, coarse and highly menacingly sexualized. But the Black body has also been valorized, represented as darkly alluring still highly menacingly sexualized but, well, in a good way. And this, historically, is an ambiguous role in the Western imagination. (p. 45)

Understanding the way in which the African or Black woman's body has been perceived, dates back to life on the continent of Africa and to the way the bodies of enslaved women have been abused.

Going back to at least the beginning of the early 19th century in Europe and America, African bodies were put on display, equivalent to animals in the zoo. Thompson (2008) noted that one of the most popular displays of African womanhood was that of a Khoi-San woman, named Saartjie Baartman. French and other Europeans alike found her exploited nude body as strangely different from the European ideals of womanhood. Baartman, "became an iconic stereotype of the evolutionary inferiority of Africans in general and of African and Black women's sexual deviance more specifically" (Thompson, 2008, p. 28). The 19th century invention of photography and

postcards pushed the European agenda or proof of "racial inferiority, further solidifying European racist perceptions of Africa's primitive and promiscuous women" (Thompson, 2008, p. 29).

European scholars and other travelers used disparaging depictions and labels to refer to Black and Brown skinned women, such as "Jezebel, "Mammy" and "Sapphire" (Patton, 2006). Women of African descent in White-dominated countries have been subjugated, exploited, ignored, marginalized, abused, ostracized, and objectified because of their gender and race.

The experience of African American women is a case in point. African American women have been under attack for centuries (Guy-Sheftall, 2002) in the course of which their bodies have been treated as different, less human, and of inconsequential worth. From colonial times to the present, African American women and their bodies have been used and seen as objects, subjects for scientific and medical experiments, and sites of assault and rape (Hill Collins, 1990; Washington, 2006). The impact of enslavement, racialized ideologies, and horrific practices of domination has plagued generations and continues to be the source of pain for African American women (Bartky, 1990). Enslaved or otherwise exploited African women in the colonies, including African American women were dominated by White enslavers, forced into breeding children for the reproduction of labor. Historically and today, the domination of Black women serves not only to privilege White men and White communities but, in their own way, to reinforce the status of Black men in their communities. Seen as property, profit, and pleasure for Black men, incestuous acts, domestic abuse, and sexual extortion, have been a part of this practice of domination (Bartky, 1990; Boehmer, 1993; A. Y. Davis, 1971). In dominant ideology, Black women are portrayed as less human and less attractive than White women because of their looks (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006; Harper & Choma, 2019; Mason & Lewis, 2016; Nelson, 1997; Parmer et al., 2004).

One Standard of Beauty

"Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" The evil queen and stepmother, in the Brothers Grimm fairy-tale, *Snow White*, posed this question in the full expectation that the answer will always be that she is that most beautiful person in the land. She posed this question to the servant behind the mirror who provided her with the right answers to all her questions. Seemingly, this is an innocent question that could be overlooked. Allegorically, analyzed from a Black feminist or womanist theoretical epistemology, this question could provide insight into how this sublime message and others found in children's literature could provide children with an early ideology of who is considered beautiful. Women and girls have adopted White, middle class heteronormative standards of beauty. Women undergo extreme mental and physical pain in an effort to rise to the westernized, "Eurocentric" depiction of beautiful (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Hall, 1995).

These standards of physical beauty are polar opposite to the natural physicality of an African American woman. Weitz (2001) asserted that there are three most common standards of beauty in the United States that women are subject to embrace: "1. Women's hair should be long, curly or wavy, not kinky and preferably blond; 2. Women's hair should look hairstyled—this requires money and time; and 3. Women's hair should look feminine and different from men's hair" (p. 672). Hair is the most common standard of beauty, along with one's body size and color shape. In the U.S. dominant ideology, women are also expected to be thinner and will be appreciated more, the lighter the complexion. Patriarchal, racist, heteronormative expectations and other forms of control of the female body are expressed and internalized in terms of surveillance and shaming of the body (Bessenoff & Snow., 2006; Harper & Choma, 2019; Mason & Lewis, 2016; Nelson, 1997; Parmer et al., 2004).

Globally, the effects of trying to obtain the hegemonic standard of beauty ideal has led to body dissatisfaction, body shame, body oppression. Bodies are treated as commodities. Saltzberg and Chrisler (2006) asserted that "Beauty is an elusive commodity" (p. 143). Body dissatisfaction and body shame are so prevalent in females in Western societies that the phenomenon has been described as "normative discontent" (Rodin et al., 1984; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2003). This normative discontent has led to mental angst, including internalization and self-objectification. Impett et al. (2006) posited, "Given the evidence that self-objectification is linked to compromised mental and physical well-being, strategies that buffer girls and women against a sexually objectified view of self-care are needed" (p. 40). Furthermore, Hill Collins (1990) wrote that upward comparisons of African American women to idealized images in print media lead to negative self-esteem. Dismantling these structural oppressive phenomena, requires acknowledgment and understanding of how the White standard of beauty became the norm, the historical context of the intersectional identity of U.S. women of African descent, the psychosocial impact, the pains as well as healing paths they have followed towards embracement and love for their bodies. Against this background, the purpose of this study is to explore and gain insight in societal and personal challenges and changes African American women face in relation to their bodies, and to identify possible body positive paths they may have developed.

Research Question

The overarching question for this study is, How do African American women experience their bodies? I will explore this question from an intersectional approach, focusing mainly on the simultaneity of gender, race, sexual orientation and class and through the frame of Womanism. Through literature, activism, and African American women's practice, Womanism has emerged as one of the most explicitly positive frames of identity including the acceptance of the body as

being whole (Phillips, 2006; Walker, 1985). The quest for lifting and embracing the voice of the African American woman has been at the heart of Womanism, which emerged from muted and marginalized voices and experiences within the feminist movement (Das, 2014). As a social change perspective, the thrust of Womanism is liberation and self-determination (Phillips, 2006). The primary foci are "harmonizing and coordinating difference, ending all forms of oppression and dehumanization and promoting well-being and commonweal for all people regardless of identity, social address or origins" (Phillips, 2006, p. xxvi). Within the mainstream body image field, including studies like Hargrove (1999), Rucker and Cash (1992), and Sabik et al. (2010). Womanism is rarely, if at all, recognized as an epistemological lens relevant to understand the lived experiences of African American women and their bodies. This study seeks to expand the opportunity for body image scholars, social scientists and mental health practitioners to envision and understand more deeply the lived experiences of African American women and their bodies.

Researcher and Positionality

"Hold your stomach in," "You are so cute with your chubby cheeks;" "You need to go put on a girdle;" "You are thick." These haunting statements and demands ruminate in my mind to this day. At an early age, I learned the gravity of words and the ideologies behind such words and the impact felt by not only me but many other women. I noticed that all the women wore girdles and "control top" pantyhose, which I recognized controlled or flattened the stomach. So, growing up I never felt comfortable in my own body. I would always compare myself to other girls and this continued on into my adulthood. From the weight loss franchise, Jenny Craig, to diet pills, I have been on the perpetual cycle of losing weight to wear a certain size or obtain a certain weight in order to measure up to society's perception of someone who is considered "beautiful." I had the

ability to present that I was confident in my body, but I really wasn't. Only in the past few years have I been able to vocalize this truth that I internalized for so long.

Consequently, I have been on a never-ending cycle to fit into a particular size. I started running in 2013. I wanted to try this as a new weight loss method when I heard of a group of Black women who ran together on a weekly basis and "no woman was left behind." Black Girls Run is a national organization started by two women to encourage Black women to run and highlight that Black women do run. Every week, there were at least three or four opportunities for women to meet up and run or walk. This supportive group encouraged applauded and cheered on the first woman to finish the run to the last one. No high five received by each runner would go unnoticed. While on this journey, I met women who struggled with their body image and just like me were seeking weight loss in each footstep that hit the pavement. Conversations on the roads and trails were always about how they denied themselves certain foods, extreme workout challenges, and the desire to be a certain size. This is not uncommon in exercise groups. People seek support and advice while on weight loss journeys. Unfortunately, the conversation is around altering one's appearance versus acceptance. During my time running with these ladies I chose a new career path: holistic wellness coach. This path was driven by the desire to become a healthier version of myself and to support others on their wellness journeys.

After receiving holistic certification, I established my holistic wellness coaching practice. At that time, I advertised coaching services to those interested in wanting to learn how to eat healthier and have more energy in their daily life. When I began working with women, I had clients who struggled with the same insecurities as well around their body image and years of dissatisfaction. After a year hiatus, I redirected my mission to supporting the needs of women who

want to liberate themselves from the power of White, patriarchal, heteronormative standards. These women and my own experiences have led me to this research.

Ossana et al. (1992) argued that to develop a healthy identity, Black women must move from an externally and societally based definition within which women define their values, beliefs, and abilities for themselves. African American women are experiencing emotional distress impacting mental and physical well-being (Franko & Roehrig, 2011; Higgins, 1987; Quinn & Crocker, 1999).

When I began to listen to my spirit, I began to honor who I am. I then began to realize that who I am inside is much greater than what society has told me I was on the outside. Women of African descent are, in important ways, a communal people (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Oyserman & Harrison, 1998). Although women of African descent are a very diverse group, the reference to "we" has relevance, but should not be taken as literally meaning "all." We feed off of sharing and listening to stories and experiences (Banks-Wallace, 1994; Hill Collins, 1990). We are spiritual and religious people (Bryant-Davis, 2013). We believe in the power of a higher being or force to help guide us. We are resilient (Bagley & Carroll, 1998; Bryant-Davis, 2013; Hill Collins, 1990; Trotman, 2011). All of these attributes and characteristics reflect a certain value system that can be grounding and are likened to the womanist framework (Maparyan, 2012; Phillips, 2006). This makes a womanist lens a natural fit for a study that intends to actively involve and engage African American women participants in a collaborative project.

As a Womanist, I believe the importance of sharing our stories, supporting each other and liberating ourselves. Women have the tools needed to learn how to love themselves just the way they are, no matter the size or shape. When provided the opportunity to share and learn in a

supportive, sacred space, women can find the answers within themselves and each other. The opportunity to share experiences and participating in a research study can be liberating.

Methodology

The choice to see and hear the voices and experiences of African American women is critical to gaining a deeper insight into the lived experiences, instead of relying on controlled studies that make observations and draw conclusions from a single axis point of gender or race. Aligned with Womanist thinking, narrative PhotoVoice methodology (Mitchell, 2011; Moletsane et al., 2007) was used to allow me and the participants in this study to hear and see intimately how gender, race, sexual orientation impact the way in which women experience their bodies. There is lack of qualitative research addressing the lived experiences of African American women and their bodies. The selected methodology was chosen to garner authenticity from the participants lived experiences. Sharing life experiences in stories, in song, in dance and images, are ways in which African Americans connect with each other. It can be expected that sharing their lived experiences in familiar ways might generate deeper a connection with themselves and each other. A more detailed rationale regarding the selection of this methodology and the research process will be discussed in Chapter III.

Ethical Considerations

The very nature of talking about one's body is sensitive. Participants make themselves vulnerable, which is taking a risk, when sharing personal feelings and concerns. Having suffered from body image issues all my life, I am sensitive to those that do suffer. As a certified holistic wellness practitioner, I have experience working with women and sensitive topics. Trained in active listening strategies, I carefully listen and provide a safe space for sharing. Finally, I will adhere to IRB standards for working with participants in the study.

Study Limitations

There are multiple variables and characteristics that comprise African American women's body image and prior research suggests consideration of skin color, hair, and facial features as dominant factors (Bond & Cash,1992; C. C. I. Hall, 1995; Miller et al., 2000). However, for the purposes of this study, the point of departure and main focus are weight, shape, and size. The split between facial/hair and full body image is artificial. It should be acknowledged that how women treat their hair and face can be an expression of how they feel about the rest of their body and vice versa. The size and weight that will be considered is that of someone considered "overweight" or "obese" according to medical standards. Finally, the study will not include participants who have been clinically diagnosed with anorexia nervosa or bulimia, or survivors of a life -threatening illness who have body image issues.

Definitions and Key Terminology

The following terms are defined as they are applicable to this study. Some are just informative; others, including "womanist" or "body surveillance," are conceptually complex and key to this study. They will be discussed in more detail in Chapter II.

Body image: Pulvers et al.'s (2004) definition of body image provides a broader view to an oftentimes linear thought regarding this construct:

> Consists of both attitudinal and perceptual dimensions. Attitudinal investigations of body image explore the feelings and thoughts people have about their bodies, such as satisfaction with body and weight and feelings of attractiveness. Perceptual investigations of body image examine the accuracy of body size estimations and the accuracy of weight classification relative to medical standards. (p. 1642)

Body dissatisfaction: Crowther and Williams (2011) defined this as "the negative and dysfunctional feelings and beliefs about one's shape and weight" (p. 290).

Body surveillance: McKinley (2011) argued that body surveillance "is paying attention to one's self in terms of how one appears to others" (p. 48).

Women of African descent/African American/Black: For the purposes of this dissertation, these terms will be used interchangeably to represent the group of people whose lineage originated in the African diaspora.

Womanist: Important to this dissertation is the use of Alice Walker's entire definition of this term. Usage of this traditional definition is the counternarratives to the Womanist religious scholars streamlined and marginalized usage of the word. Walker (1985) described *womanist* as follows:

> 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.)A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another Black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

> 2. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we Brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are White, beige and Black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented. "Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

> 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*

> 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Walker, 1985, pp. xi–xii,)

Dissertation Chapter Overview

Chapter I has set the foundation for my research and study. Chapter II will review relevant literature and themes important to the study. Chapter III will introduce the action research methodology particularly the Narrative PhotoVoice approach. I will delineate the rationale for use of this methodology, provide a detailed research plan, which includes the recruitment and

selection of participants and cover overall logistics. Chapter IV will reveal the data from the focus groups and personal interviews. Chapter V will make meaning of the data. I will also discuss the implications of the study and the future of this scholarship.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Bodies are sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings.

—Brown & Gershon (2017, p. 1)

Sankofa is a word and an Adinkra symbol most commonly associated with the Akan people of Ghana. In the Twi language, it means "Go back and fetch it." There are two symbols associated with Sankofa: one of a bird with its head turned backwards, while the other is a stylized heart (Figure 2.1). The more common symbol of the mythical bird with its body facing forward and its head turned backwards, symbolizes the Akan's belief that there is knowledge and wisdom to be gained from the past as a guide for the future. Grounding this chapter with reference to Sankofa serves to provide a meaningful perspective and understanding of the construction of this review.

Figure 2.1. Depictions of Sankofa. Figure on left is the logo for Sankofa Global Project by SankofaTime2, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SakofaTime2.jpg. Figure on right is by Onelove.sankofa, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Akindra.jpg. Both images in public domain.

To grasp how contemporary African American women come to understand and experience their body, one must interrogate how body identity was constructed historically. Without intending to provide a comprehensive historical approach, it is relevant to anchor contemporary body experiences in the way foremothers experienced their bodies. Here, I contextualize how the past shaped current narratives surrounding African American women,

consider the possibility of how those experiences have shaped others (i.e., majority) perceptions, reconstruct how those perceptions shape daily experiences of their bodies, and discuss the impact on their image and identity whether positive or negative. This review will explore current body image scholarship to connect possible linkages from the historical to the contemporary, and also address contemporary ways in which women have embraced liberation and agency and have disrupted stereotypes and ideologies. Rooted in the phenomenological experiences of women, womanist scholars engage in discourse that troubles ideologies around women's ways of knowing and being. The final section of this review will offer womanist theory as a conceptual framework and lens to examine the lived experiences of African American women and their bodies. Interrogating the experiences of the oppressed body of the African begins with the colonization of Africa which led to centuries of power and domination of African descendent people.

In the Beginning: Complexities of Colonization

Understanding current perceptions of the African American or Black woman's body dates back to life on the continent of Africa and how Europeans redefined beauty for indigenous women. Anecdotal evidence of indigenous hair and body beautification can be inferred, for instance, from 19th century ethnographic postcards of Sierra Leonian women, picturing examples of the female body (Figure 2.2). It seems that cultural practices such as body adornment and coiffures were common (Geary, 1998) In addition to Sierra Leonian women, Mangbtu women were also the subjects of mass distributed images for European eyes and profit making. Ethnographer, Amrand Hutreau and German Zoologist Hebert Lang are said to have been responsible for documenting the Mangbetu women in "newspapers, magazines, posters, advertisements and even eventually on a Belgian Congo postage stamp" (Schildkrout,2008, p. 81).

Figure 2.2. Sierra Leone women in 19th century postcards. From "Kora Player and Six Women, Sierra Leone," by W. E. Riebel 1904/2006, *Otterbein University Digital Commons* (https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/context/archives_sleone/article/1145/type/native/viewcontent.) Under Creative Commons License.

Hair styling was an intergenerational practice. Schildkrout (2008) describes the practice of head binding and grooming by the Mangbtu people noting that both women and men and "babies' heads were bound with braided cord made of human hair or plant fibers" (p. 78). The hairstyle hair pins, hats and combs worn indicated a person's level of importance in the society. Determined to bring what was seen as civilization to the continent, colonizers intended to strip natives of their identity. Within the Igbo culture, particularly the Nnobi religion, where the female body was seen as a site of womanhood, esteem and power, Christian crusaders, colonizers viewed otherwise thus deeming the indigenous practices of painted body art and nakedness as "heathenism" (Amadiume, 2008, p. 58). Scholars such as Amadiume (2008) and Morgan (1997) describe how the European invasion and violent possession of Africa profoundly disrupted the way of life for the natives, including the relation to and appreciation of their bodies, for centuries

to come (Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994). Caldwell (2000) made a poignant comment on Black

women's lingering postcolonial alienation from their hair.

> I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I
> lost the right to me before I knew that the burden of beauty–or lack of it—for an entire
> race of people could be tied up with my hair and me. (p. 275)

 Dissatisfaction with the texture of their hair, though key to the body experience of African

American women, was just one residual of colonization as colonizers sought to erase the culture

of a people by indoctrination of their values, beliefs, and their god. Colonization is about the

exploitation of countries and people by using power and securing domination in all spheres of

(institutional) life. Culturally and psychologically the quest to overtake the mind and bodies of

groups of people had profoundly dehumanizing effects on racialized groups of people,

individuals, and countries (Fanon, 1961/2004; Memmi, 1957/1965; Nandy, 2009).

The humiliation of African women and their bodies has a long history (Coly, 2014;

Oyěwùmí, 1997). Prior to the colonization of Africans by the Europeans, women in most cultures

were already subjected to degrees of male domination; abuse of their labor, and humiliation of

their bodies, genital mutilation being a case in point (Perbi, 2004; Stoler, 1995; Sultana, 2012).

For the purpose of this dissertation and, in particular, the grounding of the body experience of

African American women, I focus on the experience of male domination framed in a context of

colonization and racism.

Oyěwùmí (1997) identified two distinct processes involved in European colonization:

racializing and inferiorization of the African people, with inferiorization of African women in

particular. This domination and "double colonization" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 340) of African

women was associated with the Europeans and with the other, longer-standing indigenous

traditions imposed by men. Thus, the double colonization was racialized and gendered. Oyěwùmí

purported that the loss of the natives' sovereignty drove them to look to the colonizer for

direction. One of the ways, Oyěwùmí identified, was that the colonized adopted specific European customs and values. She stated, "One of the Victorian values imposed by the colonizers was the use of body-type to delineate social categories: and this was manifested in the separation of sexes and the presumed inferiority of females" (p. 355). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) confirmed this view:

> The European powers had by the nineteenth century already established systems of rule and forms of social relations which governed interaction with the indigenous peoples being colonized. These relations were gendered, hierarchical... to be considered indigenous people as not fully human or not human at all enabled distance to be maintained and justified various policies of either extermination or domestication. (p. 27)

Based in power and privilege Europeans constructed a distractive, destructive, and distinctive narrative around African bodies. In this ideology, African bodies were pictured as animals, sexual, and erotic beings, and producers and reproducers for the pleasure and financial benefit of the colonizers.

Construction of the Sociopolitical Narrative of the Body

According to Black feminist theory, Black women's bodies were devalued, demoralized, and ignored before, during, and after the institution of American slavery (Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984). Seen as pawns in capitalist transactions and for pleasure, the construction of the female identity was that of producers, reproducers. Devalued and demoralized, yet fantasized and fetishized by these invaders, their bodies were sold, raped, and placed on display for the amusement and enjoyment of others.

The Racialized, Sexualized Other

"The enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society's *Other"*

—Barbara Christian (1985, p. 160)

Dominant perceptions about African women in the United States emerged from European American constructions around Black female sexuality, physical make up, and

domesticity (Foucault, 1978; Gilman, 1985). Hammonds (1997) made the point that "Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision as a void or empty space that is simultaneously ever—visible (exposed) and invisible, where Black women's bodies are already colonized" (p. 171). A considerable amount of literature has been published on the sexualized perception of the African American woman (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Littlefield, 2008; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010; Watson et al., 2013). Gilman (1985) reviewed the iconography of female sexuality found in art, medicine, and literature in the late 19th century. He related constructions of African women's sexuality to social class. His work revealed perpetuated ideologies around gender and sexuality in which women, particularly Black women, were seen as lower class, unattractive, and diseased beings that needed to be controlled. In the same vein of a lower status or class, Social Darwinism approached human development from a hierarchy of humans in terms of health, intelligence, and civility. Africans were the race on the bottom of the hierarchy and because women of African descent were viewed through a racialized, patriarchal lens, they were placed lowest in the hierarchy (Krieger & Fee, 1996).

Gilman (1985) traces the development of the idea of Black female inferiority to the deliberate racist, often violent, practices of medical practitioners who chose to interrogate, investigate, and dissect the sexual parts of Black women in order to delineate difference and inferiority. He said, "If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the Blacks were a separate and needless to say lower race as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan" (p. 217). Gilman claimed that 19th century medical practitioners pathologized the skin color of Blacks likening it to disease, as a congenital leprosy. Segregation of the races after the abolition of slavery in France and Great Britain and even the

Civil War was an institutionalized process meant to distinguish the inferiority of Blacks as a group. In addition to 18th and 19th century medical practitioners who used their scalpel to mutilate and abuse female and male bodies as experiments, and used their pen to disseminate ideologies, artists used pen and paintbrush to reduce Black women to their body parts as the central image for the Black female was Saartje Baartman (Gilman, 1985). Gilman investigated the impact of two iconographic images, the "Prostitute woman" and the "Hottentot woman." The prostitute was intended to represent the White or any sexualized woman juxtaposed with the "Hottentot Venus" to represent Black women. Gilman argued that the transmission of those images was the perception and representation of two distinct classes and qualities thereof. The idea was that both of these iconic images could be controlled. Sexuality indeed was a core component of control during the 18th and 19th centuries. But sexuality was not considered race neutral. French philosopher, Michel Foucault, traced the development of racism in the early 19th century to sex and the control of the body (Stoler, 1995). "Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species, it was employed as a standard for the disciplines and basis of regulation" (Foucault, 1978, p. 34).

In addition to power and domination, one of the overarching characteristics coinciding with the role of sex and sexuality and the African descendent woman was and still is objectification. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) define sexual objectification as "the experience of being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (p. 174). The authors offer objectification theory as a framework to understanding what it is like to be a woman in a society that sexually objectifies the body. However, they do not qualify the impact of ethnoracial background on sexual objectification, which usually means that implicitly they would be imagining their theory to apply to White

women. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), "objectification theory posits that girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" (p. 173), resulting in body shame and negative health outcomes. This process is called *self-objectification.* Mercurio and Landry (2008) examined associations among self-objectification, body shame, and two indicators of well-being: satisfaction with life and self-esteem. There have been studies that linked self-objectification and body shame (McKinley, 1998), body shame and self-esteem (Kostanski & Gullone, 1998), body shame and self-esteem and life satisfaction (Hong & Giannakopoulos, 1994), but Mercurio and Landry's pivotal study added to the growing body of literature that connects self-objectification to women's overall health (McKinley, 1999; Sinclair & Myers, 2004). The result of their quantitative study was the development of a single conceptual model that examined all of the variables; this had not been done in previous studies. Their findings indicated that "self-objectification impacts overall life satisfaction through its' relation with body shame and self-esteem" (Mercurio & Landry, 2008 p. 464). In Mercurio and Landry's (2008) study, there was a minimal representation of African American women participants. They flagged this limitation stating that "future work should examine whether the associations observed in this study would hold across a more diverse subgroup of women, including those of various ethnic backgrounds" (Mercurio & Landry, 2008, p. 474).

Objectification and Stereotypes

Images in print and media have contributed to the perpetuation and justification of objectifying African American women. Hill Collins (1990), contends that "the dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black

women's subordination" (p. 79). This subordination could be seen in the images portrayed in

print. Both print and media have been potent vehicles in the continued cycle of perpetuating

normative ideas about the woman's body and their sexuality, including the thin ideal for

"respectable" White women and the big sized, over-sexualized stereotypes of African American

women. Stephens and Phillips (2003) described four foundational images of African American

women; Jezebel, Mammy, Matriarch and Welfare Mother. The authors assert that these "images"

are more than just that, they are "sexual scripts" which impact how people behave and operate in

ways that relate or coincide with the stereotype (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The *Jezebel*

represents the objectified, sexually promiscuous woman. Viewed as a vixen and seductress and

characterized as animals in heat and un-rapeable (hooks, 1984). Subsequently, White slave

owners justified their rape and desires (Hill Collins, 1990) and decried that "African American

women were viewed as culpable in their sexual objectification" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The

distribution of the image of the alluring African woman was strategic; to create, maintain, and

dominate a class of people that could advance the political, economic, and social structure of the

United States.

Opposite of the sexual objectified stereotype is the *Mammy* figure. Mammy, an oversized,

dark skinned woman donning a bandana, "is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender,

sexuality and class" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 80). Hill Collins suggested that regarding racial

oppression, the "Mammy" image sends a message of obeisance. This message could be perceived

that African Americans are to be kept in their place and to care and do as the White power

structures say and expect. Mammy was the compliant, domestic servant pictorialized and

presented to demonstrate the expectation of the slave woman's behavior. She was obedient to

doing whatever the master wanted, if that meant caring for his White family, more times better

than caring for her own family (Hill Collins, 1990). A symbol of ultimate servitude. Divergent from the subservient depiction of the Mammy and the sexual illustrations of the Jezebel, is the strong, unfeminine image of the *Matriarch*. Solidified in the 1960's, when the Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Moynihan coined the term "matriarch" in his report on the African American experience. This report was developed in response to the insurgence of power movements and dissonance in the United States (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The Moynihan report presented African American women as controlling and emasculating and not in need of a man to help raise the family. Emphatically, Moynihan problematized and rejected women centered households with strong Black women.

Finally, according to Sklar (1995) the term *welfare mother* was spewed around by middle class White women who wanted to create a narrative that African American women were breeding children uncontrollably, were lazy and will pass on that mentality to children This image was developed as a response to middle-class families' who were furious about the monetary support giving to African American women supporting their families with government assistance particularly against Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Middle-class White women widowed by war, originally earmarked for these funds (Sklar, 1995). It is no coincidence that Harvard professor of Law, Lani Guinier's nomination as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights (in 1993 by Bill Clinton) triggered a wave of backlash, captured in the racist tag of "Quota Queen." This was an implicit reference to the racist nickname of "welfare queen" more generally used to refer to financially poor Black women. Clinton withdrew her nomination within a few months. Stereotypical images perpetuate racist, classist beliefs in society at large. Stereotypical images that sexually objectify and denigrate African American women can be a detriment to their (self) esteem. Researchers sought to investigate a woman's experiences with sexual

objectification and its impact (Watson et al., 2013). Conducted with 20 African American female graduate students, Watson et al. (2013) found that when sexually objectifying experiences were high and multiculturally inclusive, racial identity attitudes were average or low. to internalize sociocultural standards of beauty. These young women internalized sociocultural standards of beauty were then associated with increased body surveillance (Watson et al., 2013, p. 345). Franko and Roehrig (2011) reported that a "Community sample of over 500 Black adolescent females found that increased exposure and perception of Black sexual stereotypes in rap music predicted more negative body image" (Franko & Roehrig, 2011, p. 224). Stereotypes have been instrumental in the construction and the continuation of the narrative about African American women. Based on racist, hegemonic ideologies, these stereotypes were strategic in their deployment. Stereotypes that advanced the political, economic, and social structure of the United States, the Matriarch who is blamed for keeping the Black man down, or the Welfare Queen who is accused of unduly benefiting from the economic system. Stereotypes that cemented pervasive ideologies that African American women were to be used for the benefit of others such as The Jezebel and Mammy images legitimatedsexual abuse and labor exploitation (Harris-Perry, 2011; Hill Collins, 1990; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Violence and Humiliation

According to the Centers of Disease Control, more than half of the girl and women victims of homicide were killed by a current or former male intimate partner (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.-b). Petrosky et al. (2017) highlighted racial and ethnic differences in homicides of adult women and the role of intimate violence between 2003 and 2014. Five racial/ethnic categories were used for the study; White, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic. Findings indicated that one in 10 victims experienced some

form of violence in the month preceding the death. Black victims were significantly more likely to

be killed by an acquaintance likely from the Black community. Sexual violence, defined as "rape,

being made to penetrate, sexual coercion, and/or unwanted sexual contact" (Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention, n.d.-a, para. 13) affects one in three women in the United States.

Fifty-two percent of those women report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of

intimate partner violence. The *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* declared violence

against women as a public health issue (Pearlman & Waalen, 2000). This declaration is a wakeup

call for those who are directly working with women. Decades ago, but still relevant today, Angela

Davis (1971) provided the glaring insight that conversations about sexual violence against women

and strategic ways to mobilize must include the impact of living in a racist, hegemonic society, to

identify the crippling, pervasive myths that continue to distort the message of the victim (A. Y.

Davis, 1990). She emphasized,

> The truth is that most rapists do not do so impulsively in order to satisfy an uncontrollable sexual passion. Instead men's motives for rape often arise from their socially imposed need to exercise power and control over women through the use of violence. (A. Y. Davis, 1990, p. 43)

Contemporarily, it can be argued that hip/hop and rap's mysogonistic lyrics promote

power and domination of women. Pervasive in rap music and videos, women have been

sexualized and referred to as "hoes" and "bitches." Hill Collins (1990) expressed the quandary

that Black hip/hop Rap presents. On one hand, Black Hip/Hip Rap music has been freeing for

urban youth to creatively speak to the ill effects of racism in our society. On the other hand, rap

lyrics and images are misogynistic and portray "Black women as sexually available hoochies

. . . freak . . . seen poppin that coochie" (p. 93). According to the article, "Hateful Hip—Hop Top

US R & B Hip Hop Songs Objectify Women 55 times," for the week of March 31, 2018, eight of

the top 20 songs in Billboards R&B Hip Hop chart were blatantly sexist and misogynistic (Hays,

2018).

> In these songs Black women were portrayed as commodities or luxury goods something to be owned or consumed and of not more importance than money, cars, liquor, or drugs. Sexual lyrics are casually graphic and almost solely about giving men pleasure. (Hays, 2018, para. 1)

Important to this dissertation is the possibility to uncover the lived experience of a woman

who may have been a victim of physical, symbolic, or virtual sexual violence and the impact on

her body image. Possible stories that could be shared are the participant's perceptions of their

bodies as seen through the lyrics of Hip Hop and Rap songs.

Commodification

Through their reproductive capacity Black women have been coerced into serving the

intentional economic gain of the enslavers. Rousseau (2013) asserted, "Black women have

maintained significant ties to the forces of production in the U.S. capitalist economy since the

earliest years of forced productive; reproductive and biological labor in the U.S." (p. 193).

Women's bodies were used as sites of terror and torture as they were raped and forced to carry the

baby of their oppressor or of Black men used as impregnators in order to increase the labor pool.

Women were commodities. Omolade (1994) argued that every part of the Black woman was used

by the White slave owner. "To him she was a fragmented commodity whose feelings and choices

were rarely considered: her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and

divided from her womb and vagina" (Omolade, 1994, p. 7). In addition to Omolade's assertion

regarding the commodification of the body, Sharp (2000) also argued that the body has been used

as sites of production and insists that objectification must be considered relevant to the discussion

of commodification (Sharp, 2000). Women's bodies have been broken down into specific parts

for usage for reproductive potential. Wombs and vaginas used to bring more labor into the world.

Breasts used to provide nourishment to the White slave master's children. These women were referred to as wet nurses. West and Knight (2017) acknowledge that "wet-nursing is a uniquely gendered kind of exploitation, and under slavery it represented the point at which the exploitation of enslaved women as workers and as reproducers literally intersected" (p. 37). The gendered exploitation of the "other" is indicative of the use, misuse, dissection, and abuse of the body parts. Not only has the African descendent woman's body parts been used but they have been evaluated based on their body shape, size, skin complexion, hair texture and facial features (Falconer & Neville, 2000, p. 238).

Erasure/Socialization/Assimilation

Hair

African women and men donned unique hairstyles. From short to long, braided, plaited, coiffed, or dyed, this thick natural hair, was an outward demonstration of the diversity and humanity of a people (Sieber & Batulukisi, 2000). Together with social rituals that denoted tribal affiliation, marital status, sex, age and occupation, these intricate hair arraignments and styles of the African people were to be suppressed and erased from view upon reaching America's soil. Sieber and Batulukisi (2000) insisted,

> At the end of the eighteenth and in the early years of the nineteenth century as the African proportion of the slave population shrank and Africa increasingly was a place remembered by a dwindling group of aging men and women, these hairstyles quietly disappeared. (p. 64)

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the enslaved attempted to maintain some of the hair styling traditions of their homeland; however due to labor demands as a slave and disrupted relations of family and care, women did not have time and (social) space to groom nor have the implements to style their hair in intricate designs (White & White, 1995). They began to cover their hair with bandanas. This was not only just to protect their hair from the weather elements,

but for some women a way to cover any traditional markings or other remnants of cultural rituals. Moreover, the very structure of Black hair changed as a result of other forms of assimilation, including (coercive) interracial sexual intercourse.

African women who had to give birth as a result of rape by the White enslaver were left to raise these children with or without a husband. In some instances where there was genuine affectionate love, these White men/masters married the women. Thomas Jefferson is known to have raped hisenslaved sister in law, Sally Hemmings, and who bore their three children. The amalgamation of biracial offspring led to children with texture of hair often times similar to their White lineage. Not only did intermingling with Whites take place but also with Native Americans. Unions between White men with Black women were common. Hidden endearing love relations between the enslaved women and White males. Children of these unions and non-unions were referred to as *mulattos* who had a diversity and range of hair texture from soft to coarse. "Good hair" was considered straight and long and "bad hair" was short and kinky (Hill Collins, 1990). Children whose hair and skin color were a close resemblance to their White lineage, received preferential treatment. These descendants tended to be the "house slaves"—that is, to work in the house of the master versus the more grueling destiny of laboring in the field (Patton, 2006). The house slave or the person with "good hair" (and lighter skin) were perceived as more fortunate, receiving better privileges and a different status among Whites.

Recognizing the privileges of hair status, African Americans during the turn of the century came to emulate "good hair." The acculturative acts translated into societal economic gains. Because the dominant ideology articulated kinky and tightly coiled hair as ugly, Black women began to "straighten" or "press" their tresses. This process of straightening one's hair started with the invention of the pressing comb or hot comb. The heated comb is placed on an oiled scalp and

then pulled through the hair to make it straight. hooks (1984) described hair pressing as the "ritual

of Black women's culture of intimacy" (p. 1). This ritual, though happening in a context of

conforming to racist beauty ideals, also had another side to it. It was a time when Black mothers

talked to daughters and Black women talked to other women. Straightening one's hair was a

reaction to the marginalization of African beauty and also one of female bonding at the same time.

The assimilative act of pressing the hair to present the straighten more pleasing to the eye

hairstyle was ultimately indicative of low self-esteem, self-hatred and internalized racism (hooks,

1989). Beyond pressing of the hair, straightening the hair with permanent chemical cream relaxers

was another assimilative act. The permanent crème relaxer was made famous by African

American female Entrepreneur, Madame C. J. Walker. Throughout the years, the beauty industry

has evolved and included variations of alterations in the appearance of one's hair. After the Black

power movement of the 60s and 70s, which was a period when many Black women returned to

wearing their hair naturally again there was a backlash. Patton (2006) explained, "American

success was through assimilation of hairstyle and dress, many African American women began to

press or chemically straighten their hair again" (p. 41).

The desire to live up to the Eurocentric standard of beauty by changing the texture or color

of one's hair or fixing one's hair was a chasm in the African American community. It is

compounded not only with societal expectations to be beautiful but for upward mobility. Patton

(2006) went on to say,

> Many women found that it was easier to don wigs, weaves, or undergo expensive
> chemical processes in order to replicate mainstream hairstyles rather than wear their hair
> in an afro, braids, or dreadlocks which may convey a political statement or socioeconomic
> status. (p. 41)

The texture and length of African descendent women's hair has and continues to be a large

part of conversation around beauty and body image. Discriminatory practices that penalize

African American people for their natural hair and hairstyles, particularly harmful punishment has been seen in school districts. Hairstyles such as locs, twists, afros, hair extensions deemed unworthy to be worn in many school districts (Perry, 2019). Perry (2019) accurately claimed, "Present day efforts to police and fix black students' hair is a vestige of our segregated past that deemed blackness inferior and the emulation of Whites as the route toward assimilation" (para. 2).From the east coast to the west coast, racially bias hair policies justified the cutting of an athletes' locs in order to be permitted to wrestle in a high school match or he would have had to forfeit the match. In July 2019, California made history becoming the first state to ban racial discrimination against people based on their natural hairstyle (Stack, 2019). The CROWN Act—with CROWN an acronym for "Create A Respectful and Open Workplace for natural hair"—is a law that "points to the history of anti-black racism in the United States and the role it has placed in shaping Eurocentric beauty standards and ideas of what constitutes a professional appearance (Stack, 2019).

Skin Color

Attention to the skin color has been frequently researched and discussed within the beauty and body image literature (Bond & Cash, 1992; Breland, 1998; Fink et al., 2001; C. C. I. Hall, 1995; Keith & Herring, 1991). Scholars have explored the psychological impact of skin color on African American women's esteem, mental well-being and worth (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey et al., 1987).

The attention to skin color within communities of color emerged with the legalization of American system of chattel slavery (Hunter, 2002). Before, it seems to have been different. In early 17th-century, enslaved Africans were brought to America as indentured servants. Angolans are said to have been the first Africans to arrive to Virginia (Russell-Cole et al., 2013). They were

said to be Christian and literate, which conferred a privileged status to the English settlers. As a result of this privilege, Angolans were treated no differently than White indentured servants (Russell-Cole et al., 2013), which meant that after seven years of indentured servitude, they were granted freedom.

Years passed and the demand for cheap labor increased as constant turnover of labor rose. White farmers were aware of the economic advantages Central and South America had received as a result of the importation of slaves from Africa. Having this understanding, they joined the slave trade business as customers with a demand for purposefully-stolen Africans from their homeland to become their slaves. In the late 1600s, laws were created and passed to legalize slavery, particularly keeping the dark-skinned African an indentured servant for life (Russell-Cole et al., 2013). Other laws and statutes were enacted that denoted that "Negroes" and "Mulattoes" should be deemed property as would enslaved women who birthed Black children and children of mixed race—all of whom added to the slave owner's property.

The "one drop rule" was conceptualized and implemented to ensure that offspring were not afforded White ancestry recognition and afforded the privileges of pure-bred Whites. This rule (also called "one-drop theory"), invented and applicable particularly in the United States, articulated that "no matter how White-looking or White acting someone of mixed ancestry was, or how little Blackness was actually in the person's genetic makeup, that individual was to be considered Black (Russell-Cole et al., 2013, p. 17). Created to divide, exploit, demean, demoralize, and to maintain control, Whites set up this hierarchy with associated values and privileges within the variation of skin tones. Similar to hair texture, lighter-complexioned slaves received privileges, including the tasks of house servant or slave, artisans, and skilled laborer (Drake & Clayton, 1945; Myrdal, 1962).

Skin color stratification led to using distinguishing language to differentiate between lightness or darkness in skin tone. For example, a person with light skin tones was often referred to as "fair," "bright," "half White," or "yellow," while those who were of dark skin tone were called "jet Black," "ink spot," or "shine." People in between those tones could be called "tan," "bronze," or Brown skin. A popular Blues song. "Get Back" (also known as "Black, Brown, and White"), written and performed by Big Bill Broonzy (1947/2000) during the Jim Crow period, captured the negative perception of dark skin tones. The lyrics were imbued with the White supremacist belief that to be White is better:

"If you're White, you're alright.

If you was Brown, stick around.

If you was Black, git back, git back, git back" (Broonzy, 1947/2000).

Internalizing racist ideologies, for decades, African Americans have attempted to pass and live by the "Brown paper Bag" test (Hunter, 2002). "Passing" was an African American's strategy for avoiding the negative brunt of *colorism*, the contemporary term that refers to "the prejudices and discriminatory practices surrounding skin-color differences that occur not only among African Americans, but also among other populations of color such as Latinos and Asians" (Russell-Cole et al., 2013, p. xiii). Intertwined, yet distinct from racism, both are subversive and divisive. According to A. P. Harris (2008) racism involves, "discrimination against persons based on their racial identity which in turn is traditionally designated through a complex mix of self-identification and other identification through appearance including color and ancestry" (p. 54).

From slavery to Jim Crow, colorism has withstood. It has had a damaging effect on the esteem, self-worth, and body image of African American women (Hill Collins, 1990; Patton,

2006; Tate, 2015). Some women have subscribed to the idea of lighter complexion as beautiful and that beauty can be used as a form of social capital. Hunter (2002) contended that this social capital can be converted to economic, educational, or other types of social capital.

This so-called "light skin capital" affords women privilege in education, better paying jobs, and social acceptance from Whites (Hunter, 2002; Poussaint, 1975). Just like modifications, women have made for their hair by straightening it, some women have tried to look lighter by using bleaching creams (Rooks, 1996). Sloan's (2011) analysis of advertisements in *Ebony* magazine of the 1950s reveals that most consisted of skin bleaching creams and hair straightening products. Analyzing three women magazines; *Ebony, Life* and *Ladies Home Journal*, in 1947, 1950, 1953, and 1962, Sloan found that print media affected women's ideals about beauty and societal expectations. Sloan stated: "Ebony is portraying the idea that beautiful is to be as White as possible" (p. 3).

Sloan's (2011) qualitative study revealed that all of the ads in *Ebony, Life,* and *Ladies Home Journal* mirrored societal expectations of beauty and trends that were shaped by the perpetuation of stereotypes, the notion of upward social mobility and the importance of being White and feminine. These ads during the 1950s meant to show not only Black women but also White women, that beautiful meant lighter skin and straighter hair. Implicitly, the normative for being considered a woman, meant to be White. Over 40 years ago, skin lightening practices spread throughout the African Diaspora, and is still a common practice. As recently as this century famous South African Singer, Mshoza, known for her music but also her bleached skin, was quoted as saying that she wanted to "see what it would be like to be White and I'm happy" (as cited in Rao, 2019, para. 1). Mshoza's statement was in response to questioning of her decision to bleach her skin in 2011. African women from all backgrounds pursue these products

seeking to secure a perceived better social and economic status after becoming lighter. Even though complications and dire health risks have been associated with skin bleaching (de Souza, 2008), according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 77% of Nigerian women use skin lightening products (World Health Organization, 2011). In 2018, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Rwanda banned skin bleaching products (Garcia, 2019; Rao, 2019). In 2001, Kenya, banned skin bleaching products (de Souza, 2008). These acts of assimilation are residual effects of the internalization of combinations of racism and colorism. Internalized oppression and the different expressions it takes, are important to recognize when I address body image in the course of the dissertation project. The marketing and selling of cosmetic products to women dissatisfied with their skin complexion also proves that cosmetic companies are opportunistic and capitalize on the internal anguish of women of color (Hunter, 2002).

Divergent from Watson et al.'s (2013) study and Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, Buchanan et al. (2008) broadened the scope of body image theory by examining the implications of skin tone, body monitoring, and dissatisfaction. Buchanan et al. found that African American women's surveillance of their own body shape and size predicted body shame. In addition, shame was also associated with skin tone. Higher levels of skin-tone specific monitoring were associated with overall body shame as well as targeted skin tone dissatisfaction. Body shame is also associated with hierarchies of status and attraction attached to body size.

Size

The average dress size of women in the United States is 16–18 (Christel & Dunn, 2017), which is also designated XL or "extra-large." Yet, society's expectation, strongly influenced by the fashion industry, is that women are to be thinner and of a smaller size. This thin ideal has been

equated to (White) feminine beauty. Throughout colonial history, Eurocentric ideologies dominated concepts of beauty, though changing over time to reflect Whiteness and the societal standards of particular time periods (Garner et al., 1980). Indeed, dominant concepts of beauty did not include women of African descent. "From the Rubenesque women of the 17th century to contemporary symbols of fashion, different White body shapes have been selected for, and associated with, desirable social status" (Garner et al., 1980, p. 482). Polivy et al., (1986) acknowledged this association of body size and status: "In economies more oriented to subsistence than abundance, a plump figure was a sign of wealth, health and youth" (p. 89). A shift in the 20th century occurred. In a comparison study with participants representing cultural ideas about feminine beauty—for example, for Miss America Pageant contestants and *Playboy* magazine centerfolds—Garner et al. (1980) found that from 1959 to 1978, the height, weight and body measurements of these groups shifted to a thinner size. Bust and hip measurements decreased significantly, and waists became larger. The *Playboy* centerfold data revealed that the bust, waist, and hip measurements of this group were a more "tubular body form" (Garner et al., 1980, p. 489). From 1959 through 1978, the average weight of the playmates declined. This weight decline was also seen in the Miss America Pageant contestants. The quest for and acceptance of the thin ideal of feminine beauty is manifest in a dieting culture. Polivy et al. (1986) asserted that these factors contribute to the increased emphasis on dieting:

1. Emulation of the higher social classes.
2. Health consciousness and fears about obesity.
3. A growing preoccupation with body images and a quest for youth.
4. Overvaluation of a sense of personal control, or ascetic ideal.
5. Social roles for women which have evolved over the 1960s and 1970s. (Polivy et al., 1986, p. 91)

Polivy et al. (1986) were among the first to explore the possibility of the five factors that were reported contributing to an emphasis on dieting. As in most clinical research related to

dieting, eating disturbances, body image, studies are conducted with limited samples of people of

color, particularly African American women. Supporting this claim, Striegel-Moore and Bulik

(2007) contended that a gap within their research signifies there is a "lack of epidemiological data

capturing the population diversity in the United States" relative to eating disorders" (p. 185).

Along with scholars, mainstream media have also been indicative of ignoring African

American women's size and beauty, thus erasing the relevance of their lives and experiences as

worthy human beings. Bordo (1993) criticized Western mainstream media for the complicit

demonstration and distribution of images that homogenize female beauty, ignoring racial, ethnic,

and sexual differences that "disturb Anglo-Saxon heterosexual expectations and identifications"

(p. 25). Bordo urged choosing images to disturb Anglo Saxon heterosexual expectations and

identifications, such as an African American's critical perspective on why Black beauty images

are not as prevalent as White images.

In the United States, Bennett (1984) offered three reasons why Black beauty has not been

given its just due for consideration.

> First of all, Black beauty is disguised by poverty, nutritional inadequacies, and intolerable
> burdens. Secondly, that beauty is appraised almost always by White standards alias to its
> genius. Thirdly, Black beauty is often forced to doubt itself and to itself by the cruel and
> artificial standards of a society which says always and everywhere that Black is bad and
> White is good. (p. 44)

A question then arises: What are the effects on African American women? Thomas (1989)

asserted,

> women's satisfaction with their body image is influenced not only by physical
> characteristics but also by the way others react to them, a comparison of their physique to
> that of others in their immediate environment, and a comparison to cultural ideals. (p. 108)

Thomas went on to say that "most researchers investigating body-image satisfaction have

used White female samples in their studies" (p. 108). White culture is the dominant culture;

therefore, researchers have tended to restrict their work to conducting samples and studies on the

White females of that culture. S. M. Harris (1995) asserted that "absent from existing studies is an examination of demographic and sociocultural variables that relate to perceptions of and feelings toward the body among African American women" (p. 129). Although demographic and cultural factors (socioeconomic status, sex role stereotypes, and social networks have been found to play a major role in body image satisfaction" (Thomas, 1989, p. 108), Thomas's study examined the level of body image satisfaction among Black women along with the influence of body weight, self-esteem, and perceptions of significant others on body-image satisfaction. The study participants were African American women living in the DC area, mostly employed, younger than 35, at least some college education, and never married. The women completed a questionnaire that included a Likert scale to elicit responses relative to their satisfaction with their bodies. A self-esteem scale was used to determine if the woman felt they were worthy. There were also questions involving the perceptions of people close to them—for example, how their mother, father, and close male and female friends would rate their body shape and scale. Body weight was recorded for each participant.

Similar to the study around weight underestimation, this study highlighted the discrepancy between a woman's weight and the ideal weight. The study also found a substantial number of women reporting body dissatisfaction, "39.6% of the women were unhappy, 60.4% felt too fat" (Thomas, 1989, p. 109). The report spoke of the impact a significant others' perceptions related to a woman's body-image satisfaction. A man's perception was quite influential to the way in which a woman perceived herself. Thomas revealed a significant positive correlation that emerged between the perceptions of close male friends and the perceptions of boyfriends and spouses: "The data indicated a modest yet significant relationship between self-esteem and body-image

satisfaction" (Thomas, 1989, p. 110). The procedures used in this study were a bit limited. The questionnaires were not culturally relevant and were broad in scope.

S. M. Harris (1995) asserted that "the conceptualization of body image is particularly important in understanding the inconsistencies in the literature related to the body attitudes of African American women" (p. 130). In agreement, I believe that the importance of understanding how the African American's image was contrived; to consider their lived experiences and attitudes is important to not only closing the gap in the literature, but provide a platform to sanction voice and give breadth to the intersectionality of African American women's experiences with their bodies.

White Standard of Beauty

Feminine Eurocentric depiction of beauty was the ostensibly universal normative in the early 1600s and still is pervasive today. The idea of beauty of the English women in the 1600s was that of "tan-free skin," naturally straight, wavy, or long hair, a small nose, thin lips, light eyes, and slim body (Neal & Wilson, 1989; Russell-Cole et al., 2013). Utilizing the power of the pen, European writers and explorers began to shape the narrative of what they supposed to be the African woman's identity (Guy-Sheftall, 2002; Morgan, 1997). African women were contrasted to European women as social constructions of the Other contributed to creating a superior European identity. Colonizers deliberately "found a means to articulate shifting perceptions of themselves as religiously, culturally, and phenotypically superior to those Black or born persons they sought to define" (Morgan, 1997, p. 168). African women were seen as the antithesis of European women who were seemingly demure, civil, and bound up in corsets (Guy-Sheftall, 2002; Morgan, 1997). They were seen as beautiful and also controllable, unlike Black and Brown women who were characterized as animal-like (Patton, 2006). Patton (2006) demonstratively chided the

perpetuation of Eurocentric beauty standards that held women captive in a place of mental and emotional turmoil that resulted in oppressive self-inflicted behaviors such as eating disorders, self-objectification, and psychological stress. Saltzberg and Chrisler (2006) asserted that "beauty is subject to the hegemonic standards of the ruling class. Because of this, beauty is an elusive commodity" (p. 135). The African body was indeed a commodity, beginning in the early 19th century in Europe and America, when indigenous bodies were put on display. One of the most popular displays of African womanhood, that of Khoi-San woman, Saartjie Baartman.

Europeans sought to elucidate the physical differences of African women and to colonize a way of thinking, particularly when it came to what constituted physical attractiveness. Conversely, slavery had a detrimental impact on the idea of who is considered physically attractive. Parmer et al. (2004) asserted,

> The effects of slavery have perpetuated the issue of physical attractiveness in African American communities. Therefore, given the different historical and sociocultural experiences relative to physical attractiveness that have prevailed for 400 years, African Americans have assigned different meanings to their experiences due to the devaluation of their physical features and the comparative appraisal against White standards of beauty. (p. 231)

Racially Relevant Standards of Beauty

Capodilupo and Kim (2013) postulated the gravity of understanding and considering the intersections in Black women's body image encapsulating gender and race. Intersectionality recognizes where two or more social identities and related structural experiences converge (Chikwendu, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990; Wilkins, 2012; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Capodilupo and Kim used a qualitative method to gain a deeper understanding of the implications of race, culture, ethnicity, and body image. Once again, these researchers concluded that there is an overabundance of research that imposes the thin ideal as a universal standard for women. Their use of a post-structural/critical version of the grounded theory approach yielded an

emerging framework to accurately assess the body image development of the African American woman. The study included women who self-identified as Black and/or African American and were recruited through community centers in a large metropolitan city. Participants took part in focus groups with a lead facilitator and observers who were themselves Black American women. Six focus groups were conducted. Consistent with grounded theory methods and as a way of avoiding White female normativity dominating a plethora of body image measurements and theories, the researchers believed it would be advantageous to analyze the data without the use of an existing theory but, instead, to yet let theory emerge from the themes. The core concept around body/self-image held hair, skin, attitude, and shape, all affected by three broad categories: interpersonal influence, experiences of oppression, and media images

Included in interpersonal influences were the influence of Black men and family members. The way in which women described their feelings about their weight, shape, and overall appearance and about eating in general, were attributed to what was acceptable and normal within their family. If the normal was that eating makes you feel good and it is what you do, then typically the family was a support.

Significantly, Black men—or as Capodilupo and Kim (2013) labelled them, "standard enforcers" (p. 44)—validate a woman's sense of beauty. The influence of Black men overlaps both the interpersonal influences and the media images category. The women in Capodilupo and Kim's study describe the influence media has on the Black men and their perception and depictions of beautiful women. They spoke about the thin ideal of women seen in rap videos on TV and how that has affected Black men's preferences. Experiences of oppression related to race/gender microaggressions and invisibility and the impact on the women's self-image.

Other qualitative research supports these findings. For example, in their study of 31

African American women, Awad et al. (2015) found salient themes important to understanding

the experience of Black women and their bodies within a political and racialized context. Hair

was one of the themes of importance. They found that "the participants consistently spoke about

the experience of sacrifice, ignorance/racial microaggressions and validation-invalidation by

others versatility relative to a woman's hair" (Awad et al., 2015, p. 14). The researchers further

reported that "for some Black women, their personal and political significance of their hair is

rooted in a system that values some hair types over others" (Awad et al., 2015, p. 15) However,

traditional work around body image in psychology fails to acknowledge racialized aspects of

body image. Furthermore, Awad et al. confirmed the experience of preferential treatment given to

lighter skinned women—which is consistent with previous research of skin color as a component

of this population's body image. For some, trying to live up to the White standard of beauty has

meant bleaching, dying of hair, bleaching of skin, and the alteration of one's size through extreme

dieting and body alteration surgeries. These acts are outward expressions of internalized

oppression.

Internalized Oppression

Internalized oppression is deleterious to marginalized groups. External acts of

inferiorization prompt an internal cycle of hatred towards self. As Bulhan (1985) described,

> For in prolonged oppression, the oppressed group willy-nilly internalizes the oppressor
> without. They adopt his guidelines and prohibitions, they assimilate his image and his
> social behaviors, and they become agents of their own oppression . . . The well-known
> inferiority complex of the oppressed originates in this process of internalization . . . They
> engage in self-destructive behavior injurious to themselves, their loved ones, and their
> neighbors. (p. 126)

Parmer et al. (2004) stated, "Physical attractiveness as a process of internalized oppression

is significant in counseling because it has been projected across family systems for generations in

African American communities" (p. 232). These are deeply rooted in the belief system. Parmer et

al. further argued,

> One lasting consequence of multiracial sexual contacts and miscegenation has been the creation of an elite group of mulattos. Because these individuals have fewer African features, they have set the standard for what physical attractiveness is in African American communities relative to facial features, skin color, hair, and body size. Although issues of physical attractiveness are likely to affect all family members is often the African American female who is the family scapegoat. (p. 233)

Slavery's residuals and forced Eurocentric standards influenced the perceptions of African

Americans and beauty. Jefferson and Stake (2009) found distinct racial differences in body

self-attitudes between European American and African American woman. Eighty-nine European

and 80 African American women took part in varied assessments of body image dissatisfaction,

internalization of societal standards of beauty, and social comparisons. The researchers had

predicted that African American women would compare themselves to media ideals to a lesser

degree than European American women and would be less likely to internalize Western societal

ideals of beauty. Furthermore, they predicted that internalization was expected to correlate with

body dissatisfaction with both groups. Consistent with their predictions, Jefferson and Stake

found that European American women expressed more dissatisfaction with weight related

features than African American women and the difference was greater when Body Mass Index

was controlled. European American women held more internalized societal ideals than did

African American women. The researchers concluded that weight is central to the body image of

European Americans but not to the African American participants whose body image also

comprised non-weight factors such as skin color, facial features and hair. This finding supports

Capodilupo's (2015) assertion that hair and skin color were equally important to weight and shape

in understanding African American woman's body image.

Internalization of these ideals has resulted in some women expressing hatred to other women. In an essay entitled, "To the Women Who Bent My Reflection: How Internalized Misogyny Creates Toxic Relationships Among Women," Nkadi (2017) criticized women who assume the role of the oppressor and who judge another woman's appearance. She asserted, "The respectability politics you project onto me are a reflection of your own internalized misogyny, not of my lack of worth" (para. 5). Nkadi highlighted her experience of shame that began at an early age and brings attention to the conundrum of women policing other women's bodies: "We are doing the work of the oppressor. We are but little complicit puppets, propagating the imperialist, White-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Don't you know that when you hurt me, you hurt yourself?" (Nkadi, 2017, para. 4). Nkadi's emphatic declaration to women to rise above respectability politics is a plea for the support and sanity of women. She asserted, "Do not force respectability politics on other her. Do not police her clothing choices. Do not criticize her size, sexuality, beauty, intelligence, or worth. Because a reflection can only bend so much before it breaks" (para. 14).

Liberation and Agency

Liberation is the result of purposeful agency; below I focus on two liberating paths where African American women have enacted agency and made bold statements about who they are: First, coming out and embracing one's love for another person of the same gender; and, second, taking a public stand in defying society's perceptions of living in a larger size body.

Coming out at the age of 40 was a liberating act of my mind and body. Choosing to acknowledge my inner self in an outward way, I began to live my existence as a woman who loved women sexually and non-sexually. This liberation opened the door to appreciating and looking at my body differently. Though not immune to societal, heteronormative, patriarchal

pressures to look a certain way and love someone of the opposite gender, after coming out I felt more comfortable to challenge my socialized body and thoughts of beauty. Black's (2006) qualitative study on bisexual and lesbian women's experiences with physical appearance, revealed two dichotomous forces at play after women came out. The first force is the recognition, as lesbian and bisexual women, that there is freedom from and resistance to heteronormative, Eurocentric standards of beauty (e.g., celebration of body diversity and non-traditional gender norms).

The second force relates to becoming a part of the newly embraced community, which can involve its own form of unfreedom. The pressure to conform to expected dress codes within the gay community that identifies someone as "butch" or "lesbian." Psychologists L. S. Brown (1987) and Dworkin (1989) have closely examined and generated theories around lesbian body image. Brown asserted that if a lesbian is able to break through the internalized heterosexism, she is less likely to ascribe to and follow societal expectations of beauty. Conversely, women who do internalize heterosexism will be more likely to follow societal thinness norms. According to Brown, lesbians decrease their internalization of heterosexist attitudes as they develop their sexual identities. Dworkin's contrasting argument was that because lesbians live and work in the same heterosexist society, they are likely to experience the same levels of body dissatisfaction. However, like myself, there are fat, queer, or lesbian women, who found coming out and embracing their identity and the fat lesbian body to be liberating. Coming out involves the agency of refusing to hide the sexual same-gender-loving identity, initially often aimed at self-liberation. The following examples of agency are forms of body embracement intended to influence or inspire others, and, as such, are also forms of community or public leadership. The media plays an important role in this process.

There are women in the media today who are showing the world that they want to be seen as fully human beings. Taking a public stand, they intend to disrupt the ideologies and defy stereotypes. These women have enacted agency over and in their bodies. Research on body embracing African American women as an act of leadership is scarce, but it deserves attention, even in the form of selected examples. Standing firm in boldly loving their bodies, First lady Michelle Obama, singer and rapper Lizzo, and Yoga teacher and body positive (body pos) advocate Jessamyn Stanley, are just a few African American women who are sharing their love of self and liberation through words and activism.

Before and during the time of her husband's run for and time in office, First Lady Michelle Obama was accosted with much criticism about her look, her style, her body. From everyday citizens to famous people, Obama's body has been the site of verbal attacks. The *Washington Post's*, Mikki Kendall (2016), listed 22 offensive statements in her article, "22 Times Michelle Obama Endured Rude, Racist, Sexist or Plain Ridiculous Attacks." In spite of these attacks, Obama exuded confidence and grace. Her approach was simple: she focused attention on healthy eating and lifestyle habits. In her time in the White House, she established the "Let's Move" campaign. The focus was to promote healthy habits among children and adults (Let's Move, n.d.). Significantly, the emphasis was not on how kids *look*, but about how they *feel*. Simply put, it was to keep kids feeling good about their bodies (Rocketto, 2014).

Lizzo, a singer and rapper from Detroit, has shared her love of self through songs. This iconic plus size millennial has shown the world that she has learned to accept her body. In her third Album, "Cuz I love you," which has her beautifully authentic nude on the cover, Lizzo also bears all in expressive songs of vulnerability and bluntness. In an interview with National Public Radio's, Terry Gross, Lizzo said,

About 10 years ago, I made the decision that I just want surveillance with my body and I just wanted to be happy with who I am, that was the beginning of my journey with learning how to love my body. . . . You have to find that love for yourself deep down inside, underneath all of that questioning and ickiness. (Gross, 2019, para. 6)

Yoga teacher and body pos advocate, Jessamyn Stanley has pushed through the yoga world's doors with her message of body inclusivity for all. This self-identified, Black, fat, queer, femme is ignoring the stereotypical image of one who practices yoga as thin and White and boldly and bending and stretching her big body across yoga mats across this country. In her first book, *Every body Yoga, Let Go of Fear, Get on the Mat, Love Your Body*, Stanley (2017) detailed her personal yoga journey and boldly professes that yoga is for everybody. Touring the globe giving presentations and yoga workshops, sharing her story of love and acceptance of her body, Stanley pushes the envelope as a liberated body who has taken agency.

Radical self-love activist, Sonya Renee Taylor, defiantly disrupts discursive discourse and engenders agency with her radical self -love movement. Her quest to move people to "building a radical self-love" (S. R. Taylor, 2018, p. 57) is to move people to make peace with their bodies, the bodies of others In*, The Body Is Not An Apology,* S. J. Taylor (2018) weaves stories of "the personal with the political" (p. xx), suturing them with 10 concrete, practical ways, individually and collectively, members of society can change the world by adopting her 10 tools for radical self-love. The tools are anchored within in her "four pillars of practice" (p. 64). The first pillar is "Taking Out the Toxic" (p. 66) S. J. Taylor advised people to "Dump the Junk" (p. 95), which is to detoxify our lives from mass media body shame. The second tool is "Curb Body Bad-Mouthing" (p. 96) meaning watch what you say about yourself. The second pillar is "Mind Matters" (p. 67). With tool 3, S. J. Taylor emphasized "reframing your framework" (p. 98) thinking differently about your body. Tool 4, "meditate on a mantra" (p. 100), pointed out the positive benefits of meditation, mindfulness and mantras help generate present thoughts and

positivity. Tool 5, was "Banish the Binary" (p. 103). Pillar three was "Unapologetic Action" (p. 65) Tool 6 is "Explore Your Terrain" (p. 105)—get intimate with your body. Tool seven, was "Be In Movement" (p. 107) through your own personal story of moving from couch to a 5 km run, S. J. Taylor suggested that movement is an "act of freedom" (p. 109). Her Tool 8 was "Make A New Story" (p. 109) emphasizing the importance of releasing old body shame stories and make a new more positive story about yourself. Tool 9 and 10 reside within Pillar 4 "Collective Compassion" (p. 65). Tool 9 is "Be In Community" (p. 111) which suggested people to find compassionate and caring communities to connect with. Tool 10 stated "Give Yourself some Grace" (p. 113). This Radical Self Love tool kit and S. J. Taylor's movement encapsulate body embracing activism.

Body embracing activism has a place in the longer history of African American activism to move from "margin to the center," to borrow from the title of one of bell hooks's books (2000). Most relevant for the dissertation project is Womanism, the ideology, life philosophy, if not movement, rooted in the 1980s, to which I now turn, as the final part of this chapter.

Womanism

> The lived experiences and narratives of African American girls and women must be privileged and placed at the center of any analysis so that instances of injustice and oppression can be unearthed, unsilenced, made visible, acknowledged, and recognized.

> —Pratt-Clarke (2013, p. 101)

Assertion, agency, and acknowledgement are words which thematically undergird Alice Walker's (1985) definition of a womanist and Womanism. The proclamation of a womanist is grounded in liberation, self -determination, and humanity for all people. This theory bodes as a lens for consideration in addressing lived bodily experiences of African American women. Research studies from a womanist framework have been done in the fields of education, theology, and mental health, but as yet, not within the body image field. Marr (2014) asserted, **"Womanist**

epistemology and theory seeks to disrupt dominant ways of knowing" (p. 99). The dominant ways

of knowing about African American women's body has been largely seen through the lens of a

westernized, colonialized narrative of the ideal of beauty.

Layli (Phillips) Marpayan, womanist scholar and researcher, has spent years researching

and writing about Womanism. For the purpose of this study, I find her working definition of

Womanism useful:

> Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of
> color's everyday experience and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday
> spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring
> the balance between people and the environment/nature and reconciling human life with
> the spiritual dimension. (Phillips, 2006, p. xx)

The foundation of what critical scholars assert is the validity of the African American

woman's experience shapes meaning and provides wisdom. Hill Collins (1990) claimed that from

an African American woman's viewpoint, "Individuals who 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 experience" (p. 209). Out of these experiences of receiving knowledge one

obtains wisdom, which is verified through experience with themselves or spirit. Essentially, both

scholars posit the beneficial nature of experiences. Moore (2016) stated that Womanism provides,

"the ability to summarize and verbalize her individual experiences as a self-defined cooperative

perspective is essential to her survival" (p. 24). Espousing a womanist consciousness

demonstrates a particular stance that African American women can assert when they have been

denied visibility and voice.

On a daily basis, African American women live their lives at the intersection of race,

gender class. Womanism recognizes the social construction of the African American woman's

identity through a historical context which includes the legacy of slavery and the intersectionality

of women's experiences (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Vaz, 2006). Ignored, objectified,

sexualized, demoralized, their lived body experiences are compared with others and/or defined for them. This research will utilize the Womanist lens to enter into the everyday experiences of women with their bodies. Through stories and images, women will come to share and know the experiences of the body through an intersectional lens.

Intersectionality

Prior to Crenshaw (1991) conceptualizing intersectionality, the theory was rooted in Black feminists and activists calling attention to what feminism was not doing (Crenshaw, 1991; A. Y. Davis, 1971; hooks, 1984). Refusing to embrace or include multiple identities within the scope of feminist work, hooks (1984) described feminist Betty Frieden's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, as "a one-dimensional perspective on women's reality" (p. 3). hooks continued, saying, "like Friedan before them White women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group" (p. 3). hooks disrupted the notion of single axis point of reference by giving an example of a child coming into this world, how this child's fate will be determined. hooks argued, "when the child of two Black parents is coming out of the womb the factor that is considered first is skin color, then gender, because race and gender will determine that child's fate" (p. xii). hooks (1984) believed that one discussion in her women's studies class, changed the trajectory of feminist thought. Not only in feminist thought, but years later, Crenshaw's (1991) discussion around the erasure of Black women through a single axis framework, pushed the term "intersectionality" into focus in race and sex discrimination cases. K. Davis (2008) noted, "Difference of opinions exist regarding whether it [intersectionality]should be limited to understanding individual experiences to theorizing identity or whether it should be taken as property of societal structures and cultural discourses" (p. 68). There is agreed discourse around the importance of understanding all

identities; however, there are certain nuances and complexities that Chikwendu (2013) and K. Davis (2008) have contended.

Crenshaw's (1991) paradigmatic approach to the issue of intersectionality was to frame and interpret the stories of Black women who filed discrimination cases. Using her experience as a lawyer to explain how discriminatory and marginalizing it was to look through a lens of either/or versus both or all/and. Crenshaw referenced the court cases, *DeGaffenreid v. General Motors,* and *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter* to illustrate instances where the courts failed to understand and recognize plaintiff's claim of both racial and gender discrimination in both of the cases. In *Payne v. Travenol*, two Black women, representing all Black employees at a pharmaceutical plant, brought a class action suit citing racial discrimination before the courts. The courts ruled that the women could not represent both men and women, but did agree that the women were discriminated against and were awarded a settlement. Crenshaw asserted that the *DeGafferenreid v. General Motors*, *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter*, and *Payne v. Travenol* cases are "doctrinal manifestations of a common political and theoretical approach to discrimination which operates to marginalize Black women" (p. 150). Crenshaw and other scholars engage and inform didactic discourse around oppression that exists within each category that make up one's identity (Crenshaw,1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Guy-Sheftall, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lorde, 1984). Limiting the discussion to one dimension of the individual's experience devalues the full identity and humanity of the person.

Chapter Summary

Images haves been instrumental in shaping socially constructed ideologies about African American women. Stripping the humanity from Black women, ideologies intended to objectify, oppress, promote inferiority (Gilman, 1985; Hill Collins, 1990). From the iconic images of Saartje

Baartman (Gilman, 1985) to the hip/hop rap music videos (African descent) women's bodies have

been scrutinized and deduced to their body parts. This chapter presented relevant literature,

themes and concepts related to understanding the historical and contemporary experiences of

African American women and their bodies. Distinct themes in this chapter included the

construction of the sociopolitical narrative. Stereotypes were created to shame Black women.

Harris-Perry (2011) when discussing the way in which black women confront race and gender

stereotypes, she points out, "Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to

figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black

women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 29). The review of

the literature here, presented how women have attempted to assimilate to Eurocentric standards of

beauty and the deleterious effects of the assimilation (Rooks, 1996; Sloan, 2011).

Despite some women attempting to assimilate, there are those who are willing to take

agency and resist. From the White House to the Yoga mat, women are showing the world a new

perspective of embodiment. To consider the full humanity of African American women, scholars

and activists insist the consideration of all aspects of her identity (Alston & McClellan, 2011;

Crenshaw,1991; Essed, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks,1984; Lorde, 1984; Taylor, 2018).

Crenshaw (1991) and hooks (1984), among others, laid a solid foundation for scholars and

activists to broaden their understanding and approach to working with and for communities of

color; particularly African American women. Intersectionality theory and Womanism cement the

idea of liberation, and agency which in solidarity fortifies the humanity of African-American

women. Utilizing an affirming approach, Narrative PhotoVoice Methodology fosters a legacy of

stories in both pictures and words and for the purposes of this study will provide a deeper

understanding of the lived experiences of African American women and their bodies. The next

chapter will detail the processes involved executing this methodology.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter introduces qualitive, participatory action research (PAR) as an apt methodology to explore the lived experiences of African American women and their bodies. PAR allows participants to take agency and serve as co-researchers lending their voices and experiences to issues that are of interest and concern. The methodology rationale, overview of action research and participatory action research design are discussed in this chapter. The particular method to be used is PhotoVoice in combination with individual interviews and focus group conversations. Additional primary elements in this chapter, include information regarding the study participants, ethical considerations, and the method of analysis.

Research Questions and Methodology Rationale

This study seeks to answer the following question:

RQ1 (research question 1): How do African American women experience their bodies?

The body experience is perceived from an intersectional perspective. In answering the research question, a womanist approach will guide the methodology. In essence it is an appreciative approach to women, womanhood, and our bodies based in the historical experience of women of African descent in the United States In light of this, a related question arises in developing the methodology:

RQ2: How can a womanist approach be a generative lens for women to discuss experiences with their bodies?

These questions, touching upon sensitive issues around the lived, gendered, racialized body experiences of African American women drive not only the methodological choice, but reflect also my ontological commitment, values, and the intentionality of acknowledging voice of the marginalized in a culturally apt and relevant way. I seek to counter residuals from slavery and

colonization that continue to impact the way in which researchers approach studying African American people. African Americans have been often ignored in mainstream research, or, if the focus of research at all, it is typically being done "on" them and not "with" them (Guishard, 2018). I value the life of the participants, seek to acknowledge and uplift their voices, and draw attention to their experiences. I was committed to interrogating the intersectionality of the African American women's experiences of her body to make explicit their daily experiences living in a Black woman's body. The methodology made it possible to literally hear the voice of, see their lives, and provide a platform to share the experiences that could honor the full humanity of African American women.

McNiff and Whitehead (2011) claim that "action research is done by practitioners who regard themselves as agents" (p. 34). I am an agent of change and, with that declaration, I understand the responsibilities of critical researchers who consider themselves change agents. As Weis and Fine (2004) asserted, "Critical researchers have an obligation not simply to dislodge the dominant discourse, but to help readers and audiences imagine where the spaces for resistance, agency and possibility lie (p. xxi). Herr and Anderson (2015) pointed out that feminist and antiracist researchers have pushed the boundaries of action research by critiquing paradigm thinking.

A way of challenging the boundaries is by thinking differently about the way in which to approach conducting research with women and people of color. McAdoo and McAdoo (1994) insightfully argued that social science researchers should utilize research methodologies that are culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate for African Americans.

Action research design provides study participants the platform to be involved in the process. PhotoVoice, as I will introduce and explain below, is a culturally sensitive approach that provided the lens through which participants could can capture and share their lived experiences.

Action Research Design

German-American Psychologist Kurt Lewin has been considered the originator of action research theory (Kemmis, 1980; Masters, 1995; Rowell et al.,2017). Although Herr and Anderson (2015) acknowledged this, probably more accurately, they clarify that Lewin was "the first to develop a theory of action research that made it a respectable form of research in the social sciences" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 11). Lewin described action research as a cyclical process that involves the community members in every part of the process (Kemmis, 1980). Lewin's studies involved discrimination against minority groups and factory workers (Lewin, 1946).

Subsequently, academicians and researchers from diverse disciplines have coined and coopted their own variations and definitions for *action research* (Argyris & Schön, 1989; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Kemmis et al., 2014; Stringer, 2007). Stringer (2007) defined action research as "a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems (p. 8). Herr and Anderson (2015) defined action research as "inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community but never to or on them. It is a reflective process" (p. 3). McKernan (1988) defined it as "a form of self-reflective problem solving which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social change" (p. 6). The thread within all of these definitions is that it being participant-centered. Participants drive the research and the researcher guides. This is particularly relevant in my study because women of African descent have largely been excluded from research that expresses their own vision and agency in change.

Comparatively, McNiff and Whitehead (2011) added to the conversation: "Action research has always been understood as people taking action to improve their personal and social situations" (p. 14). Reflection and collaboration are essential to the attainment of knowledge within this research paradigm. The knowledge that is gained in action research is through the collection of participants' thoughts and experiences, involving a collaborative process whereby researcher and participants engage in identifying solutions to problems. This process is an equitable one. The researcher does not bear all of the responsibility of crafting the direction of the research. There is not an unequal balance in responsibility. This can be a challenge for the researcher, trained or used to taking responsibility and ownership of the project. At the same time, it can also be a challenge for marginalized groups of people who have been accustomed to systems; top down or managerial leaders who silence their voices and exist in a hegemonic environment (Guishard, 2009). The process, which actually worked organically and smoothly for all involved, all voices could be heard as everyone worked together to create knowledge. McNiff and Whitehead (2011), asserted that "the situation becomes one of collectives of individuals investigating their practices, a question of the 'I'/we investigating the 'I/we' in company with others who are also investigating the: individual or collective practices" (p. 28).

Despite the fact that scholars from diverse academic disciplines (Argyris & Schön, 1989; Kemmis et al., 2014; Stringer, 2007) have coined and coopted their own varied definitions of action research, most would agree to Stringer's (2007) framework that drives the process in action research: "look, think, act" (p. 8). This process is a very simple way to begin to think about the research and build on concepts and ideas. "Looking" translates to the gathering of data, defining the issue/problem and describing them. "Thinking" is the analyzing of the issue or problem and theorizing. Finally, "acting" is the reporting of what was discovered (Stringer, 2007). Contention

has been around the legitimacy of the action research as a form of academic inquiry. Herr and Anderson (2015) asserted that within the discussion around legitimacy is the "who "is doing the research which are the "inside practitioners" who generate knowledge versus academic researchers and the "what" type of research is being done, that is, practice driven versus theory driven (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

In addition to the "who "and the "how" that is being challenged, there is the validity of the research relative to the "practical" versus "formal" research. V. Richardson (1994) delineated this distinction as between practical and formal. "Practical inquiry is conducted by practitioners to help them understand their contexts, practices and in the case of teachers, their students. However, formal research is what we usually think of in educational research" (p. 7). I would argue that the distinction between practitionership and formal research is exclusionary. As a healer and as an African American woman, I am intimately familiar with the research problem. My practice and experiences informed and enriched my understanding of theory. Conversely, the use of scholarly theory and tools would equip me with a deeper understanding of ways to improve my practice.

Despite the opposition and debates regarding the legitimacy of this method its greatest acceptance has been in the fields of organizational development, social work, nursing, public health, education, and agriculture (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Many researchers within these fields have undertaken participatory action research projects in an effort to work with communities and institutions to make change or bring awareness of issues that are of importance.

PAR (Participatory Action Research)

Rooted in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Nyemba & Mayer, 2018), Participatory action research (PAR) is done "with" the study participants instead of "on" them. Participatory research disrupts traditional research ideology of passive participation and embraces participants as active

agents working to address and study issues, collect and interpret data and take action within their

communities (Laura Smith et al., 2010). Anthropologist, Marja Liisa Swantz is credited with

developing PAR as a method (Nyemba & Mayer, 2018). In collaboration with villagers and

scholars of Tanzania and Finland, Swantz's Jipemoyo project, linked theory and practice. The

co-researchers—a commonly used term for the community participants in action research—

identified and solved problems within their village and were the catalyst of the evolution of PAR

(Nyemba & Mayer, 2018). Fine (2009) noted the bottom up approach to engaging and including

participants in the study reflects the fact that "PAR assumes that critical expertise lies in those

most oppressed" (p. 2). Providing a platform for marginalized people to address issues within

communities has led to a growth in this method being used to bring attention to issues such as

mothers with learning difficulties, gentrification, and college study within prison (Booth & Booth,

2003; Cahill, 2007).

Guishard (2009) claimed that the prominence and growth of PAR is a result of researchers

seeking alternative methodologies to "address histories of exploitation, surveillance, and social

exclusion, deeply embedded in mainstream research" (p. 85). Years of exploitation led to mistrust

between marginalized groups and researchers. Adopting Prilleltensky's (2003) emancipatory

communicative approach, researchers Laura Smith et al. (2010) provided a framework for PAR

collaboration.

PAR requires the researcher to also "think" or be reflexive through this process. In the

words of Guishard (2009), "more reflective about our respective standpoints, vulnerabilities and

the limits of our theories and analytical strategies" (p. 88). The method and technique of

PhotoVoice—illuminating narratives triggered by and exemplified with photographs—

complements the purposes of PAR. Reflections, stories, and photographs bring to life experiences

and ideas, which further enlighten and expand the ideas, thoughts, and lived experiences of the participant. Narratives or stories are ways in which people make meaning of their lives, their world, and their culture. Historically, African Americans have a deeply rooted tradition of storytelling (Amoah, 1997). Descendants from Africa passed down this oral tradition transmitting religious customs, family and societal traditions and cultural norms. Passing down these important stories and traditions to familial lineage was important to maintaining their cultural heritage in spite of the influence of European control. Stories are important to understanding a person's lived experience. Relying on the many and various forms of storytelling, narrative inquiry offered the opportunity for the participants to share their stories, their experiences, their voices.

Narrative Inquiry

Amoah (1997), referring to narrative as the "harbinger of truth" (p. 87), provided a substantive rationale for narrative's use in research with women and people of color:

> The practice of Narrative functions to allow traditionally marginalized and disempowered groups such as women and people of color to reclaim their voices. In addition, by laying claim to personal narrative (i.e., telling of one's own story), oppressed peoples are able to create their own sphere of theorized existence and thus remove themselves from the marginalized position to which the dominant society has relegated them. (p. 85)

Conversely, Simmonds et al. (2015) asserted, "Narrative inquiry is also valuable when conducting gender -based research because it focuses on narratives as experiences lived and told" (p. 36). To this end, for groups of people who have had research *done to* them, this approach is a viable option for researchers who intend to work *with* such marginalized groups. Within the realm of narrative inquiry, there are various approaches researchers have taken in developing critical self-reflection and reflexivity (De Mello, 2007: Elliott, 2005: Labonte et al., 1999). In fact, Labonte et al.'s (1999) method of storytelling engaged participants by having them render and reflect upon a story or stories around a common theme intending "to generate a new theoretical perspective and a change in practice" (Bold, 2011, p. 73). De Mello (2007) used various forms of

art as a stimulus to engage people in reflective activity. Finally, there is Elliott's (2005) defense of using diaries as a record of and reflection of one's experiences.

As evident by these tactics, the human experience is critical. It seems to me that these researchers would agree with Amoah's (1997) belief that "unless we recognize the value of human experience, then there is little chance that humanity will progress and develop to its full potential" (p. 88). Human experiences are better understood when a person is able to share their own experience. The authentic act of telling one's story whether in conversations or expressed in creative works of art, provides the option, the opportunity, and ability to share one's voice.

Amoah (1997) asserted,

> Narrative enables those on the margin to perceive the power structure in a different way, first the storyteller realizes that the power she derives from telling her own stories was always in existence; she needed only to harness and exert it (p. 89).

Narrative PhotoVoice

Simmonds et al. (2015) reconceptualized PhotoVoice by combining narrative inquiry and PhotoVoice methodology. In essence, this method gives breadth to the voice of the marginalized group. "It's aim is to capture participants lived experiences in the photographs they take and their reflections in their accompanying narrative" (Simmonds et al., p. 38). Photo narratives are a series of photos images accompanied by oral story. Photos are seen as the primary source of information and the participant's account is the secondary source. Narratives offers breadth and depth to the images and to the PhotoVoice method.

Wang and Burris (1994), who are participatory action researchers, sought to change consciousness and inform policy with their research, particularly their method PhotoNovella. PhotoNovella, a pre cursor to the contemporary term *PhotoVoice*, is a process whereby participants are co-researchers and use their "critical data collection tool" (Bendell & Sylvestre,

2017, p. 357); the camera to assess and elucidate issues within communities. Wang and Burris

(1997) suggested that PhotoVoice,

> entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders and potential catalysts for change. It uses the immediacy of the visual image to furnish evidence and to promote and effective participatory means of sharing expertise and knowledge. (p. 379)

In the field of psychology, PhotoVoice has emerged as an influential method (Mitchell et

al., 2006; Nowell et al., 2006). PhotoVoice is based in feminist theory, on Freire's (1970, 1974)

education for critical consciousness theory, and on health promotion principles (Wang & Burris,

1994). Freire's path-breaking problem-posing education of the 1970s, involved people within a

community actively engaging in addressing the problems through dialogue and seeing

connections of everyday social and political forces that impacted their lives. This is consistent as

well with Black feminist principles that women should not be objects of other people's actions as

is usual in conventional scholarly research agendas. Instead, women are to be authors and

authorities of their own experiences. As Wang and Burris (1994) explained, "Feminist scholars

have contended that knowledge or practice that exploits or oppress is unjustifiable" (p. 174).

PhotoVoice is an excellent research instrument for self-directed participants working together in

view of community and societal change. According to Wang and Burris (1994), the goals of

PhotoVoice are to:

> Enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns. Promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussions of photographs. To reach policy makers. (p. 370)

There is a multistep process involved within the execution of this method. First, the

researcher will share the research question with participants and researcher/s develop the theme or

question that will be addressed in the study. This was a key engagement factor in the process. In

this study, the pre drafted research question lent itself to active participant engagement in

self-reflexive discovery, a way which could elicit self-determination from the participants to

actively engage as a co-researcher and co-create the theme. After deciding upon the theme or questions, they received a photographic technique training.

Following training in photo documentation, the group had a designated time period in which to take pictures. After image-taking, the participants' photographs were developed. The photographs then served to prompt and guide facilitated discussions in focus groups and interviews. At the conclusion of the study, the photographs could be shared beyond the group, if so wished, with an opportunity to show their photos in public (Wang & Burris, 1994). In a study with 62 rural women in China, Wang and Burris (1994) expanded on this concept of engagement and critical consciousness, by giving women cameras to monitor and assess the needs of women living and working in Chengjiang and Luiliang counties. These images were used as codification of their experiences. Cognizant of male bias, Wang and Burris, found this methodology advantageous to increasing the visibility of women.

PhotoVoice has proven to be an empowering tool. It is also a counter story-telling praxis. Moletsane et al. (2007) asserted that photovoice sits within the larger scope of visual methodologies for social change which help people to process their lived experiences while framing their ideas for change. Moreover, this methodology complements phenomenological approaches in research.

Considered to be a philosophy and a methodology, phenomenology has become a common framework used in social sciences as it seeks to delineate lived experiences (Usher & Jackson, 2014). It has been suggested that in addition to eliciting rich data from participants, PhotoVoice can have a cognitive and somatic impact on individuals. Plunkett et al. (2012) argued that PhotoVoice is an emancipatory health promotion practice useful as a research method to elicit rich data about the lived experience. It has been correlated with multiple mental and physical

health promoting outcomes, such as empowerment and improved self-efficacy (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005).

Denov et al. (2012) conducted a PhotoVoice project with children of civil war veterans of Sierra Leone. The purpose of their project was to highlight the challenging experience of life for this group of children as they reacclimated back into society after fighting a 10-year civil war. In another application of PhotoVoice, Mitchell et al. (2006) explored the HIV and AIDS epidemic in rural South Africa. Baker and Wang (2006) brought attention to the experiences of older adults experiencing chronic pain in a PhotoVoice project. As well, the Language of Light PhotoVoice project (Wang et al., 2000) created awareness around the everyday life conditions of homeless individuals in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Consistent with Wang and Burris (1994, 1997), my study followed a modified version of PhotoVoice. The reason was that participant self-direction cannot be absolute in the context of this dissertation. Swantz contended that "without diverting from the principles of participatory methods, each researcher incorporates his or her own approach to doing participatory projects based on the objectives of the study" (as cited in Nyemba & Mayer, 2018, p. 324). In the same vein, Herr and Anderson (2015) defended PAR researchers who come into communities and initiate a participatory research group that aims to give participants deeper understanding of an issue and move them to action. They argued that "it [still] qualifies as PAR because group members were involved in other phases of the research, such as data analysis and because participants' understandings of their beliefs and practices were deepened and several were moved to action" (Herr & Anderson, p. 90). As the researcher, I approached the group of women raising the issue body image and of the absences of African American women's voices and experiences within the literature and society at large to voice how "we" experience living our bodies. The

community of women will share their experiences in words and images in a narrative PhotoVoice research study.

My Research Vision Process

Participants: Criteria and Number

Most body image research has been conducted among college-aged women (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Rucker & Cash, 1992; Sabik et al., 2010; Wildes et al.,2001). The criteria used to recruit participants in this project included women who consider themselves of Black or African American, between the ages of 30 to 55, and who have a minimum of a bachelor's degree. This particular demographic was selected because there are limited research studies within this age and racial demographic.

Participants were expected to have photographic capability on their cellular device and access to internet. Given the demographic, and as rightly assumed all the women had a cellular phone; which proved not to be a barrier for participation in the study. Focus groups and interviews were conducted via Zoom videoconferencing. In addition, photographs were submitted to a web-based password-protected data storage service; therefore, access to internet was required. Following Antioch University's IRB polices, all participants were asked to read and sign a consent form, and they were submitted for approval prior to the research.

Wang (1999) recommended seven to 10 participants for a PhotoVoice project; however, Blackman and Fairey (2014) suggested that researchers consider the sensitivity of the issue when determining group size. They argued that groups of five or six may be appropriate when working with members of vulnerable populations around psychologically or socially sensitive issues (Blackman & Fairey, 2014). This study initially had 10 participants. Due to time constraints, one participant dropped out, leaving nine.

Recruitment Process

Using snowball sampling, I identified two women whom I already knew from an historically Black sorority. I invited them to invite women who might be interested in the topic. Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) made the point,

> The method is well suited for a number of research purposes and is particularly applicable when the focus of study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and thus requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study. (p. 141)

So, additional participants were identified and referred by the initial participants who had been selected by the researcher. Their referrals, it seemed reasonable to assume, should have some of the characteristics that my research called for (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Using this snowball sampling protocol, I contacted the referrals and asked for an initial conversation, an intake session (or "session zero') to make sure they understood the process and that we could and wanted to work together.

Ethical Considerations

Being ethical has been a top priority throughout the study. Understanding that some participants might not be technically savvy with uploading photographs to a photo storage portal, in the first meeting I provided instructions on uploading to Dropbox; their individual folders. Of upmost importance was the participant's well-being, requiring mindful consideration around the sensitivity of the topic. When engaging with the participant, I remained cognizant of the potential triggering associated with negative emotions of past and present experiences that may be revealed in our discussion. Potential distress from participation could have arisen, so I informed the participants of this possibility. I did an emotional check-in throughout the course of interviews and focus discussions, prompting them for "feeling words."

One particular session was quite emotionally challenging. I followed up with an email to offer personal time to debrief and process feelings and if need be provide resources. Also, for

additional support, a list of therapists affiliated with the Association of Black Psychologists was provided at the first session. Wang and Burris (1994) implored researchers to explore and execute ways to minimize physical harm and loss of privacy to themselves or their community. In consideration of Wang and Burris's recommendation, participants completed a confidentiality form. (See draft in Appendix B). Finally, all photographs, recordings of photo selection sessions, interviews and accompanying transcripts were housed on a password protected computer only accessible to me.

Sequence of Sessions

During a period of six weeks, women participants, also called "co-researchers/and sisters" in the project, shared their stories and experiences with their bodies. Before the sessions began, women had a one-on-one interview with the me via the video conferencing platform Zoom. Figure 3.1 illustrates the flow of the sessions. The photo exhibit was intentionally delayed until the dissertation defense. All sessions were held via Zoom.
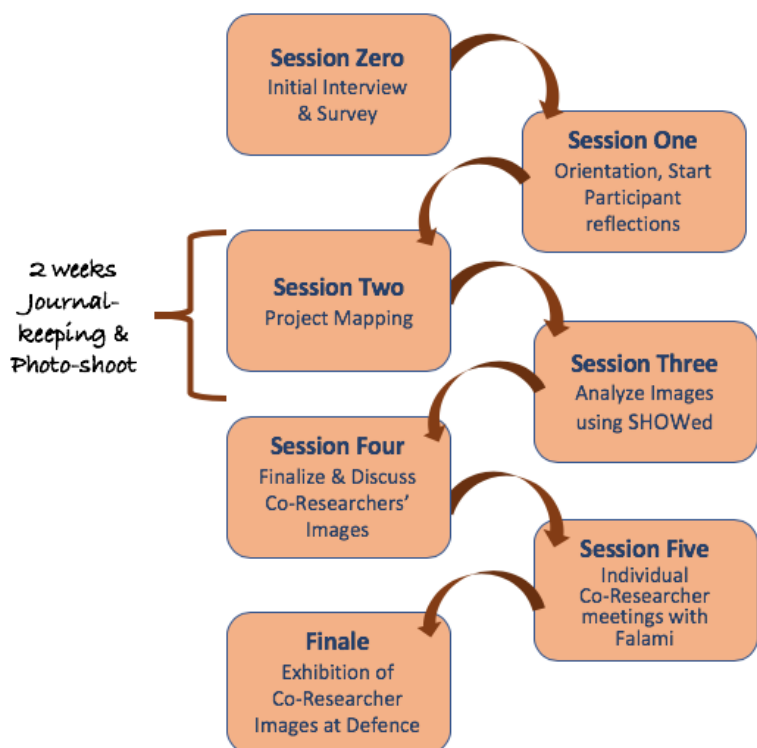
Figure 3.1. Planned sequence of research sessions.

Session Zero

In the Narrative PhotoVoice methodology, this "prep stage" is important (Simmonds et al., 2015). Utilizing the Narrative PhotoVoice approach, I discussed the research broadly, providing an overview of the theme, ethics, potential risks, such as taking photographs in a non-secured environment, I asked the participants if they believed the topic was relevant to themselves or the next generation. Those women who agreed that the study was relevant and was interest in participating, were asked to participate. Participants received the informed consent form and returned the signed form via mail before Session One. Participants were sent the link to the virtual site such as Zoom where all sessions took place. My heart was filled with anticipation, nearing the

process we were about to embark upon. Two early research journal entries are shown in Figure

3.2 and 3.3.[1]

> **Researcher's Journal Entry, 1/16/20 (three days before the first group session☺)**
>
> *I am no words, I am emotional. I am humbled, I am grateful for the interview today that solidified the importance of my research. We don't know our body stories, per se' or if we do, we don't think about them in the context of every day. We are mothers with daughters, We are "other "mothers. We have a responsibility to instil the importance of being who they are, not a size, shape or color when illness/disease wreaks havoc. I know we have stories of trauma that have impacted the way we walk in the work and not love our bodies"*

Figure 3.2. Researcher journal entry January 16, 2020.

> **Researcher's Journal Entry, 1/18/20**
>
> *I sent a reminder email to the co-researchers, but prior to the email I established a "Group Me" text message so that everyone could receive group texts on one platform vs getting bombarded with text messages. I added all participants and all of the group's sessions to the calendar so everyone could plan their schedules accordingly.*

Figure 3.3. Researcher journal entry January 18, 2020.

Session One

As a contemplative praxis, when the women entered the zoom room, they heard the

sounds of Whitney Houston, singing, "I'm Every Woman" to energize the space and have the

women connect to the song that touts the ferocity of women. I watched the clock, almost everyone

---

[1] These textual entries are embedded in a figure so as to preserve the formatting which was somewhat different from ordinary APA text.

arrived from two to five minutes before the scheduled start time. One participant checked in just two minutes after the scheduled time.

Honoring my spiritual tradition (Evans-Winter, 2019; Maparyan, 2011), I began this session and each session recognizing and honoring women who were influential in my life; that are now ancestors. This first session was purposefully scheduled on what would have been the 77th birthday of my mother, Dr. Edna LaJoyce Devoe Neal. So, the session began honoring her and other influential women in my life, with the customary Yoruba tribute chant, "I Call Her Name." This practice continued and was shared for all our mothers and othermothers at the opening of every subsequent session.

As a way to get to know each other, the women were asked to introduce themselves with "I am" statements, why they were participating in the study, and say one fun statement about themselves. I then went through the agenda for our session. Next, they watched a video clip of Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley addressing the issue of her hair loss due to alopecia (The Root, 2020). This video was a great example of how Black women who are in the public arena navigate societal expectations regarding their appearance. I then went to the slides outlining the project goals, introduction of Narrative PhotoVoice and timeline of events with the participants, in addition, participants were asked to reflect on their feelings and thoughts during the process. Because of the sensitivity of the subject, a setting of group norms was collectively constructed.

Session Two

This session began by calling the name of my maternal grandmother, Florell Dixon Devoe. I then reviewed the agenda which included the review of group norms and photo submission logistics. I showed two short video clips, "Being Black and struggling with Body Image and the "Perfect Woman Body Type." The purpose of this was to provide an understanding

and context around bodies and women. We then went over basic photography 101 information, that included photo composition and how to tell a story in images.

Next, time was devoted to mapping out the project with the co-researchers. They brainstormed strategies for executing the project goals. During the two weeks while participants are taking pictures, all participants agreed to continuing conversations and sharing information via a private FaceBook group.

Anticipating the third session I made an entry to my researcher's journal (Figure 3.4).

> **Researcher's Journal Entry, 2/9/20**
>
> *So today is the third session, It has been two weeks since I saw them In those two weeks, I have been all over the place with my emotions wondering if everybody was uploading pictures, did they get what they were supposed to do, what were they struggling with. During the two weeks, to keep them engaged, I posted video clips on the FB group. A video clip from the TV sitcom "Blacklish," were the character, Diane, is grappling with what to do with her hair. I asked questions about their experiences. On average, there was 95% participation on the posts!*
>
> *It is a balancing act being a researcher and photographer. As I review the photos, at times I fight back the photographer instinct. I think how the picture could have been taken differently, but I also think about the possibilities.*

Figure 3.4. Researcher journal entry February 9, 2020 (before Session Three)

Session Three

As they entered the zoom room, the song for this session playing was "This Girl is on Fire," by singer-songwriter Alicia Keys. This is another women's empowerment song. I began the session by calling the name of my best friend, Gina Shavon Harkness. After "I call her name," the sisters shared their five selected photographs to review and discuss using the SHOWed method (Wang & Burris, 1997). To prepare them for the SHOWed session, they all received an

information sheet describing the acronym. This acronym represents the method that invites

participants to answer these questions (note the bold first letter of the steps, which constitute the

acronym, SHOWed).

- What do you *S*ᴇᴇ here? (Describe what the eyes see)

- What is really happening *H*ᴇʀᴇ? (What is the unseen story behind the picture? What

  does the heart see?)

- How does this relate to *O*ᴜʀ lives?

- *Why* does this problem concern or strength exist? What can we do about it? How

  might the photo *ED*ᴜᴄᴀᴛᴇ?

The sisters analyzed the images, providing feedback sharing what resonated. I challenged

them to discuss themes or issues that emerged. This was a difficult session for the sisters. It was

visibly noticeable. Before concluding the sessions, a few of the sisters shared. "This was

emotional, I had to take breaks (from the camera), yet I was empowered by the stories listening to

the stories made me think about how I always conform to others." One sister said she felt "safe

and sacred with the sisters." Figure 3.5 is my researcher's journal entry following the third

session. Figure 3.6 was the next entry.

Researcher's Journal Entry (morphed into a poem) 2/9/20 / right after the session

After such an intense session, I was inspired to write a poem. I am a poet. A lover of words, I have written poetry since I was a child. Poetry has been my way of communicating my inner thoughts through painful and joyful times in my life.

This shit was deep
They connected
We connected
We bonded
Shared Our Truth
Shared our Hidden
We saw Each other
We heard to the depths of our soul
We reached forth our arms
Through our bellies
To connect
Like a baby to her
Mother's umbilical cord.
Freedom Resist. Conform
The Nod
The "Yes"
The clutched hand to the throat
Grasping for air
Hanging on to every word
Each image
As if to find themselves… There
They are We
I am We

Figure 3.5. Researcher journal entry February 9, 2020 (after Session Three).

> **Researcher's Journal Entry, 2/16/20 (Two days before the Lorde's/Morrison's birthday!)**
>
> *Today is my last group session, I cannot believe it. I am grateful to be here I wonder what the sistas are thinking about this being the last session. It is funny to see how some of them have continued to upload pictures. It seems like maybe the more they processed they felt inclined to share more.*

Figure 3.6. Researcher journal entry February 16, 2020.

Session Four

In honor of two my favorite writers, I began the last session honoring Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison. After taking this last sacred time to remember the legacy of these great women, I did a "feeling" check in with the sisters. The sisters that did not present their images during the third session, shared their images. As before, discussion about things that resonated with them themes or issues that emerged. I, then, moved into closing thoughts giving an overview of what would be next: arranging the final one on one interview, reminding them to send any journal entries, and discussing what to do with the Facebook page.

Session Five

The sisters met individually with me as primary researcher to review the selected five photos that will be showcased in a virtual online exhibit and share and discuss their SHOWed entries which Simmonds et al. (2015) report is the metadata. I discussed the sisters' reflection of their experience participating in the study. This was important because it helped to give me key features of the research and aid in the crystallization of data as it provided an alternative perspective on the research themes in the study (Simmonds et al., 2015).

Finale—Photo Exhibition

Participants' work will be showcased at a virtual photographic exhibition planned for the dissertation defense.

Data Collection

A triangulation of the data included one-on-one interviews, group discussions and participant SHOWed entries. All data was transcribed by a hired transcriptionist who signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix F). The data was uploaded to Dedoose, a coding program.

Data Analysis

Saldaña (2016) said "the nature of your central and related research questions and thus the answers you seek will influence the specific coding choice(s) you make." (p.70). This statement was at the forefront of my mind when determining my choices. Figure 3.7 is my researcher's journal entry during the analysis phase.

Researcher's Journal entry 3/1/20

So, Jameta (External committee member) suggested that I read "Black Feminism Qualitative Inquiry" by Dr. Venus Evans Winters. Wow. Did she turn me on to something powerful. SO much to take away and get absorbed in. This mother-daughter is coming up strong for me in this dissertation. Anyway, Dr. Evans-Winters (2019) said, "Because mothers tell us the stories and our mothers are the original keepers of the secrets sometimes we forget in our methodologies of telling that women were daughters before we were women. Daughtering like mothering/other mothering informs our worldview (methodologies, inquiry, data analysis)" (p. 131). She goes on to say . . . " As an ethic of love daughtering conjures creative expression. Daughters' data representations might be shared through dance, a poem, a piece of prose or song or perhaps it would present itself as a hair pattern adorned on top of a girl's or woman's head" (p. 139). YESSS!!.

Figure 3.7. Researcher journal entry March 1, 2020.

Through the critical lens of Womanist theory and daughtering inquiry (Maparyan, 2011, Evans-Winters, 2019), I analyzed the data. The empowering words of Evans-Winters (2019) were gentle reminders as I began the analysis with process coding also called action coding. Process coding is considered a first cycle coding method (Saldaña, 2016) Using gerunds, line by line, I accurately labeled the co researcher's actions. Another method used in the first cycle was emotion coding. "Emotion codes label the emotions and /or experienced by the participant or inferred by the researcher about the participant" (Saldaña 2016, p. 125). Because of the sensitivity of this topic, I knew, I wanted to capture and understand the emotions behind the stories. Saldaña (2016) stated, "Emotion coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for those that explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions, especially in matters of social relationships, reasoning, decision-making, judgement and risk taking" (p. 125). Employing an interpretative narrative approach to analyzing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) stanza-by-stanza, I grouped the codes by emotions. This was a very emotional and labor intense process. Rereading over and over the stories, was a trigger as many of their stories mirrored my life.

Report of Findings

Within conventional scholarship, there is the assumption of disconnection between the research and a researcher's life. Over the course of this study, I slept, I processed, I embodied my co-researcher's stories as real life experiences that became embedded in my life. As I sat with the data, reviewing the process and emotion codes, I heard their voices and the expressive ways they shared their stories. I juxtaposed their images alongside the one on one interviews and group session conversations. Just like during the sessions, there were sentences, phrases that the women shared that inspired me to write poems. Using their words, the poems became the way in which I

share the findings. The translation of their words into poems will be reported in Chapter IV.

Evans-Winters (2019) spoke of the conjuring of creative expression. The findings of this study

were conjured into poems and manifestation of creative expression.

Chapter IV: Findings at the Table

For six weeks, they gathered. They gathered, exchanging stories and tears . . . memories

and smiles. Exchanging life stories from past to present . . . reflecting on the future.

Sitting around the virtual "kitchen table," ten women, ten "sisters" not by blood …

but shared experiences

came together to

share and unpack

the lived experiences

of their bodies…

never before

had any

had

a conversation

like this.

Welcome to the kitchen table.[2]

The Kitchen Table

Phillips (2006) used the "kitchen table" as a metaphor to describe dialogue; from the

Womanist perspective, it is considered one of the ways in which transformation occurs. Phillips

said the kitchen table "is an informal woman-centered space where all are welcome, and all can

participate" (p. xxvii). For this study, I have used the same metaphor. The kitchen table was the

dialogue that occurred via a computer screen or cellular device. The virtual kitchen table served as

the location site where the women connected and participated in this study. Evident around the

kitchen table were activities that Phillips (2006) referred to as,

> *Womanist methods of social transformation* [emphasis added]. . . these methods work in
> and through relationship, reject violence and aggression but not assertiveness and readily
> incorporate everyday activities. These overlapping methods include, but are not limited to

---

[2] A note on formatting. The poems are presented with 1.5 spacing which seemed to suit their form and flow. A symbol of two periods is used to indicate a breath or a brief pause. Spacing between poems or between poems and text is set to maximize the readability and with full respect for those speaking the poems.

dialogue, arbitration and mediation, spiritual activities, hospitality, mutual aid and self-help, and mothering. (p. xxvi)

Besides dialogue, the women in this study created an atmosphere of intimacy built on respect in what one sister described as the "sacred circle," which was done by "a way of acknowledging dignity, offering nurturance, promoting amity, and providing pleasure to foster positive intra and intergroup relations" (Phillips, 2006, p. xxvii.). Phillips described this as "hospitality." This sense of hospitality was seen as they affirmed each other verbally and nonverbally. In each head nod and sporadic "yes" outburst, the women held each other in a caring and respectful way. These women—who were daughters before they became women—gained wisdom from listening and sharing their life experiences, excavating ways in which they navigate and negotiate their experiences as Black women living in a heteronormative, racist, sexist society. Coming together and sharing wisdom to solve a common problem is considered "mutual aid and self-help." These women chose to sit at the "kitchen table" and, though some were not mothers, yet many engaged in "mothering," confirming and affirming their shared experiences. Phillips (2006) asserted that mothering or motherhood "must be disassociated from its purely biological connotation and even from its strictly gendered connotation. . . . [It] is a set of behaviors based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual mediation and dispute resolution" (p. xxix). Uploading news stories, blog posts and videos to the private Facebook page, these 10 women extended the virtual conversation by providing additional education and support about the topics discussed in the group sessions.

Utilizing poetic inquiry, this chapter presents the findings of a participatory action research study of African American women who shared the lived experiences of their bodies. Using the kitchen as the place of reference and context, subsequent headings will have "kitchen" and "kitchen table" references. These women captured their past and present experiences in

narration and photography. As salt and pepper is passed around a kitchen table providing additional flavor or enhancement to a dish, so too were the sisters' images circling the table, providing a deeper meaning or flavor to their words. In the collective spirit of the Black cultural tradition and protection of their identities, co-researchers will be referred to as "Sister."

Sisters at the Table

Sister One

A beautifully draped fuchsia and white scarf frames the oval, caramel colored face and brings attention to the purple glasses that sit on her face. It is quite clear that she appreciates color as it seems as if the choices of the scarf have been carefully color coordinated with her pink, orange, and black caftan. Sister One, a hospice social worker, identifies herself as a "Queer lesbian; woman-identified, but open to multiple genders." Expressive with hand gestures and quick snippets of laughter, her passion as a "fat positive," "sex positive," "body positive activist," and "healer" is weaved throughout all of our conversations. She is a naturalist, who self identifies as a "Black Hippie."

Sister Two

Constantly active eyes twirling and touching her thickly twisted locks, this round face, chestnut-colored sister shared stories of trauma, matriarchal expectations, and freedom. Checking to see if the others were listening, Sister Two proudly declared, "I am an activist, but an educator about it." Just as proud as she is about her role as an educator, she is equally proud to be a mother of an 8-year-old son who loves to build Legos.

Sister Three

Tortoise designer glasses frame her ovate, melanin-rich face. A self-proclaimed womanist, Sister Three is a HER 2 positive[3] metastatic breast cancer survivor; an aggressive type of breast cancer. With her lyrical, distinguishing New York accent, and demonstrative hand gestures, I am drawn into the richness of each story that she narrates during our time together. A mother of an adult daughter and son. This teenage mother, who grew up in the projects, gave herself permission to be vulnerable. In a very genuine way, she shared her struggles and triumphs in the "sacred space," a name she used to describe the space in which the sisters met. A space built on trust and respect. This sister is a committed racial and social justice activist within her community and the founder of a non-profit organization.

Sister Four

When I first met Sister Four, she gave me her birth name, her West African name and her title: "Yoruba Priestess." I immediately sensed the importance of her spiritual role and status. As a Yoruba practitioner, I was excited and hopeful about her contribution from a spiritual perspective. Inspired by the desire to uncover some of her own "hang ups" and "insecurities" about herself, Sister Four was forthcoming and transparent about her personal issues with her body and being seen naked. She emphatically identifies herself as a humanist relinquishing from the titles that are limiting. She is a proud mother and grandmother.

Sister Five

As a new doctoral student, this oblong face, chestnut-colored sister had an infectious smile. A dedicated educator for 10 years, she is a dog mom and mother of a 10-year-old son.

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[3] "HER2-positive breast cancer is a breast cancer that tests positive for a protein called human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2)" (Giridhar, n.d., para. 1)

Unfortunately, due to work commitments Sister Five "just couldn't keep up with the schedule" and regrettably hated that I couldn't give my full participation in your study." Sister Five was present for the initial interview and session one.

Sister Six

Within the first few moments of our conversation, it is quite apparent that this sister has a deep understanding and personal connection to the "societal messages of preferred beauty." Recalling stories of her childhood and the desire to have long, flowing hair, Sister Six says that she never met the "societal markers for beauty" despite the accepted light skin complexion. This "cool girl," as she references herself, intersperses humor with the struggle stories of acceptance and self-love. She is an educator and mother of two boys and a girl.

Sister Seven

With her cleanly shaven head, Sister Seven has a reserved disposition. When we first meet, I sense a bit of hesitation or anxiousness. She admits, "I am super self-conscious in my skin." A sexpert, author, and mother of an adult daughter, son, and young son. She shares her modest beginnings as a sharecropper's daughter where she was a "tomboy" wearing jeans and a T-shirt. As an erotica writer, she uses her stories to help others become more comfortable with their bodies and to have meaningful sex with themselves and others.

Sister Eight

Ironically, a picture of her sits in the background. Unintentional, yet Sister Eight's beautiful Brown-skinned daughter was a part of our conversations. As I get to know Sister Eight, I realize the close relationship she has with her 14-year-old daughter, so ironic that each time we meet, I see her face. This kind-hearted, reserved sister is a scholar who recently completed her doctoral studies. As she offers more nonverbal cues of understanding than verbal, it is clear that

she is a deep listener. She discloses never having thought about her body story. Yet, over the course of the study project, through her reflexive responses, she realizes how important it is to take ownership of knowing and understanding her body story.

Sister Nine

Bothered by the narrative of Black women that has been distorted, this sister wanted to participate in this study to see what other Black women experienced with their bodies. With her bright smile and bubbly energy, this Southern sister entered into our first conversation with excitement willingly sharing past and present stories of insecurities. She is a teacher, author, and runner.

Sister Ten

Images of a pastor's wife particularly within the Black community typically are those of women who have a "look" typically pictorialized in a long dress suit with a silk blouse and pearl earrings and necklaces. Sister Ten offers another image. With no earrings or necklace and a cotton black t-shirt. She emphatically says, "I am *First*, (with emphasis on the last word), comma, Lady." She is a woman of faith weaving biblical scripture versus and colloquialism, this sister is a natural storyteller. She tells of navigating her life as a mother, First Lady of a church and respectability politics. She is the mother of a 13-year-old daughter.

Sister Eleven

Like the mane of a lion, her fiery red locks encircle her round, chestnut colored face immediately brightening my computer screen. Inspired by the premise of the study, Sister Eleven wanted "to lend my voice." This educator candidly described a very distant relationship between herself and her mother.

Stirring the Pot

Like their mothers, grandmothers, and aunties did, 10 women gathered in kitchens, in homes where stories of lives long ago and treasured memories were told. These women sat in the comfort of their homes much like that kitchen table, connected to each other by a monitor where most women have sat. Pierced eyes, tear stained eyes, bowed heads and lifted hearts, these sisters shared images and stories and peeled back the layered lives in which they live. Throughout the individual and group sessions, like echoing whispers, the words and stories began to reverberate in my ear. The cadence, the expressive modulations in their voices seemed to situate in my head like poems. Their lyrics became verses. Their images became background portraits to those verses and illuminated the themes that emerged. Rationalizing the use of poetry as a method of analyzation, L. Richardson (2002) suggested that "poetic representation offers researchers an opportunity to write about or with people in ways that honor their speech styles, words, rhythm and syntax" (p. 850). Using the sisters' words, I wrote this reflexive poem after the first group session.

They. We.

This shit was deep

They connected

We connected

Bonding

Sharing their truth

Spoke their hidden

They saw each other

We saw each other

We heard each other

We reached forth our arms

Through our bellies to connect with each other

Conform

Resist

Freedom

Listening to their words was powerful. The writing of this and other poems over the course of the six weeks, was an expression of that power. Janesick (2016) validated how powerful poetry is to transform qualitative data. She asserted,

> 1. Poetry allows for building relationships and community. . . . 2. Poetry opens up ways to see the world and makes a space for the spoken word as well as the written word. . . . 3. Poetry as inquiry builds resilience and sparks imagination and creativity. . . . 4. Poetry leads to awareness and self-knowledge. (p. 38)

Through the critical lens of Womanist theory and "daughtering" (Evans-Winters, 2019; Phillips, 2006), I approached the coding process utilizing process and emotion coding. I generated major themes, then coded and sorted the sisters' words by those themes to construct the poems. The poetic transcription in this chapter will range from Womanist prose, lyric poetry, free form, and dialogue poems. All poems are intellectual property of the author.

The Judgment Seat

They discovered they were not alone. In shared stories of rejection, stigmatization, and silence, the women told stories and shared images recounting experiences with those entrusted to care for their health. Labeled as "obese" and told that their health conditions were because of being "overweight," several sisters shared the uncomfortable relationship they have with their physicians. Most of the sisters talked about the explicit anti-fat bias exhibited by their medical professionals. Sister Six said,

> I've had terrible experiences with doctors who have said very judgmental and rude things to me about my health. And I know that I'm not the only person who has experienced that. In my family or close friends, some of the experiences that they have with their doctors, they're saying the same things to them.

Sabin et al. (2012) found that implicit and explicit anti-fat bias was prevalent among medical doctors. In a voluntary study, medical doctors took the Weight Implicit association test measuring social cognition between two pairs of concepts and their associations. In this instance, the categories, participants selected pictures of overweight people and "value laden words that appeared" (Sabin et al., 2012, p. 2). The results found that implicit and explicit anti-fat bias attitudes were strong, suggesting negative attitudes toward overweight people. The sisters talked about this common practice of medical professionals and the hurtful experiences of sitting in the judgement seat.

Because I'm Obese

Every health issue
is because I'm obese.
I have sleep apnea
It's because I'm obese
I have facial hair
It's because I'm obese

Signs of pre-diabetes

Because I'm obese

I just really got tired of doctors

Saying crazy things to me

I found a new doctor ..

Learn to advocate for ourselves.

~ Sister Ten.

Yep!

Doctors always want to zero in on your weight

Yup!

Most of my life.

Yes!

Yes!

Most definitely.

It's good to know that I am not the only one.

~ Collective Sisters

Figure 4.1. "The Judgment Seat" by Sister Six

I hate the doctor's office

Insensitive physicians

Scolded me. . . my weight.

~ Sister Nine

Choosing not to share their body story and struggles with mental health practitioners, was one of the sub themes. In her two poems, one sister reveals why she chose not to discuss.

No ammunition

I didn't want to give them any ammunition

Enamored

With Black Beauty

Black Bodies

Black Hair

Different doctors

Black

White

Person of Color

"Oh, your hair is so pretty"

"Your skin is so beautiful"

I didn't feel comfortable

Digging deeper

Giving them any reason to think other

Beautiful

Black

Woman

I didn't want to give them any ammunition

To think otherwise.

~ Sister Three

Off the "Kitchen Table" Record

From Sister Three: I must admit .. I have never talked about my body image with any of my therapist M/F Black or White

19:07:55   From Falami Devoe to Sister Three (privately) : Me neither.

19:08:45   From Sister Three to Falami Devoe (privately) : They can only talk about what I give them LOL ~ and that topic ain't it

19:08:53   From Falami Devoe To Sister Three (privately) : RIGHT!

~ Sister Three and the Sister Researcher

Not Good Enough, Not Pretty Enough, Not Beautiful

Contrary to Rakhokovshaya and Warren's (2014) hypothesis that the thin idea would be lower among African Americans, within the review of the literature there is evidence that shows the negative impact of internalizing the dominant discourse of what it means to be beautiful. The impact to Black women's emotional and relational health is troubling (Campón & Carter, 2015; Reyome et al., 2010). All of the sisters in this study admitted to, at one point in their lives, internalizing "not feeling good enough, pretty enough, professional enough or beautiful." For some, those ruminating thoughts caused anxiety, strained intimacy with a partner, making aesthetic changes, depression, and distancing themselves from others. These are their words.

He doesn't say that to me
What is it? ..
About my face
Am I just
Invisible
"Damn she's fine"
He's never made any remarks
About my body

I don't say anything

I start to

Question

My body

Looking right in this outfit?

Looking fat?

Pick

Apart

What's wrong with my body.

~ Collective Voices-Sister Four, Sister Nine

Eyes

Big, Bulging Eyes!

Big, Bulging Eyes!

Never. Wore Makeup!

~ Sister Six

Closing the Gap

Everyone on my mother's side of the family

Has this gap.

A beautiful gap?

It was not beautiful to me at all.

I was picked on

Made fun of

I just didn't appreciate it

Or see it is beautiful

Tribes in Africa

They all have gaps

It is seen as something

Beautiful

"YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL!"

"YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL!"

I never felt beautiful

I decided to get braces

Close the gap

My mother ..

It was really disappointing

The hurt she felt

Maybe she had passed it on

.. A hereditary thing

I convinced myself

I needed to do it

The image ..

I wanted other people to see

Not

Being

Happy

With the person

I really am.

~ Sister Eight

Figure 4.2. "To Retain" by Sister Eight.

I am Edna's daughter—Daughters before Women.

I am Marilyn's daughter

Because her fight for my life gave me the will to live.

I am Gladys Daughter

Strong. Resilient. Don't hold my tongue

I am Kathy's Daughter

Infectious smile

I am Wendie's daughter

Silly, facial expressions, sarcasm, prominent hereditary hips

I am Kim's biological Daughter, Yet Fran is my mom

We are resilient and smart

I am Joyce's Daughter

My eyes .. my ways

I am Phyllis' daughter

Love .. unconditionally

I am Marble's Daughter

Resilient

I am the late Rosie Lee daughter.

like a rose that grew from the concrete.

From the Womanist perspective motherhood is not relegated to those who share the same

blood. Maparyan (2012) posited that in its archetype form,

> [A] mother takes a person or a group of persons who have a simultaneous array of
> qualities characteristic of blank slates, preformed beings, and self-authoring beings, and
> provides a ranges of inputs and supports that protect the person or people, on the one hand
> and shape the person or people on the other. (p. 62)

Mothers, including othermothers,[4] are typically a child's first teacher. There is an

unbreakable bond between a mother and her daughter—"my guide, my support" (Sister Three).

---

[4] This is a term for others in a child's life who provide care and love despite not being the biological mother. See
McCandless (2016).

Children learn from what is said and not said. Children learn how they should act, how they should speak, how they should dress, what is acceptable and what's not just by watching. They watch and pick up on hidden messages, unspoken lessons about themselves and their bodies. Through silent actions, the sisters' learned about their mother's values, her fears, her struggles, and her insecurities. These silent actions manifested themselves in the lived experiences of their daughters.

Not in her image

My biological mother
Is very heavyset
I didn't like anything about her
It was very important
Not
To become overweight
Because I didn't
Want to look like her
Be like her

~ Sister Two

"Can't Do Me No Harm"

SHE
Was keeping me
Out of the reach
Of people who could
Harm
ME
MY MOTHER
Hampered my maturation
Trying to keep me looking a certain way
Keep me from becoming

A WOMAN

Desirable to men.

<div align="right">~ Sister Eleven</div>

My Little Doll

Before me

My mother was a model

Always been kind of consumed with appearance

I was always her little doll

Dress me up

Hair always braided or platted

Bows

Barrettes

The cutest Sunday dress

Mary Jane's

Ankle socks

Age appropriate

Everything

<div align="right">~ Sister Eleven</div>

Do you see me as Beauty?

Mommy was not like that

Not a beauty person

That's not who she is

At all.

It caused me to look at her

A certain kind of way

Caused me to feel

I was a reflection of that lack of beauty

Because I didn't see her that way

I felt she didn't see me that way.

<div align="right">~ Sister Six</div>

Pouring

"You compliment them too much"

She always says

I just keep doing it

"Ain't somebody else supposed to do that?"

She says

But

In order for somebody else to see me as beautiful

YOU had to tell me I was beautiful

But that didn't happen.

So .

I pour into my children.

~ Sister Six

Hiding Myself

Like a tortoise that retreats back in its shell, survivors of trauma, abuse, those who have

insecurities with their bodies, hide themselves from others. Hiding was an emergent theme for

several sisters in this study. Within this theme, there were several sub themes that too emerged,

and that provided depth and breadth to the notion of hiding. Using clothes, towels, hats, and

hoodies as shields of protective layers from outsiders, these bold sisters described the ways in

which they hid and still hide themselves from attention, shame, judgment, hurt, and abuse.

Purposefully protecting themselves from the "gaze"—whether it is consuming or oppositional—

these women share their lived and hidden experiences of intentional invisibility. Their words,

these poems, reveal why they chose and choose to hide and how they conceal. While the first

poem that follows focuses on Sister Two who uses clothes as a shield to protect herself against

possible predators or future trauma, it is about violence and domination. The next poem deepens

the discussion of trauma although, it is implied in the first poem, Sister Six directly addresses why

she hides. The poem is more explicit, yet innocent, links her past sexual abuse to the present. Hiding in clothing was a way to protect. Yet, hiding is a way to avoid judgement or shame from a partner. A subtheme that surfaced was hiding during intimate moments with a partner. Either keeping clothes on or lights off during intimate moments, Sisters Four and Nine recognize their tactics are related to their body insecurities.

The agentic act of intentional invisibility is shielding, defensive and comforting. These words from Sister Two provide this perspective.

> ***Invisible***
> I wear a lot of
> Baggy clothes
> Big Clothes
> Growing up
> And I still do
> Trauma
> I hide my body
> Nobody will try to hurt my body!
> Hoodies
> Has become more part of my image
> Hides Everything
> Almost makes me feel invisible.
> ~ Sister Two

Fig 4.3. "Hoodies or Sweats."

Body memories

Sexually violated

My body was awakened

Too early

Childlike

I began to respond

Trying to protect myself

Wear my clothes too big

Hide my face

Behind my ball caps

My body

Has

Held

Onto

Trauma.

~ Sister Six

The Dark

I was that type of person.

Let's make love in the dark.

~ Sister Nine

Sex and the Towel and T-shirt

 "Why don't you remove all your clothes?', he would say

"You are going to have sex, remove all your clothes"

I would never remove all of my clothes for sex

Always

Cover up some portion of my body

I have a towel to wrap myself in

I would at least wear a T-shirt

So that I would not be .

Fully

Naked.

<div align="center">~ Sister Four</div>

The glaring gaze of a stranger's eyes can be challenging for anyone. But, for someone with body insecurities, it can be even more difficult, hurtful. When the "thinness" ingredient was missing in the recipe, sisters experienced anxiety, insecurities and low self-esteem; Sister Seven hides her "belly," which she feels most insecure.

Hiding the belly

I always look pregnant

These clothes that are flowy and sway

You can't really tell what the shape is

It's my creative way of thinking

Hiding the fact

I have a belly under these clothes.

<div align="center">~ Sister Seven</div>

Questions

"How far along are you?"

"You're very round"

"That's a perfect belly for.."

 It'd be a joke.

> HA
>
> HA
>
> HA?
>
> Never funny for me.
>
> Just didn't fit
>
> Their perspective of what my body should look like.
>
> ~ Sister Eight

The Recipe

In group sessions and individual interviews, at length the sisters explicitly revealed the ways in which they conform and assimilate to the European expectations of what a woman should look like in order to be considered beautiful. This "recipe," this list of expectations, says that women should be thin, have straight hair and light; near white complexion. This expectation, this "standard of beauty," this recipe, is compounded for Black women. Not only does the dominant culture enforce and reinforce these expectations in print and media, but some within the Black community uphold and reinforce the same incapacitating narrative. They share the emotional toil of not being thin and having insecurities with their bodies. The sisters spoke of generational expectations of thinness and ascribing to the idea of good hair, beautiful hair, considered straight hair. Shaping and molding themselves to look thin, Sisters Four and Eight are like many women who seek different approaches to obtain the look. Proudly and not so proudly, these women, explain what they did and still do to look thin. Restricting what one eats is another way to achieve that "thinness": Sister Nine gave a candid story of yo-yo dieting. In contrast, Sister One talked about how others attempted to restrict and monitor her food intake.

The Uniform

Panty. Girdle. Camy.

Birthed after my daughter's birth

Worn daily to conceal the rolls.

Nipped. Tucked. Smooth.

Can't go anywhere without one

Can't go anywhere without . . . a girdle

Can't go anywhere without . . . a camy
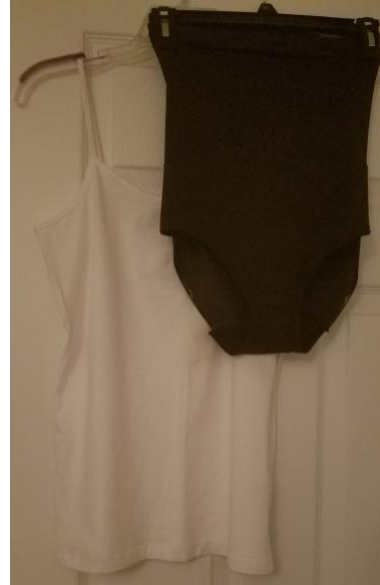
My uniform.

~ Sister Eight

Fig 4.4 "The Uniform."

Displeasing

I found a picture of me

I was very thin

"Damn, I had the white body"

Psychologically

I was saying

I had the perfect...

I had it.

I lost it

Trying to achieve that flat stomach

Spend $4,000 on cool sculpting

Didn't work at all.

~ Sister Four

Everybody

Everybody

My siblings

two sisters

two brothers

my mother

Everybody

had an issue

with MY weight

what I was putting in my mouth

Everybody

had something to say.

~ Sister One

Black and White

Obsessed. Dieting.

Black Girls Not. But White Girls Would.

~ Sister Nine

Yo-Yo

"I already ate" I tell my parents

Skip breakfast

Wouldn't eat dinner

The cycle

Going on a diet

Working out

They would talk about my weight

THEY

Doctors.. who were not African American (we went to doctors not African -American)

My MOM

"Maybe I do need to put you on a diet"

"If you want to lose weight you can"

I

know now

Black girls

Body composition is different

Different muscle mass

ways we hold fat

But .. people weren't informed back then.

<div align="center">~ Sister Nine</div>

Hair straightening stories start in the kitchen and lead to a beauty shop. Like a rite of passage, mothers escorted their daughters to these community spaces where women gathered to prepare their tresses. Sisters Three and Eleven recount their weekly visits to their local beautician. Sisters One, Eleven, Two and Five process what it means to have "good" hair, "well kempt" hair and not like or want that good hair and then what it means to have not so good hair; unkempt hair; nappy hair yet embracing it.

Well Kempt

Go
To the Hair Salon
Put perm in my hair.

<div align="center">~ Sister Two</div>

Tender Head

My mom would send me to the hair salon every week.
I was very tender headed
Still very tender headed
Every week.
We walked up 125th Street. Harlem.
Wash and Press
Every week.
Hair was very important
Straight hair was even more important
I ended up getting a perm
An excuse
I was tender headed
But now,
Upon reflection
I wanted the
Standard of

American Beauty.

<div align="right">~ Sister Three</div>

My locs

Whenever I would cut my locs

allow my hair to be straight and flattened

"Oh, you look so beautiful"

"Oh that's so pretty"

..not necessarily when I have my locs

<div align="right">~ Sister Two</div>

Stay straight

Hot comb right on the stove

Easter.

Picture day.

Only for special occasions

Always had a lot of hair

Good hair

Tender Headed

Then the conversation started ..

I said to my mom

I wanted one

wanted one

wanted my hair straight

stay straight.

that's what was beautiful

not to wear your hair in its natural state

Be more managed.

More kempt.

<div align="right">~ Sister Five</div>

No Such Thing

They say..

I had good hair

Didn't know what that meant

Asked my mom..

She was like..

"There's no such thing!"

~Sister One

Good Hair

Mulattos

Good hair

Certain features

Certain privilege

these women or men

were awarded.

They could pass for white.

They had the fine hair

Good hair.

Pointed out as a Black woman that had good hair,

meant you were not Black.

You had white people hair

"White Girl"

Me

So called "good hair"

Had a hard time styling it

Overtime,

Stereotypes Black people accepted about white people

They're dirty

this type of hair was dirty

it smells.

Assumptions made about me and others

with this grade of hair.

white people's hair

Good hair.

~ Sister Four

We were taught to hate our hair

Conform to a more European standard of beauty

And not even that was a standard of beauty

just what was accepted.

I have rejected that my entire Adult life

conforming to that standard

I appreciate the thickness

the fullness

The rejection of the conformity.

~ Sister Eleven

Salt or Pepper?

The many hues of melanin that sat around the kitchen table was a just a small

representation of the diversity in complexion within the American Black culture. Within the Black

culture, it is a known fact that intra-culture dynamics exist with preference for lighter complexion.

Depending on where and how a person was raised could determine their view of their skin

complexion. What does color preference look like? Three sisters give accounts of their "light skin/

dark skin" experiences.

Changing Locations

I move to the south
Elementary school
all the girls in the school calling (me) things
"High Yellow"
"Red Bone"
I'd never heard anything like that before.
It was like this whole new culture.

~ Sister One

38 years of not loving myself,
lack of identity, low self esteem
38 years of relying on others to define me
me. Being a dark-skinned woman.

~ Sister Three

Louder voices

My parents
were the voice
telling me that I'm beautiful
telling me I'm their dark-skinned beautiful child
encouraging me to love the skin I'm in
Unfortunately
In "my community"
Spanish Harlem,
My Black brothers, sisters
Black people
Puerto Rican people
Their voices
were louder than my parents
"Blackie"
"Darky"
didn't fit in with what Black people defined as beauty.
"You Ugly!"

~ Sister Three

Wanted: Melanin!

I always wanted some color!

Noooo!

I had to be light skin!

If I can channel some melanin skin

Maybe that would make me more beautiful

When I come back, I want to be the darkest sister on the planet.

<div align="center">~ Sister Ten</div>

Coming out of the Pantry

It is understood that for living in a heteronormative society, the acceptable and approved form of love and relationships is with the opposite sex. In some instances, it can be difficult for someone to find love and be in relationship with someone from the opposite sex if that person has that standard of beauty. So, the question becomes, what happens if a person of the same gender loves someone sexually, romantically, intimately, does this love and relationship remove the societal expectations of what is beautiful? What happens when someone "comes out?" Does one love their bodies more? Sisters One and Eleven provide a powerful articulation of their experiences as same gender loving women. Joining the lesbian community, Sister One found safety and security. She found safety in freeing herself emotionally and physically. Embracing the 'au naturel', Sister One comes to recognize her inner goddess. Struggling with body confidence Sister Eleven questions her wife's adoration for her body. As if attempting to convince herself of this love of her body, in the poem "My wife loves my body," she repeats the phrase about the love twice.

A safer place

A safer place to be who I am;

in the Lesbian community.

Feel Beautiful.

With straight women,

I didn't

Feel Beautiful.

Just being around them

criticisms of me and my body.

~ Sister One

Goddess body

When I become a Lesbian

I was more at ease in my body.

Explore that more.

Naked.

In the woods.

Going to Women's festivals

Everybody saying,

"Oh my God, you're so beautiful, look like a goddess."

MY BODY IS THE BODY OF A GODDESS!

~ Sister One

In Community

Women's community

More

And More

Comfortable

Accepting

Loving

Enjoying

My body

WHOA!

~ Sister One

My Wife loves my body

 "She's blowing smoke,"

I think in the back of my mind.

I don't have the confidence in my body that she has.

I don't have the love for my body that she has.

She loves my body.

My wife loves my body.

I love it.

~ Sister Eleven

For Black women, there is a lot to consider when hearing the diagnosis, "breast cancer." It is more than thinking about a foreign substance eating away and attacking the body. The complexity of society's expectations for women and their bodies. Black women's bodies are seen as site locations of viewing pleasure, particularly, breasts are focal points for those who find women objects of pleasure. Black women's bodies have also been used to feed a nation. Consequently, oftentimes women question their desirability and attractiveness after receiving the diagnosis; especially if removal of the breasts is required. The vicissitude of one's perception and perspective on life and what is important can change in a moment's notice. However, the pervasive undertone of who's beautiful, desirable, attractive is there. Sister Three shares her triumphs and struggles living as a survivor.

Beyond what you see

Diagnosed with HER 2 Stage four metastatic breast cancer

rocked my world

that really shifted me

that was one of the biggest

that really helped me to define who I am

love me

put me first

Embrace losing my breast

Losing tremendous amount of weight

losing my hair

losing my eyebrows

hair

All of those physical appearances

and aesthetics now did not become so important.

It was more of beyond what you see.

~ Sister Three

R(3)

Embracing the loss

Grieving the loss

Realizing that didn't define me

Now

Recreate

Reimagine

Re Envision

what life

Antithetical

to what white dominant thought is.

~ Sister Three

Choosing the Scars

One week out of surgery.

I have my breast implants

They're kind of lopsided.

The radiation side is tighter.

You can't really tell that much

But I can tell.

My incisions split;

Not a good thing.

Hoping that it heals on its own

I chose these particular scars to live with

Instead of being restless.

Reconciling when I lost my hair

But losing my breasts

I could not live with

I chose these scars.

Along with these scars came four surgeries

May have been only one

or maybe two.

I had a recurrence

It turned into multiple surgeries

May or may not have been necessary

They were necessary for me.

These are scars that I would reckon with

I wasn't sure I could look at a chest with two scars

Across my breast.

But that comes with a price.

I had to reflect.

Why I chose to hold on to breasts that someone may never touch

caress

be intimate in ways I am accustomed to.

But, through my shirt, it'll look good

will they really serve a purpose that I would love and love for them to serve?

~ Sister Three

I have no nipples.

Buy nipples on Amazon

How about that?

~ Sister Three

Six weeks, sixty plus hours, these mothers, wives, daughters, scholars, activists, professional women; sisters spent focusing on self. They paused. Making the decision whether knowingly or unknowingly through introspective thoughts, visuals and candid conversations, the women revealed their struggles with identity with self and with their mothers and struggles with following the Eurocentric "recipe." Snippets of information from each of the women provide a taste test of each women individually and now collectively began altering the recipe. This altered recipe is a big pot of gumbo. The gumbo pot will be looked at in Chapter V.

Chapter V: Concluding, We Sisters Rise From the Table

On this kitchen table sits a large, dented steel pot with streaks of Brown scratches at the bottom, it is evident that this vessel has been used by many for many generations. For this study, inside this pot are the personal stories and images shared while sitting at the kitchen table. For six weeks, around this virtual kitchen table, are the hands that touched the pot providing the ingredients, creating the mystique; that is the gumbo. Like each carefully selected ingredient and seasoning added into a gumbo, so too are these carefully constructed stories and images these Black women shared of living their womanhood in this patriarchal, heteronormative, hegemonic society. The findings in this project illuminate Black women stories, experiences and images of their bodies that go beyond what is eaten or not eaten. These experiences are doused with overt and covert messages about how to be a lady, what it means to be beautiful and being worthy of one's love. Also folded into these bodily experiences are judgments made about those who have chosen to love someone of the same gender and hatred about one's size and shape. Infused expectations of others definition of what it means to be "sexy," "attractive," or even "professional"; and dealing with the traumatic impact of domestic and sexual violence also are a part of this gumbo.

In this kitchen, this safe space, this sacred space where this pot sits, are the ingredients, stories, each seasoning, images; which are important to the gumbo. Having an opportunity to stir the gumbo, share and unpack their experiences with this collective, is a testament to the benefits and plausibility of circles like this that incorporate photos, stories as a means of gathering knowledge and sense making. Snapping peas, washing greens, seasoning the meals for the family dinner, in many African American homes, kitchens have been landing sites for the exchange of

family stories, recipes, and food that bring healing, joy, sadness and comfort (Marshall, 2001; O. I. Davis, 1999; Jefferson & Reyes, 2002).

The kitchen is an unspoken gendered space where the women and girls gather, sit, listen, and laugh while the men and boys find themselves sequestered to a family room or outside engaging in "man talk." This cultural space meant to nourish not only the physical needs of those that gather, but also the mental needs. In describing cultural space, Martin and Nakayama (1996) explained that cultural spaces are those that have culturally constructed meanings and a metaphorical place from which people communicate. O. I. Davis (1999) provided a historical perspective of the kitchen as a cultural space. "Southern plantation kitchens enabled enslaved women to struggle toward equality and to develop creative strategies for self-empowerment through transformation (O. I. Davis, 1999, p. 368). Furthermore, the kitchen was not only a place of exclusion and domination but a refuge and "provided a space in which black women passed on survival skills to their daughters and helped them develop ways to confront oppressive conditions" (O. I. Davis 1999, p. 361).

For many, the kitchen was and is a safe space. Hill Collins (2004) used the term *safe space* when acknowledging the act of collective and individual voices of black women and said, "traditionally women's efforts to construct individual and collective voices have occurred in three safe spaces. Black women's relationships with one another, friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings among individuals." (p. 112). Paule Marshall's (2001) autobiographical essay, "Callaloo," detailed stories of the women—poets she calls them— and their influence on her as a writer. She came to know stories of great people both near and far during her time spent the kitchen:

> The basement kitchen of the Brownstone house where my family lived was the usual gathering place. Once inside the warm safety of its walls the women threw off the drab

coats and hats, seated themselves at the large center table, drank their cups of tea or cocoa, and talked. While my sister and I sat at a smaller table over in a corner doing our homework, they talked endlessly, passionately, poetically, and with impressive range. No subject was beyond them. True, they would indulge in the usual gossip: whose husband was running with whom, whose daughter looked slightly "in the way" (pregnant) under her bridal gown as she walked down the aisle. That sort of thing. But they also tackled the great issues of the time. (Marshall, 2001, p. 628)

So, too was the sacred circle of the co-researchers for this study; a safe space, a liberating space where the gumbo; the stories and images have been simmering. Each story of hurt, pain, joy, resilience, resistance, freedom is like Cajun seasoning, sugar and salt used to flavor a rich pot of gumbo. The basic ingredient, the okra, from which the name *gumbo* emerged, came from enslaved Africans. Across centuries, the dish evolved to integrate African and European (French) ingredients. Just like the integration of European ingredients, so too have some women included aspects of European ideologies or standards of beauty while others chose to remove those ingredients or ideologies and add new or keep the traditional seasonings. These sister stories and images represent recipe alterations for collectively creating a shared gumbo recipe, a gumbo of liberation and healing.

Through the narrative photovoice methodology, I cited a qualitative approach providing a richer data story and spotlight lived individual experiences. In preparation for reporting the findings in Chapter IV, I recalled the melodic sounds of the sisters' words that formed into poems. Using the poetic inquiry approach to relay such rich information builds on Audre Lorde's assertion that "Poetry is not a luxury" (1984, p. 36) when speaking of poetry as an illuminating force as a means of survival referred to the use of poetry as a "revelatory distillation of experience" (p. 36). By using the sisters' own words and referencing the individual and group conversations, I was able to reveal the unknown. I was able to connect their intertwined lived experiences to a larger societal context. For the women, revealing the impact of their experiences with their bodies to racist, sexist, hegemonic ideologies and historical frameworks was

uncomfortable. Remaining consistent with this arts-based approach, some interpretation of the

data is presented in a tri voice poetry, giving voice to the sisters, sister researcher and scholars.

In this study, I take Lorde's (1984) words as a call to action:

Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change first made into language then to idea, then into more tangible action. (p. 37)

The sisters' words, creatively transposed as poems, can be conversation starters and will

inform the way people think, discuss and understand the dimensional experiences of Black

women and their bodies. Stripped down to its essence, the poems were written to grab the

attention, pull the reader in and invite them to learn and know more, making the poetry accessible

for all to understand thus hopefully bridging the gap between community and academia. Within

the academy, the experiences of Black women and their bodies are underrepresented. The poetry

"is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought" (Lorde, 1984, p. 37).

Within the larger context of scholarly literature these findings contribute to discussions

originating with the activists who speak and spoke for and about Black women. Activists such as

Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins,

Beverly Guy Sheftall, put pen to paper and presented the importance of understanding, seeing and

hearing Black women lived experiences. The Black feminists, who comprised the Combahee

River Collective[5] issued a manifesto, which emphasized the importance of understanding the

interlocking oppressions and naming of Black women experiences. The sisters' conversations

deepened my understanding of the ways in which our bodies have been acted upon both verbally

and nonverbally and highlighted the interwoven effects of racism, sexism and sexual orientation.

Bodies have been controlled by the dominant narrative, the sisters' conversations around could

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[5] The Combahee River Collective was a collective if Black feminists in the Boston area. See their statement in Combahee River Collective (1977/1995).

easily rest or add to Hill Collins's (1990, 2004) writing about power, domination, and the "new

racism" (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 54) and violence. These findings could situate within a new and

growing body of Black Feminist visual culture and theory literature. Jordan-Zachery and Harris

(2019) argued that "Black Feminist visual culture analyzes and chronicles African American

women's and others' ways of resistance across visual practices" (p. 19).

A Pinch of Liberation

My grandmother, the late Mrs. Florell Devoe, could never remember the exact

measurements to some of her recipes. She would say, "Put a pinch of this and a pinch of that then

taste it and see if it is to your liking." Despite not having the exact measurements, in the end, the

food seemed to taste just fine. So, while navigating living in this heteronormative, patriarchal

Eurocentric hegemonic society, which includes a cup of conformity and a cup of assimilation,

these sisters have decided to season and enrich their gumbo with personal pinches of liberation

and through this project found a sacred space with other sisters for healing and affirmation. Mixed

with caring for one's self, owning one's voice, while resisting societal narratives, liberation for

these women has meant learning how to survive. Surviving in what Hill Collins (2004) asserted is

the "new racism" (p. 54) where "gender has emerged as a prominent feature in discriminatory

practices that are clearly gendered." Sexism exists and so does workplace discrimination. There is

a distinct difference in workplace wage earnings between men and women, women are evaluated

more harshly and are often times passed over for promoting. Women who face the challenges of

discrimination, sexual harassment are impacted on mental and emotional level which causes strain

on their mental and physical well-being. J. Hall et al. (2012) asserted,

> The usual stressors of the working environment may be unbearable because Black women
> can be easily singled out and treated differently than their colleagues. Discrimination in
> the workplace on the basis of race and gender is a chronic stressor for Black women.
> (p. 207)

Women who identify as lesbian, gay, bi, trans, or queer (LGBTQ), not only have to contend with discriminatory practices on their jobs because of their assigned gender but because of their sexual orientation. Those within the LGBTQ community also are discriminated and harassed by family members. M. L. Smith et al. (2019) reported that more than 50% of the 200 LGBTQ people of color surveyed were harassed, rejected and discriminated from family members. Discrimination from family may be harmful due to values ingrained in racial and ethnic minority communities that include religiosity and favored traditional gender roles (LaSala & Fierson, 2012). Considering the structures and systems of power and domination pervasive in both the workplace and family dynamics, liberation might seem daunting. Few of the women in this study discussed how their mothers and "other" mothers held a dominating presence in their lives. Guiding the way, they were socialized in to becoming women or "ladies." This construct of becoming a lady was steeped in societal aesthetic expectations. Spellers (2003) posited, "deconstructing and reconstructing externally defined discourses and images of Black womanhood is a useful and worthwhile pursuit and often reveals a culture's oppressive aesthetic values" (p. 226). Sister Two said her grandmother, who she considered to be her "othermother," required "wearing makeup, nice fine jewelry, nice fine clothes, everything like a lady." Sister Five also talked about her grandmother:

> My grandmother played a big role in that (socialization of her body). She was a very traditional Baptist black woman. So, when I think back to me being kempt and my appearance, she had a lot to do with that. We were always taught to wear stockings, to wear slips, not wear things that are too short, especially, to church, and to just cover your body. Just cover your body.

In her "Reflections of a 'Good' Daughter" bell hooks (1984) described the relationship with her "mama,": "It is with her that I feel loved and sometimes accepted. She is the one person who looks into my heart, sees its needs, and tries to satisfy them. She is also always trying to

make me be what she thinks it is best for me to be. She tells me how to do my hair, what clothes I

should wear. She wants to love and control at the same time. (p. 29).

These women, some who are mothers yet all who are daughters, share what Cole (1991)

said is a "collective history" (p. xiii). This collective history is like a quilt, woven together with

pain, joy, resentment, finely threaded into women growing "both their Blackness and

womanness" (Cole, 1991, p. xiv). Over and over, these sisters traded and affirmed each other's

hair stories which included trips with their mother to the beauty shop or kitchen to get their hair

done. Most were taught by their mothers the importance of "good hair." Moving from childhood

to young adulthood, there are many women, including those in this study, who consider Cole's

(1991) thought: "How can I be of this woman and yet resist being dominated by her? Blessed are

those mothers who are courageous enough to help their daughters find answers" (p. xv). This

tension with self is seemingly a rite of passage towards the road to liberation. The daughters who

were co-researchers in my study found answers. These busy professional women who hold many

titles—mother, daughter, partner, activist, wife aunt, and friend—paused and reflected on their

pinches of liberation stories, sharing their forms of resistance challenging assumptions of Black

womanhood.

A Smidgen of Self- Care

Barlow (2016) pointed out that "Black women have major commitments to family and

community and are subjective to negative self-representations in the media. This can result in

minimal self-care; unhealthy body images" (p. 206). Sister Four, a teacher, a mother, a

grandmother and Yoruba priestess, has many commitments and struggles with "body and the

insecurities." Sister Eight said "I never really thought about my body story." Sister Two said that

participating made her "pause, show up, listen and participate and become more mindful" about

her body experiences. Self-care is not just gratifying the external self by spending money on beautifying the self; getting one's hair and nails done. It is also about fortifying the internal. Self-care is the intentional act of on focusing the inner self through introspection, reflection and creative expression. Self-care is one of the tenets of Womanism. In the act of introspection, a person will come to understand themselves finding and making meaning of their experiences in the context in the world around them. This intentional pause can be considered a self-care practice leading woman to a deeper level of awareness in conversation with others of self and the body towards a path of mental well-being and healing. Sister Four anticipated her participation would be "an opportunity to heal and for others to heal." As the researcher, I too, took care of self. During the six weeks, I kept a reflective journal. Keeping this journal allowed for me to process my feelings and thoughts about the sisters' experiences. Several of these journal entries became short poems.

A Heaping of Resistance

Changing the texture or color of one's hair or fixing one's hair, was and is a chasm in the African American community. Sister Five said, "I had been programmed that I need a perm." Most black women can attest to being programmed from an early age that straighter is more acceptable.

There were sisters who have chosen to wear their hair in its natural state as resistance, rediscovery and a reclamation of choice and no longer subscribing to a facet of Eurocentric standard of beauty.

I did it!
I just started.
Wearing my natural curl
Twist outs

Learning how do my hair..

Different Styles

I got confident

Enough to wear to work

And it works!

Straight is good…

But

I can

Also

Be natural

And

Be Just as Beautiful.

~ Sister Five

Trips to the beauty shop for the hair pressing or straightening are no more. Now,

embracing and defining the once thought of "ugly" or "short and Kinky" hair (Hill Collins, 1990)

as bad. Most of the women opted to liberate their hair.

Accepting who I am

What's beautiful for me

May not be what's beautiful for them

Accepting that.

Accepting my natural hair

That who I am

Is just as valid as how they look.

~Sister Two

Unlike Sister Two and several of the other sisters who explained that wearing their hair

was a nod to assimilating to Whiteness, Dosekun (2016) admonished Black women who choose

to wear longer hair and "less kinky" as suffering from an "inferiority complex as a form of repudiating Blackness and sign for desiring Whiteness. She believes this thought "psychopathologizes us as racially damaged and presumes gross delimitation of our capacity for self-reflexivity and agentic self-stylization" (p.64). Conversely, hooks (1989) asserted that

> The reality is straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon black people and especially black women that we are not beautiful. To make such gesture as an expression of individual freedom and choice would make me complicit with a politic of domination that hurts us. (p. 5).

Hair liberation looks different on every Black woman. For some, liberation may mean removing one's self from the dominant ideology of what black hair represents (i.e., not being beautiful) and choose to straighten and elongate their hair. "Pop," "Sizzle," "Crackle," are the sounds the black hot comb with the thick Brown handle makes as it is being combed through a well lubricated, nappy, kinky head of hair. This sound, like bacon frying on the stove, is a familiar one for many Black girls and women. The sardonic phrase in the Black community, "fried, dyed and laid to the side," explains the process of straightening one's hair either with a hot-pressing comb or a chemical relaxer. According to Green's Dictionary of Slang (2020), the phrase refers to the "three processes that are undertaken to straighten and arrange black hair . . . attempting to emulate the texture and even color of a White person's hair" ("Dried, Dyed," paras. 1–2).

Using Galtung's (1969, 1990) analyses of violence as a framework, Oyedemi (2016) asserted that African women,

> engage in the physically and culturally violent act of erasing their natural afro-textured hair in a bid for social acceptability by straightening their hair and wearing a shoulder length weave-on and artificial or fake natural hair to attain the dominant ideology of beautiful hair. (p. 542).

In a study of 159 Black African female students, Oyedemi (2016) reported that "the physical and cultural violence perpetuated in the quest for beautiful hair is a generational cycle of

identity erasure" (p. 551). The study indicated that "mothers chemically relax their daughter's hair when the kids are as young as three years old" (Oyedemi, 2016, p. 551).

Identity issues are a global problem. Despite these violent acts that Black women endure in order to look "beautiful," there are women entrepreneurs who benefit from those who need to get their hair professionally done. It may be concluded that women who own their own businesses many have a sense of liberation being their own boss. Harvey's (2005) study found that the women interviewed viewed entrepreneurship "as a route to securing basic financial stability that middle- and upper-class women already enjoy" (p. 798). Davies-Netzley (2000) studied White and Latina women who have pursued entrepreneurship to circumvent confirmed workplace discrimination. Conversely, others may embrace liberation as returning to their African roots and wear their hair natural, free of chemicals and coiled. During the early 1900s, Black women in pursuit of social and economic mobility chose Madame C. J. Walker's[6] and Anna Turbo Malone's hair straightening products as a means to refute ideals of inferiority.

Johnson and Bankhead (2014) observed that with the use of the straightening comb, "African American women were able to more easily achieve a style that they felt would afford them greater social and economic mobility" (p. 88) However, similar to Black women today who believe that using chemicals and straightening ones hair is a nod to European ideologies, some women in the early 1900s "denounced hot combing and chemical relaxing hair straightening methods since these practices were perceived to emulate European beauty standards" (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 90). The 1960s and 70s brought a surge of pride in being Black. Using their hair as a symbol of pride, power and liberation, Black women and men alike donned afros, a natural hairstyle. Johnson and Bankhead (2014) posited,

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[6] The life and work of Madame CJ Walker were the focus of a recent Netflix TV series titled *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madame C. J. Walker* (D. Davis & Lemmons, 2020).

> The Afro demonstrated that something new was happening in the U.S. and that it was essentially illustrative of the freeing of the Black mind and those without an Afro were frowned upon for remaining in a captive state of mind. (p. 89)

The Black consciousness movement promoted "Black is Beautiful." This expression of beauty was seen in the natural hairstyling. Leaning into the lineage and legacy of those who embodied liberation by their hairstyle choice, these sisters have altered the recipe and have chosen to wear their hair in its natural state.

Contrary to Rakhkovskaya and Warren (2014) who hypothesized that the thin ideal would be valued less among African Americans, these women admitted to internalizing what society deems to be beautiful, acceptable and at certain times in their lives made alterations. One may question why Black women are more sensitive to the pressure to be thin instead of the pressure to straighten their hair. Women's bodies are seen as sites of pleasure. Images in the media and print covertly send messages that associate people of a smaller size with happiness, confidence, love, and esteem people of smaller size. However, in America the average dress size for women is size 16-18 (Christel & Dunn, 2017), which is otherwise called XL or extra-large.

Within the last five years, advertisers have made advancements and adjustments with intentional marketing geared to showing diverse sizes. Internalization is the mental processing that occurs when one does not see themselves portrayed or possessing qualities that are advertised or spoken of as favorable. Body image disturbance and eating pathology are linked to thin ideal internalization and one can become more sensitive to finding fault with their size as well (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Furthermore, McKinley (2011) posited, "internalization predisposes women to connect achievement of these standards with their sense of self-worth"(McKinley, 2012, p. 49).

Internalization of European beauty standards is not only seen in real life, but also, in the pages of a fiction novel. In Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, the main character, Pecola

Breedlove struggles with her identity as a Black child and yearns for blue eyes in hopes of becoming what majority White society would deem to be "beautiful." Kumar (2020) said, "The novel is the tragic story of a black girl's quest to attain white standards. The ultimate victim of the novel, Pecola Breedlove is totally lacking self-esteem" (p. 276).

Besides internalizing societal standards of beauty that leads to deleterious effects, internalizing weight bias is also an issue. Durso and Latner (2008) showed a relationship between weight bias and self-esteem, concluding that "the more highly one has internalized weight bias, the greater one's body image concern, depression, anxiety, stress and self-esteem" (p. 585). There were several sisters in our study whose internalized weight bias was, in their view, caused by family members and medical professionals. Owning their voice and addressing what could be done to minimize internalized thoughts, was liberating.

A Dash of Owning One's Voice

Internalized thoughts touched in many ways the pain of systemic violence against Black Women. Hill Collins (1998) noted that violence is shaped by hierarchy of race, gender, class, age, ethnicity. She asserted that "wife battering, sexual extortion in the workplace, the pervasive pornographic portrayal of women in the media and rape constitute violence necessary for gender hierarchies" (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 917). Additionally, Hill Collins discussed the ways in which hierarchical power relations in the United States frame systemic violence. These powers have the ability to

> legitimate what counts as violence, the symbiotic relationship linking actions and speech and how routinized violence across a range of social institutions normalized the violence targeted toward specific groups as well as the culpability of some groups in causing it. (Hill Collins, 2017, p. 1461)

These oppressive powers could make it challenging for those to make their way out of abusive situations.

According to the National Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence survey (NIPSVS), 9.5% of Black women had been stalked and 41.2% of Black women had been physically abused by a partner during a lifetime. Additionally, a FBI supplementary homicide report revealed that "453 Black female were murdered by males in single victim/single offender homicides of Black victims who knew their offenders, 56% were wives, common-law wives, ex wives or girlfriends of the offenders" (CITE) . Gratefully, Sister Three did not become one of these statistics. However, she did stay in the marriage well after the first sign of abuse. Those who do not have a personal connection to domestic violence might wonder why women stay. Society has dissected Black sexuality politics. (Hill Collins, 2004). Gender and sexuality come in second and race is first. Could it be that women don't report their abuse because they consider an offense as a member of the Black race to acknowledge being a victim, and they want, instead, to uphold the "strong Black women" stereotype?

In regard to staying in relationships that are rooted in power and domination, could it be that Black women have been brought up to believe that in order to be "whole," they *must* have a man? Could it be that she wants to protect the man? Could it be that Black women do not want to raise a family as a single mother and become another statistic used by society to downgrade the Black woman and family? There are varied reasons why women stay in abusive relationships. However, there are more salient explanations.

Culturally, historically, and today Black women have been looked to as the protectors of their family and community. Some women may feel because of their religious beliefs they must impart forgiveness for their abusers' behavior and endure the abuse due to religious obligations

under Christian, Muslim and other faith doctrines. They may choose to stay for economic security. In the United States, "Black women in the United States who work full time, year-round are typically paid just 62 cents for every dollar paid to White, non-Hispanic men" (National Partnership for Women & Families, n.d., para. 2). Furthermore, "Median wages for Black women in the United States are $38,036 per year, compared to median wages of $61,576 annually for white, non-Hispanic men" (National Partnership for Women & Families, n.d., para. 7) This highlights the disparity and could problematize domestic violence victims leaving their abusers. Sister Three beat the odds and left her abusive marriage. Choosing not to stay in relationship with someone who is verbally and physically abusive is a part of the liberation found in this gumbo. Not only is this liberating from a personal perspective but from a collective sense; this act represents all of the survivors of domestic violence.

Various women in this study also talked about violence from different perpetuators. It may be difficult for some to notice judgmental, guilt-provoking comments, and lack of compassion, from one's medical practitioner as verbal abuse. Verbal abuse can be defined as verbal behavior designed to humiliate, degrade or otherwise demonstrate a lack of respect for the dignity and worth of another individual (Hadley, 1990). This type of behavior is contrary to what society expects of those they entrust with their medical needs. Physicians are expected to live up to standards of professionalism, have integrity and promote social good (Cruess & Cruess, 2008). The U.S. medical sector has a long history of violent experimentation on the Black female body, indifferent about the intense degree of physical pain this must have caused (Hill, 2020). Verbal violence from a physician falls into this range of indifference and disregard for Black women's feelings.

According to Evans (1992), verbal abuse is typically found in relationships of unequal power and is a factor in maintaining the unequal amount of power of the individual in the relationship. From a clinical perspective, a patient and Medical practitioner is a relationship of unequal power. The medical professional perceivably has more power due to their education, expertise and the vulnerability of any patient, seeking medical advice or healing treatment. However, the sisters in this study who had negative experiences associated with the medical profession's anti-fatness, exercised their own power. The power of self-determination. Their agentic power to not stay in that relationship was ignited as they shopped around and found a more suitable doctor. Here is Sister Six's poetic reflections on this:

> Terrible
> Judgmental
> Rude
> Very inappropriate
> I couldn't take it anymore
> I found a new doctor.
>
>   ~Sister Six

The weight normative approach (Tylka et al., 2014) dominates Western healthcare practices. The "emphasis on weight and weight loss when defining health and well-being" (Tylka et al., 2014, p. 1) has made invisible the complexity and depth of the Black woman's experience with her body. This weight normative focus is the promotion of "healthy eating habits," "healthy foods," and the maintenance of a "healthy" weight. The word "healthy" is a misnomer. This approach focuses on weight loss and management sans consideration of the social determinants of health. According to the World Health Organization,

> The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels. The social determinants of health are mostly

responsible for health inequities—the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries. (as cited in NEJM Catalyst, 2017, para. 4)

Barlow (2018) contended that "the way in which Black bodies live in the United States is the direct result of colonialism's construction of policies and practices that create structural determinants of health, and by consequence, health inequities" (p. 896). Less than three months after the kitchen table conversations took place, the racism underlying health inequities in the United States became front page news: The COVID-19 pandemic cast a bright but dismal spotlight on the social and systemic injustices impacting Brown and Black folks of color (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Laurencin & McClinton, 2020). I contend, like other scholars, the United States must now address racism as a public health crisis (Devakumar et al., 2020, Williams et al., 2019). Communities of color living in "food deserts" lack the access and the ability to purchase fresh foods in their neighborhoods (Meehan, 2020). Lack of access and affordability means that people in these communities have to choose inexpensive food, which is typically lacking nutrient value , and not considered fresh or "healthy." Eating these foods, which are typically packed with chemicals and toxins, impacts the overall health of individuals placing them at greater risk of chronic conditions such as Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.

It has been reported that the cases of COVID-19 also has disproportionally affected African Americans who have these chronic diseases (Evans et al., 2020). One of the many residuals of institutionalized racism are "food deserts."[7] Writing about these food deserts, Meehan (2020) said, "Many of these inequalities stem from institutionalized racism which allowed for practices such as supermarket redlining." (p. 2). People who live in food deserts must rely on

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[7] The concept of food deserts is said to have arisen in Britain according to R. E. Walker, Keane, & Burke (2010). They indicated that many definitions exist but, simply put, they are typically low-income communities where affordable, healthy food is nowhere close by.

getting food from convenience stores, fast food restaurants, or smaller chain supermarkets.

Meehan (2020) reported, "supermarket redlining refers to major chain supermarkets as a result of

obstacles associated with urban areas, will either avoid opening stores in inner cities and

low-income neighborhoods or will relocate existing stores to bordering suburban neighborhoods"

(p. 4). Obesity has been another factor cited to impact the rates of COVID-19 cases (Finer et al.,

2020). Considering obesity and Type 2 diabetes disproportionately impact U.S. racial and ethnic

minority communities and low-income populations, racism can be considered a public health

crisis.

Tylka et al. (2014) discussed a weight inclusive approach which is more palpable and

considers viewing "health and well-being as multifaceted while directing efforts toward

improving health access and reducing weight stigma" (p. 1). All of the sisters have experienced

weight stigma with their healthcare providers and those that found staying with the provider

unbearable, chose to release themselves and embark on a new relationship with another provider.

Learning to love her body after coming out was liberating for the one of the sisters in this

project. Unlike Dworkin (1989), who argued that because lesbians live and work in the same

heterosexist society they are likely to experience the same levels of body dissatisfaction, Sister

One experienced a newfound freedom in her large body after coming out. Embracing her

"goddess" figure, particularly the goddess Venus of Willendorf (see Kohen, 1946), she began her

path towards self-love and acceptance.

Sister One began to have a healthier view of her larger body. This is consistent with

Conner et al. (2004) and Lakkis et al. (1999) who suggested that lesbian women experience less

body dissatisfaction. Confirming this premise, Krakauer and Rose (2002) posited that the process

of coming out and being in group membership with other lesbians can cause a shift in body

weight concern.

> Women's community
> Women's festivals
> When I became a Lesbian
> Helped me to get more
> And More
> Comfortable
> Not Just comfortable
> Accepting it
> Loving it
> Enjoying it
> My body.

> ~Sister One

Liberation through body love continues to be an ongoing process that is neither linear nor

predictable. Tensions between cognitive knowing and emotional struggle to catch up with the

knowing, are much part of the Black women's experience of their bodies. Despite coming out,

Sister Eleven still struggles with body love, yet her body is loved and appreciated by her wife.

When sharing her image "Love," she exclaimed,

> This is about sexuality. That's what it's about. Because when I tell you my wife loves my body, that's probably why I would wear that two piece again and not care because really, she has me walking around thinking that I'm Beyoncé from day to day. I remember when I asked her, I said, "Would you please take this picture with me?" Which is why I did it with her and not just me by myself. I wanted to show her embracing me because her loving me the way she loves me makes me love myself. So, it's not even just about sex, but it's about self-love.

Implications for Leadership and for Change

Race Woman[8], leader, and intellectual, Anna Julia Cooper was committed to the principle that Black women's bodies are inherently part of the theories they create as intellectuals. In her seminal work, *A Voice from the South*, Cooper (1892/1988) centered discussion of gender, race and the Black body. Taking an intersectional approach, Anna Julia Cooper placed the Black female body and all that it knows squarely in the center of their methodology. According to B. C. Cooper (2017),

Two of (Anna Julia) Cooper's cardinal commitments include a commitment to seeing the Black female body as a form of possibility and not a burden, and a commitment to centering the Black female body as a means to cathect Black social thought. (p. 3)

Accurately defining Anna Julia Cooper's approach as *embodied discourse*, B. C. Cooper (2017) explained it as "a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies and in particular working class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts, they write and speak"(p. 3). The race literature conversation continued with other writers such as Pauli Murray, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde who all used the stroke of the pen to alter and bring forward the true experiences of Black Womanhood.

Black Lesbian feminist Audre Lorde spoke truth to power (Byrd, 2009). Critical of the narrowness of the white feminist movement, she brought the lived experience of Black women to center stage. Lorde (1979/2007) stated that "Black Feminism is not White feminism in Blackface.

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[8] This term has come into increasingly common usage, Maya Millet claims to have started it in creating an Instagram account using the phrase to "to celebrate pioneering black feminists too often buried by history—women who, as the name "race women" suggests, devoted their lives to furthering the freedom of the men *and* women of the race" (Millett, 2019, para.8). However, the origin of the term goes much further back as discussed by B. C. Cooper (2017) who presents a quote using "race-woman" (p. 11) penned by African American woman of letters, Pauline Hopkins in 1902!

Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women"
(p. 44). According to Alston and McClellan (2011), Lorde was a "warrior radical and leader for
social justice… who brought to the fore a focus on issues of race, gender and sexual orientation.
she was intentional in her use of language to make visible the invisible" (pp. 146–147).
Womanism clearly brings in to focus Black women's concrete history of racial and gender
oppression. It also "encourages researchers to examine intergenerational survival strategies. These
survival strategies include mothering, dialoguing, using self-help, and spirituality as a means for
solving problems" (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015 p. 511). Through listening to the sisters' conversation
and viewing their images, it became clear that the womanist survival strategies have been
sustainable factors in their lives. This study found connections between the lived experiences of
Black women and their bodies and injustices associated with one's race, gender and sexual
orientation.

Intentional language, voice and messages has been a consistent theme with not only poets
and writers but also among social movement influencers such as founders of the Black Lives
Matter movement, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Culllors, and Opal Tometi, all of whom are Black
women. Like Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1988) who so long ago said, "when and where I enter in
the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special
patronage, then and there the whole race enters with me" (p. 26), they were inclusive in their
thinking about the Black body.

Like Race Women grounded in being unapologetically Black, these young authentic and
transformative woman leaders began the movement because of a desire to answer a question they
pondered, Garza said,

> It absolutely was about: how do we live in a world that dehumanizes us and still be
> human? The fight is not just being able to keep breathing. The fight is actually to be able

to walk down the street with your head held high—and feel like I belong here, or I deserve to be here, or I just have right to have a level of dignity. Before [Black Lives Matter] I was hearing people not want to talk about race, even Black people. They would say, "When we talk about race it sets us apart from everybody else." I'm like, "We are different and that's OK!" It's actually OK to be unique and have your own contributions, to celebrate what it means to be black, how we've survived and thrived through the worst conditions possible. (as quoted in M. D. Smith, 2015, para. 15)

These are today's Black feminists/ womanists. Their activism has shifted the way society sees Black women activists and the way they view Black lives. Maparyan (2012) said, "Womanist activism changes social and ecological reality by changing their foundations in consciousness (hearts and minds) and by creating the social and environmental structures that make new and vivifying forms of human existence sustainable" (p. 5).

In response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, after the brutal murder of 16-year-old Trayvon Martin, from the pen to protests, those three voracious women organized a movement across the United States intending to "build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (Black Lives Matter, n.d., para. 1) Black Lives Matter's purpose is "to fight for freedom, liberation and justice" (n.d., banner). This movement with its ideological commitment and focus on intervention, has reshaped the way society hears and sees black lives.

As in times before in Black American liberation movements, so it is today: Black women initiate risk-taking interventions that gain national and international importance. Contemporary leaders of change use social media as bricolage movement, forming platforms like Facebook and Instagram to leverage support for their causes with hashtags. The year was 2013, a social media hashtag and those three short words—Black Lives Matter—appeared globally on cell phones and computer screens. With its arrival, the lives and accomplishments of Black women and girls became visible to the world.

Starting as a T-shirt logo, Cashawn Thompson's slogan "Black Girls are Magic," was added to Black women lexicon (Hobson, 2016). Usurping dominant narratives, this movement of resistance, reclamation and change, which I contend is womanist activism, has,

> dared to see themselves as beautiful and recognize their own brilliance in a society that constantly refutes their intellectual abilities and who dare to revere their own communities, knowledge systems and cultural practices in a nation that is determined to only view these entities through the lens of dysfunction. (Hobson 2016, p. x)

This visual story telling movement has led communities of Black women and girls towards self-illumination, self-determination and self-leadership.

Thompson's creation of a phrase, later turned hashtag, suggests consideration of the way in which a collective group can incite affirmation, acknowledgement and action. This movement, a launch pad and a petri dish, served as discovery ground for educating the broader society about ways in which intersecting oppressions impact the lives of Black women, consistent with Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality. On a micro level, the women in this project consolidated the continued vision of leading change and educating the broader society about Black women using their own images and words. Moving beyond a hashtag, on a macro level this project's collective visual storytelling using photos could inspire another movement of affirmation and action. Like the women who are leading movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo—also initiated by Black women—the birth of this project was came from a desire for change, a desire to see a shift, a new way to address how Black women view and exist in their bodies. I wanted to "change(s) social and ecological reality by changing their foundations in consciousness (hearts and minds)" (Mapyaran, 2013, p. 5). I believed that this metamorphosis could occur when Black women understood the roots of their oppressive thoughts to become liberated from ideologies rooted in colonialism, Eurocentricism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. Black women have experienced what Barlow (2018) described as "intergenerational,

gendered and racialized trauma" (p. 225). Many of the stories shared during this project can be considered "the legacy of trauma within, among and throughout generations of Black women, uniquely influenced by the construction of gender and race in the United States and consequential, intersectional experiences and associated lifestyle comorbidities, all a direct result of colonialism" (p. 225).

As the liberating begins, so does the healing, which has also been a purpose in the body experience project for this dissertation. Using the term "healing," I seek to elucidate Audre Lorde's (1979/2007, 1984) work which locates healing at the center of Black women's interactions, not just with themselves, but also with others. J. L. Richardson (2018) demonstrated that "healing circles can be an effective method for Black women (and potentially other marginalized groups) to address the impact of symbolic forms of media violence on their consciousness, humanity, and political voice" (p 285). This small circle of women who gathered for this study led change first with themselves and, subsequently, within their family and communities. Leading change in communities with small sacred circles with conversations related to can bring attention to Black women's humanity whether experiences of their bodies or issues facing Black women in general.

Envisioning a curated photovoice project, with exhibits by Black women showcasing the Black woman's experience can tour this country, similar to the AIDS quilt that began as a public memorial to those who died of AIDS. (National Aids Memorial, n.d.). Black women can lead change in large way, and the steps to leading the change begin with participating in these circles. This is evident because in this project these sisters led their own process of change. They chose to participate in the project, expecting—these are their words—"a different way of thinking;" "it will be therapeutic to bring the stuff to surface healing;" and because, it was "extremely important to

have a better understanding so that I can have these conversations with her (daughter)." By this deliberate choice to be not only participants but co-researchers in this PhotoVoice project, the women were intentional about their choice of stories and images they shared which enacted a sense of empowerment. This intentionality reflects self-leadership, which Bryant and Kazan (2012) defined as the "practice of intentionally influencing your thinking, feeling and actions towards your objective/s" (p. 11).

The women who were part of this study follow in the footsteps of the great foremothers who led change in small acts but yielded a large impact. Rallying together around a consistent theme, they were contemporary Race Women, the leaders of today who can inspire future leaders. They consider themselves adding to the work of past leaders. The conversations and images around the experiences of the body intersect between the political and social landscape of body politics. Brown and Gershon (2017) asserted that "bodies are sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings subjecting the body to systemic regimes such as government regulation is a method of ensuring that bodies will behave in socially and politically accepted manners" (p. 1). The sisters exchanged stories of how their "socially constructed" aesthetic differences forced them to conform in order to be accepted at their jobs and even in their families.

Finding ways to tap into a person's creativity is one of the ways to share sensitive information. Black girls from two small schools in Brooklyn, New York, who participated in Dill et al.'s (2018) research, learned how to write poems to heal from relationship violence. Therefore, poetry and photography could be considered mediums or instruments of change that can bring attention to the experiences of Black women and their bodies. The small acts seen in our work can

have a ripple effect as they move forward and share their insight and the impact of their experience to their daughters, families and communities.

Few empirical investigations include race, gender, sexual orientation and the role these play in the lived experiences of black women and their bodies (Capodulipo, 2015). The full scope of Black women's experiences with their bodies are still unseen, invisible. Through an intersectional and womanist lens, this project revealed the multilayered fabric of Black women's lives in relationship to images and ideologies of Black physical existence.

Implications for Community Health

Even before it became part of mainstream knowledge due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was no secret that that health disparities in the United States impacted African American communities particularly hard (Barlow & Dill, 2018; Thornton et al., 2019). There are a range of contributing factors to the well-being of a person. The social determinants of health are part of a framework for understanding that one's health is not just about what one eats. Yet within these communities, access to this information about one's health is not shared. People are admonished for not eating "healthy" foods, yet education about healthy foods is not available nor is access to "healthy" foods typically available. Because more Black communities are located in food desserts, the people who live there have to rely on corner store options or have to leave their neighborhoods to purchase those "healthy" foods. A problem exists if there are economic challenges that make it cost prohibitive to leave the neighborhood for food. According to the World Health Organization, the social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow live and include factors like socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood, physical environment, employment and social support network as well as access to health care.

(Jenkins et al). So, when it comes to discussing the body and obesity, there are other more factors that are important.

Black communities need spaces/circles for women to not only receive healing but comprehensive information about the social determinants of health and places to share their lived experiences. From a community health perspective, our collaborative research provides insight and foresight to deeply, doing research with and for black women. The results tell us that Black women have come to know their bodies substantially through the way others perceive them and through this knowing they have also internalized negative perceptions of themselves, they have assimilated, adapted in order to survive, and yet continue to struggle with acceptance of their bodies. This struggle has caused depression and anxiety. However, some choose not to share this in a clinical setting with a professional therapist. Within a more intimate way, in the company of other sisters, they were vulnerable and willing to share those experiences. Understanding the value of communal, sisterly ways to receive and give information is insightful for those who choose to enter into research with black women. The values of collective spaces the women created in this project are consistent with Few et al.'s (2003) point of view was that "sharing these resources of knowledge within a safe informant defined space is empowering and useful in providing Black women a space to process their experience in a systematic manner" (p. 207). Organizations, communities could look to explore circles like this for engaging with women particularly around sensitive topics some may be hesitant to share.

Secondly, consideration around addressing a Black women's total body experiences into the self-care conversation. Expressing the importance of talking about body satisfaction or dissatisfaction and its contribution to one's mental health is vital. J. L. Richardson (2018) forwards the idea of healing circles as praxis that "acknowledges pain without becoming

paralyzed by it" (p. 282). A scholar practitioner, J. L. Richardson facilitates healing circles in and outside of the classroom. She argues that "in order to produce true social transformation and strive for a radical notion of collective freedom, we must pay attention not only to our individual and political/ideological positions, but also to our individual and collective practices of self-care and healing—practices that are themselves deeply political " (J. L. Richardson, 2018, p. 282). J. L. Richardson's study considered the historical conditions that addressed African American women's identity, self-worth and well-being. As a result of facilitating healing circles,

> J. L. Richardson's (2018) charge for future research was that
>
> scholars take into account various social processes at work in Black women's private and public lives. Family connections and upbringing, education, community, religious practices, the experience of sexual or violent trauma, and other factors may all intertwine to shape the ways in which women interpret and respond to media portrayals and representations of beauty and race. (p. 96)

> In alignment with J. L. Richardson's vision for future research, the women's stories and

images in this project provided the landscape of understanding the ways in which they view their bodies.

Limitations of This Study

There were limitations to this study that could impact future research. The population was limited to college educated women; therefore, the study did not capture the experiences of women that do not hold an advanced degree. In should be noted that there is value in capturing all women's voices and experiences, regardless of educational status. Additionally, application and validity could be questioned because of the sample size. However, this point could argue by qualitative researchers who validate research sample sizes of one or more. The quality and depth of the study is of value. Most participatory action research projects are no less than six weeks. This project was exactly six weeks.

Future Research

At the onset of this project and until its conclusion, my desire and commitment to respecting the sisters' voices was paramount and so the future of this research should also be guided by their voices. Further research is definitely needed from an intersectional perspective exploring the lived experiences of Black women and their bodies. The present study only offered a small number of experiences and was, therefore, exploratory by nature. The themes brought to life in the study, could be expanded in further studies generated around the lived experiences of different subgroups of Black women. A study involving Black "Femmes" and "Studs" and LGBTQ experiences of the Black body could begin to fill another gap. This study was conducted with women between the ages of 35–54 who shared detailed experiences with their mother or othermother. The mother-daughter connections were found to be pivotal in their socialization of their bodies and esteem. An intergenerational study between older Black mothers/othermothers and their daughters and the relation to their bodies would contribute profoundly to our liberation, in particular also in relation to how we talk about family or (Black) female related specific health challenges. According to Williams et al. (2016), "Black women have a higher incidence of breast cancer before the age of 40 years and an elevated mortality risk in comparison with White women." (p. 2138). Referencing the importance and effectively addressing Black/White health disparities, Williams et al. argued that it

> requires a rigorous understanding of black women's lived experiences of racism, segregation, psychosocial stress and the cumulative stress of living amidst a disproportionate burden of racial environmental assaults and how these experiences undermine health and contribute to breast cancer risk and morality. (p. 2138)

I have a close personal relationship with breast cancer. My mother died of breast cancer at the age of 75 after surviving for 11 years. My cousin, when diagnosed with breast cancer underwent breast removal and reconstruction surgery. Fobair et al. (2006) found greater body

image issues with women associated with a mastectomy and possible reconstruction, concluding, "programs and interventions should be developed to help women adjust to the altered sexual self that emerges after breast cancer treatment" (p. 392).

Narrative photovoice could be the methodology and the intervention to conduct a comparative study project with breast cancer survivors who have undergone a mastectomy and opted for reconstruction surgery and those who chose not to have surgery. Within the study, execution of a different arts-based methodological approach could be utilized. Finally, addressing Black women and sacred circles as an approach to self-care. (J. L. Richardson, 2018). This study demonstrates the need, plausibility and potentiality of sacred circles. Women are able to find solace in shared words and stories as they paused to take care of themselves.

Excited and willing to forecast about the future of this work, the sisters expanded my future gaze. And they expanded my idea of working with a different subgroup. Sister One shared that she wants to see research around Black women with hidden disabilities, "we don't see that, [it] can't be captured in images." She agreed that their experiences in a PhotoVoice study could be captured metaphorically. Sister Nine would love to have a "planting-the-seed" experience with teenagers. Suggesting a middle-high school curriculum with teenage girls. "As Black women, as Black girls, especially ones that might not grow up in and around predominately Black areas, they might have really difficult experiences with the acceptance of who they are and the skin that they're in."

Coda

> **Researcher's Journal Entry, 4/29/20**
>
> *I have done the hard work. I analyzed the data. I tore through the data. I sat with the data. I heard the data. I cried with the data. But this data is not just data. These are stories and experiences that tell my sister's stories, my story. Their stories penetrated more deeply as I looked at each image through their eyes and words. These sister's stories are just the beginning of more stories and images to come . . . the Black women's experiences with her body. This was not just a research study but a mind, body and spirit experience as I not only revisited my body story and experiences; but as I embodied the stories of my sisters.*
>
> *So, what was the story told? Black women's body stories are interwoven through residuals of historical, contemporaneous ideas of beauty, body autonomy, gendered roles and expectations.*
>
> *I am grateful that through my own lived experience this work was birthed.*

Figure 5.1. Researcher journal entry April 29, 2020 (final entry)

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Appendix

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form for PhotoVoice Participants

You are being invited to participate in the project "An African American Woman's Lived Experience of the Body." This involves your commitment to participate in audio recorded personal interviews, group conversations, workshops and taking photographs on your own time. The purpose of this project is to learn more about how African American women experience their bodies. It is important to note that while this project may help raise awareness, no actual changes in attitudes about one's body can be guaranteed.

PhotoVoice is a participatory photographic action research method. You are the co-researcher in a study that involves the taking of photographs that represent your individual perspectives and lived experiences. Your photographs are then shared back with other study participants and discussed to pull out connecting themes. Short narratives explaining the significance of the pictures can be attached to the photographs, but all efforts will be used to maintain confidentiality among research participants and researchers, and anonymity of all photographers when results are shared with broader audiences.

Participation will require you to meet two times with the facilitator (virtual and or in person) and three times with the group at 1237 Ralph David Abernathy Blvd. Atlanta, GA 30310. The first and final meeting with the facilitator will be one hour. The group meetings will be one hour and half. Food will be provided. There will be a week gap between the second and third meetings in which you will be expected to capture photographs of your perspectives and/or experiences. The third meeting will run for two hours and will involve a sharing back of the photographs followed by audio-taped group discussions.

Participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the project at any time without any risk to yourself. If this occurs, you are free to choose between destroying your contributions to the study or releasing them for use without your participation.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above stated purpose of the project, the agenda and your right to withdraw from participation.

I, understand the above terms of reference and give my consent to participate in the project " An African American Woman's Lived Experience of the Body."

Signature: Date:

*If you have any further questions, please contact Y. Falami Devoe, ████████████

Appendix B: Confidentiality Agreement: For Research Participants, Transcribers

I _____ (please print first and last name) understand that the information that I will read and/or hear in the focus groups, audio recordings or transcripts may be of a sensitive nature. I will keep confidential any information concerning the information contained in the interview audio recording or transcript.

Signature of Research Participant, Transcriber,_____

Date _____

Appendix C: Tips for Creating Safe Space and Building Trust

1. Participants define what "safe space" means
2. Ensure that all participants understand the purpose of the project.
3. Encourage the participants to understand their role as co-researchers and that their voices are valued.
4. Gather participants in a location that is affirming to women.
5. Provide support to participants throughout the duration of the project.
6. Understand the learning curve of participants.
7. Establish a buddy system.
8. Establish an inclusive environment regardless of one's ability, sexual orientation, religious background etc.
9. Encourage participants to discuss and share their experiences with others as well as ask questions.
10. Ensure that all participants are included in every aspect of the PhotoVoice project.

Appendix D Individual Pre-Interview Questions

1. Talk to me about your body story

2. How do you feel about your body?

3. What messages does society send about your body? – message of partners, family, friend, community in relation to their body

4. Why do you want to participate in this study?

Appendix E: Individual Post-Interview Questions

1. Paulo Freire defines **critical consciousness** as the ability to "intervene in reality in order to change it," how, if at all, can you speak about this notion in relation to your experience participating in this project?

2. Who would you like to invite into this conversation that we had for the last month? why?

3. Based on our conversations and the images you saw, was there a common thread?

4. There is much literature that says that Black women don't suffer from body dissatisfaction. What are your thoughts? Then, how do we experience our bodies?

5. How was a connection made within this "sacred circle"?

Appendix F: Evidence of No Copyright Requirements for Figures 2.1 and 2.2

For left image in Figure 2.1

For right image in Figure 2.1

For Figure 2.2, "Kora Player and Six Women, Sierra Leone,"

The following exchange between my editor, Norman Dale, and spokespeople for the Otterbein University Archives confirms the status of this photograph as under creative commons license and in public domain.

x

Norman Dale <ndale@antioch.edu>   Jul 17, 2020, 2:41 PM

to digitalcommons07

To the Otterbein University Archive

I am working with Yolandé Ifalami Devoe, a student at Antioch University (Yellow Springs, OH) who is completing her doctoral dissertation. She would like to use an image from your collection Sierra Leone Postcards,. It is one that is titled, Kora player and six women, Sierra Leone by Wallin Eleazar Riebel. It is at https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/archives_sleone/146/ and is shown in the attachment.. This email seeks clarification on the permissions needed to include this digital image in her dissertation. In particular the question is whether this is under a Creative Commons License or needs specific permissions from a copyright holder.

Your kind attention to this information request is greatly appreciated

Norman Dale, PhD
Prince George, BC
Canada
Attachments area

digitalcommons07 <digitalcommons07@otterbein.edu>   Jul 22, 2020, 7:34 AM

to Allen, me

Hi Norman:

 Sorry for getting back to you late. I don't think there will be any issues to use the image. In terms of cc license, I will let our copyright specialist Allen to answer that part of the question.
Jane

                                                                                                                          Jul 22, 2020, 7:51 AM

Reichert, Allen <preichert@otterbein.edu>

to digitalcommons07, me

Hi Norman
We have made this available online with the understanding that the image is in the public domain as it is out of copyright. So no permission is necessary to use, and she can certainly include the image.

Friendly regards,
Allen