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MeTelling: Recovering the Black Female Body

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Abstract

In this article, I explore undergraduate Black women's collective and individual responses to the media's depiction of Black women. Through participatory action research (PAR), participants created digital counter-narratives, which I refer to as *MeTelling Narratives*, focused on a particular stereotype in visual culture that is commonly ascribed to the Black female body. I used a mixed methods approach (i.e., rhetorical criticism, content analysis, and narrative inquiry) to study participants' shared knowledge, beliefs, and identification with disempowering visual narratives of race and gender. In this PAR, the researchers create digital *MeTelling Narratives* that present complex relationship between cultural points of view and personal experiences.

Keywords: Visual culture, Representation, Narrative Analysis, Black Women, PAR, Digital Art

Reflexive Recovery: Why I Engaged in a PAR Study with Black Undergraduate Women

Representations of Black female scholars are seldom present in popular visual culture. Rather, we often encounter in visual media a plethora of unflattering stereotypes of Black women. As a Black female scholar, I am interested in the voices of young educated Black women who are affected by these stereotypes as they pursue their education. I can recall the first time during my undergraduate education, when I was introduced to feminist theory and Womanist theory while simultaneously grappling with contemporary visual images of Black women that challenged these theorists. My reflexivity, along with an appreciative knowledge of the contributions of Black women in their communities' social reformations, led me in the direction of a research project (Jackson, 2010) that invited Black undergraduate women to be participatory action researchers. The participants shared knowledge, beliefs, and self-identifications of Black womanhood and the physicality of Black women in visual culture. Inadvertently, they were part of a reflexive process that made them cultural readers of their community. Black women engaging in cultural readings of their community is not a new practice but rather it is a tradition among Black feminist and Womanist who believe in the power of self-definition. Furthermore, the PAR's *MeTelling Narratives* provided revelatory insight on the depth of Black undergraduate women's visual literacy when they research their own representation.

Chambers and Sharpe (2012) argue that Black female college students have unique experiences with micro-aggressive discrimination, which subjects them to explicit and subtle forms of communication at predominately White institutions. They go on to explain that their experiences are invalidated through processes of alienation, exclusion, and nullification. The "Defining Us" study, (Jackson, 2010), was an attempt for me to work with undergraduate Black women to conduct a theoretical and creative participatory action research[1] study of the images of Black

1."Participatory action researchers typically work with groups and communities experiencing [or subject to control, oppression, or colonization by a more dominant group or culture. … PAR embodies democratic ideas and principles but does not necessarily bring about democratic change. Its objective is to produce useful knowledge and action

women in visual culture. My goal was to address the following research questions: In what ways do Black college women identify with visual images of themselves? And, how does the making of digital counter-narratives (what I name *MeTelling Narratives*) aid in understanding these women's perceptions of their visual representations?[2] Overall this study provides a perspective on how to merge the mixed methods of digital technology, narratives, and rhetorical analysis as a means of investigating race and gender representation in visual culture from the perspectives of the PAR participants.

I begin this article with discussion of Baartmanmania, which was critical to the PAR's understanding of current representations since many of the historic stereotype images of Black women have mutated into contemporary versions (Shorter-Gooden & Jones, 2003). Next, I discuss the feminist remix-art of a Black woman artist addressing the "redux" of Black women stereotypes. Following this discussion is an account of the mixed qualitative methods used in the study and a rhetorical analysis of the PAR's *MeTelling Narratives*. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on how artist researchers can effectively reclaim stereotypical narratives by including marginalized groups in the use of digital art making, and mixed methods research.

Baartmanmania: How the West Became Obsessed with Black Women's Bodies

Since the early 19th century, narratives about Black women have been brought to the forefront of Western societies and have since changed within the realm of public discourse. The most notable example of Black women's representation in early popular culture is Sarah Baartman and the 19th century phenomenon known as Baartmanmania (see Figures 1 and 2). Baartman, a South African Khoisan woman, was enticed from her homeland and exhibited from 1810 to 1815 in England and France. She was known as Sarah Baartman, Saartjie Baartman, or the Black Hottentot Venus. The variations of her name alone lead to evidence about colonial domination, possession, and mythical identities that have been commonly attached to Black women held in subjugated positions.[3]

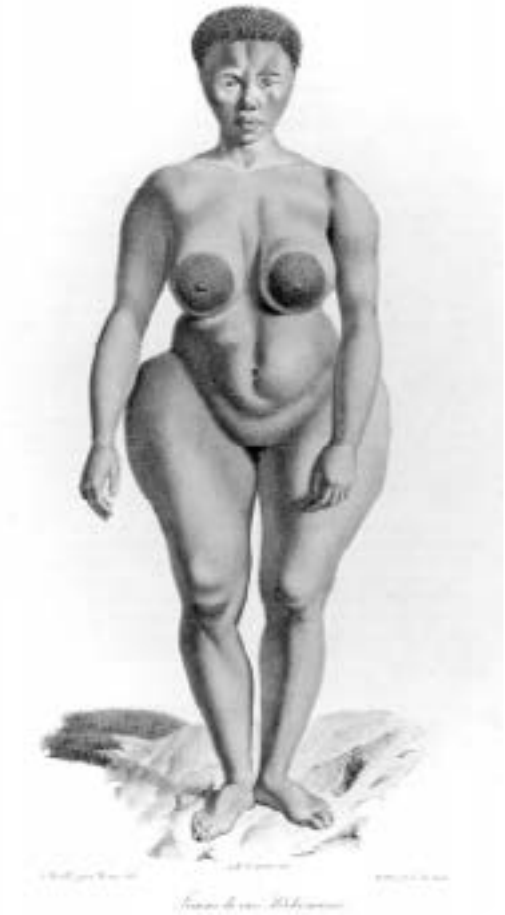

Figure 1. Femme de race Boschismanne (1824, 510 mm x 320 mm) is a hand-colored lithograph of Sarah Baartman by Wailly Leon de, pinx, & del Jacques Christophe Werner. Original Source: Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris. Source: The Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project and Photo Archive, W.E.B. Du Bois Institute Harvard University. Used with permission. Copyright Janet Woodard Houston/The Menil Foundation.

as well as consciousness raising—empowering people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 221).

2. See Appendix A.

3. Master (2004) explains that "The discourse concerning Sarah Baartman's name has centered around the use of the diminutive 'Saartje' or 'Saartjie,' [meaning little Sarah] as opposed to Sarah, offered as an example of the way indigenous people were belittled and robbed of their dignity" (p. 77). Master's insight on the issues surrounding Baartman's name serves more than an example of how indigenous people have been denigrated, but is a signifier to how text or narratives about Black women are changed and altered for the purposes and goals of White hegemony.

Figure 2. Sarah Baartman is rendered in a hand-colored lithograph (1824, 510 mm x 320 mm) by Wailly Leon de, pinx, & del Jacques Christophe Werner. Original Source: Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris. Source: The Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project and Photo Archive, W.E.B. Du Bois Institute Harvard University. Used with permission. Copyright Janet Woodard, Houston/The

Early Dutch settlers of South Africa dubbed South African natives "Hottentots" and Bushmen, "Baartman was given a sobriquet, the Black Venus, linking her to a Western icon of physical pulchritude and sexual desirability. Yet, by European standards Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, differed from Baartman as day from night" (Willis & Williams, 2002, p. 60). Her notoriety as the Black Venus or Venus Noir was part of the attention grabbing hype that was needed to lure spectators to an eight-month exhibit in which she was on display. Baartman was lured to Europe based on a promise or contract that she would earn a significant amount of money by exhibiting herself. Varying reports say that visitors paid two shillings each to view her and that she was given half the admission fee (Master, 2004). Other reports argue that she was willingly put on display in England and Paris under the guise of a legal contract that was subterfuge in nature (Master, 2004). What is certain is that she was presented in the nude, with the exception of an apron around her genitalia that she refused to show for money. She became a sensation for her large buttocks (a condition known as steatopygia), extremely large labia minora, and breasts. Unfortunately, this type of display of a human being was not an anomaly at that time. The display of indigenous bodies in circuses, zoos, and museums were common from the beginning of the 19th until the mid-20th centuries in Europe and in the United States. And after dying of syphilis and alcohol poisoning, Baartman's objectification did not discontinue. Postmortem, Baartman's body was dissected for scientific research and her reproductive organs were preserved.[4] A cast of her body was displayed until the 1970s in Paris's Musée de l'Homme before her remains (brain, bones, reproductive organs, body cast, etc.) were repatriated back to her homeland, South Africa, and laid to rest in April 2002.

Baartman has been immortalized in popular culture. Even before her death, she was widely portrayed in the popular press, most often in caricatures (Willis & Williams, 2002). Depictions of Baartman in caricatures and the construction of her in popular ballads and plays have huge implications about the roles visual and written narratives play in the mythic representations of Black women. One visual illustration in particular shows Baartman barely dressed, adorned in war paint, holding a spear while smoking a pipe as two European men gaze and discuss

4. Historical accounts establish that there was a large public interest in Sarah Baartman and that she became the object of scientific and medical research that formed the bedrock of European ideas about Black female sexuality. (BBC News, April 29, 2002)
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her "pair of broad bottoms" as the caption reads on the lithograph.[5] This image is evidence of how White Western Europeans viewed the Black female body as primitive and abnormally developed.

Reduxing Gender and Race

In recent years, Black women artists have rearticulated demeaning stereotypical narratives of Black women as means to redefine their identity and to respond to objectification of Black women's bodies in visual culture. Contemporary artist Sian Amoy (2010) expands the discourse of Black women and visual stereotypes through her video art, *Distaff (mute): "Ain't I a Redux?* The meaning of redux is to bring something back, a resurgent. This rhetorical title echoes Sojourner Truth's speech, Ain't I a Woman, that was delivered at the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio. Truth, while giving several examples of how women are equal to men, repeatedly asked "*Ain't I a Woman?*" in order to shed light on gender discrimination against women and particularly Black women. Similarly, Amoy problematizes the resurgence of stereotypical images of Black women in visual culture and she implicates the participation of the media through the main title *Distaff (mute)*. A distaff is a tool used to ease the spinning process of wool; it holds the unspun fibers in place in order to keep them untangled. Comparatively, Amoy's title suggests that the media is a tool used to hold and easily spin out stereotypes of Black women. The fact that Amoy's remix video art is mute lends to feminists' critique of the lack of discourse in regards to the representation of Black women in visual media. As early as the late 19th century, silent film depictions of Black characters were highly offensive much like some contemporary images that the media itself subverts. *Ain't I a Redux?* confronts the resurgence of Black women stereotypes by juxtaposing classic cartoons produced by *Universal Pictures, Warner Bros, and Disney* in the 1930s and 1940s with recent sports news footage of Venus and Serena Williams playing tennis and winning trophies in major tournaments. The cartoons positioned on the left of a split screen show Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire caricatures[6] that have historically and presently attacked Black women's character. Much of the discourse about representation of Black women in popular visual culture has focused on the problematic stereotypes[7] that persist and how these images influence public policy and Black women's access to resources.[8] The Mammy stereotype portrays Black women as submissive domestics who are typically jolly about their lot in life and yet they act aggressive towards other African Americans. This stereotype was created to counter the critique that slavery in the United States was cruel and harsh toward enslaved Blacks and that domestic occupations were culturally ascribed. Also, the Mammy image possesses undesirably masculine features and an overweight physique that counters the standard of beauty in Western culture. In contrast, the Jezebel stereotype portrays Black women as hypersexual bad-girls (Abagond, 2008a). Jezebel serves the role of a seductress that was created to justify White antebellum slave owners' coercion of Black women to be sexually attracted to them. The Sapphire stereotype portrays Black women as loud, overbearing, rude, angry, and malicious (Abagond, 2008b). Her words and actions exhibit misplaced violence and are often used to emasculate Black men and to address others whom she feels has disrespected her. David Pilgrim (2012) asserts that the Sapphire caricature "is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish Black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening, and unseen" (Sapphire Caricature section, para 1).

5. Image of *Broad Bottoms* can be viewed at this website: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1478528&partId=1&searchText=broad%20bottoms

6. K. Sue Jewell (1993) posits, "the origins of these images and symbols of African American womanhood have, with few exceptions, been defined as negative. … These images were believed to have evolved during slavery, and portray African American women as the antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood" (p. 36).

7. bell hooks (1992) asserts that "popular culture provides countless examples of Black female appropriation and exploitation of 'negative stereotypes' to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits from it" (p. 65).

8. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) connects the myths of African American women to polity. She develops a theory of recognition and argues that the history of intentional misrecognition of Black women is a means to advance specific economic, social, and political motives of White America during various nation-building efforts.

White producers created these cartoons to make White audiences laugh at portrayals of Black women. The representation of the Williams sisters is not excluded from the tradition.

On the right side of Amoy's video art split screen are images of the Williams sisters who are visually attractive, have strong athletic bodies, and are accomplished champions. Despite the differences, the Williams sisters have been subjected to scrutiny and negative stereotypes in the media about their physical appearance. In December 2012 the sports media showed Danish tennis player, Caroline Wozniacki, wearing a padded skirt and a towel stuffed bra to mimic the voluptuous physique of Serena Williams during an exhibition match. A month prior, the media showed White male tennis players, Novak Djokovic and Andy Roddick, also enhancing their assets with towels in an effort to imitate the Williams sisters and to illicit laughs (Delvecchio, 2012). Both of these portrayals of the Williams sisters are examples of how media subverts demeaning socio-political ideals about Black women. Amoy challenges the negative narratives by showing the difference between the aforementioned stereotypes of exaggerated singing, dancing, sassy, angry, seducing, bulged eyed, overweight cartoon characters with the Williams sisters' pensive, serious and determined looks on the court. Amoy's remix video art serves as a great example of how artists/researchers[9] can collect visual images and remix them with digital technology to construct new narratives and challenge existing ones. The PAR's in this study did not view Amoy's work. However, they did view 1930's and 1940's Disney cartoons and were able to identify the stereotypes previously discussed. The responses were mixed with shock, disbelief, anger, and acceptance that these images were "business as usual" as one participant stated. Viewing various works of art from Black women artists sparked more discussion on the historical and contemporary visual representations of Black women. This became a catalyst for the PAR's to create remix video art using digital technology to construct new narratives and challenge existing ones.

Qualitative Methods: Narrative Inquiry and Rhetorical Criticism

One of the major objectives of this study was to let multiple voices of Black women be heard through narrative writing and digital video art and to shed light on how they perceive their collective selves to be visually represented in popular visual culture. According to Patricia Hill-Collins (2008), and Afshar and Maynard (1994), this approach to research is supported by Black feminist standpoint theory[10] that argues that Black women need to take up a central position in (re)naming and (re)defining their own lives. In this study, focus group participants used narrative inquiry as a method of exploring visual images about the Black female body. Participants, who ranged in ages 19 to 22 years, developed narratives that addressed specific themes that they perceive to be ascribed to the Black female body and character in visual culture.

I recruited participants by posting fliers at a predominately White University's Black cultural center. I also advertised the study on the Black cultural center's listserv in an effort to recruit Black undergraduate women.[11] Utilizing qualitative inquiry methods and a process of elimination based on schedule availability, I selected a purposeful sample of five undergraduate Black women to participate in a twelve-week long *MeTelling Narratives* workshop. I met with the participants two times a week for twelve weeks. Three of the women were juniors, one was a senior, and the other participant was a sophomore, all of whom self-identified as Black.

Visual Body Mapping

The women in this study began with a brainstorming exercise that I call *Visual Body Mapping* (see Figure 3). I presented to the group, a

9. I refer to the participants in this study as artist/researchers due to their engagement with research and the creative making process of the digital *MeTelling Narratives*.

10. Feminist standpoint theory involves tapping sources of everyday, unarticulated consciousness that have traditionally been denigrated in White, male-controlled institutions. For Black women, the struggle involves embracing a consciousness that is simultaneously Afrocentric and feminist (Hill-Collins, 2008).

11.This type of sampling is what O'Leary (2004) describes as volunteer sampling since the process of selecting a sample is simply by asking for volunteers. This is a method of sampling that is highly convenient but necessarily representative. And the characteristics of those who volunteer are highly distinct from those who don't. Usually the volunteers have a high interest in the research subject. The goal of this study was not for representativeness but rich information that might come from a few participants.

life-size silhouette of a female body that I created out of black and white foam paper. The silhouette on the map was suggestively female with emphasized curves. I provided sticky notes and asked participants to label the map with positive and negative terms that often are associated with Black women in the media.

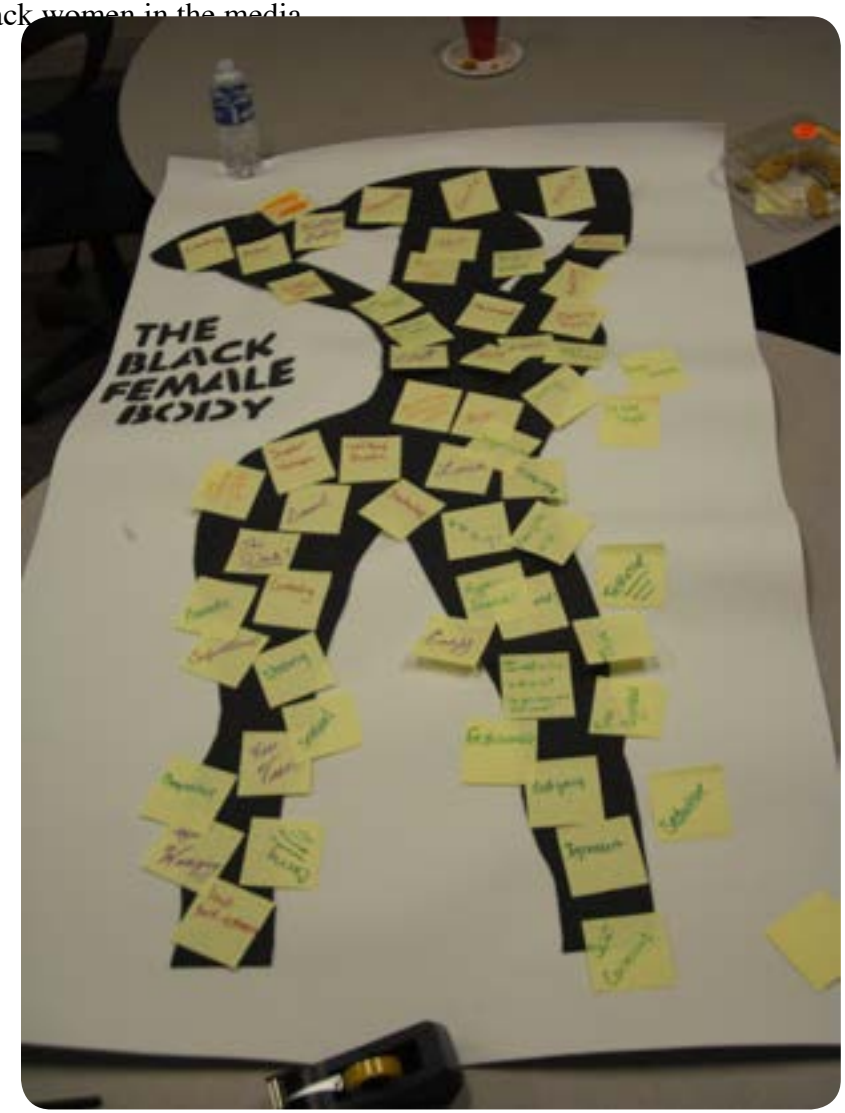

Figure 3. Photograph by Tanisha M. Jackson (2010) is of a *Visual Body Map* labeled by artists/researchers during a PAR workshop.

Some of the labels that the PAR's posted were: lazy, stupid, whore and aggressive. These labels addressed the physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics of Black women that are portrayed in visual culture. This exercise helped me to facilitate group discussions about representation and narratives. PAR participants engaged in a creative interpretive process with each woman writing a term on a post-it that named significant meanings they interpreted in visual images. Participants built on each other's ideas. Some added to already mentioned terms while others were introduced to new terms through the course of a lively discussion. I later, used content analysis to categorize the terms into themes and coded their frequency. Overall there were 13 characteristics of Black women mentioned and the most frequent were *confrontational* and *hypersexual*.

Viewer Response Workshop Activities: Representations and Narratives

Overall, my role in the group was to ask the group questions, record their responses, and to show them various music videos, movie clips, YouTube movies[12] and art reproductions.[13] Additionally, I provided creative writing prompts,[14] and gave them time to respond to questions following the viewing videos that would aid them in collecting materials for the development of their *MeTelling Narratives*. Participants wrote in response to writing prompts and shared their responses with the group, thus expanding our discussions. Next, the participants selected visual images from the Internet, social media sites, art books, magazines, and various other media. Then they analyzed the images for denoted and connoted meanings.

These writings, conversations, collecting of images, brainstorming activities and semiotic reading exercises became data that participants used to construct their individual narrative inquiry about Black women in visual culture. I rely on Patricia Leavy's (2009) definition of the narra-

12. See Appendix B.
13. See Appendix C.
14. See Appendix D..

tive method to best articulate what took place in this study. She points out that, "The narrative method or narrative inquiry attempts to collaboratively access participants' life experiences and engage in a process of storying and restorying in order to reveal multidimensional meanings and present an authentic and compelling rendering of the data" (pp. 27-28). Leavy's description of the narrative method process is what occurred during this study.

After the narratives were written and recorded I analyzed the data through a specific rhetorical method,[15] called *cluster analysis*.[16] I used this method to analyze symbols, language, and images, and how each participant used these forms of communication to tell a particular story about Black women in visual culture. The rhetorical analysis[17] in this research was not used to provide a correct interpretation of the artifact, but rather, as a "basis for criticism" (Foss, 2009, p. 18). In what follows, I present
my cluster analysis of two *MeTelling Narratives* from participants in the study.[18] The first narrative concentrates on the theme hypersexuality. This MeTelling Narrative is a poem that questions the public's acceptance of pervasive hypersexual images of Black women in visual culture. The artist/research participant, Rasheeda,[19] also addresses the economic relationship associated between models and the entertainment industry as well as her personal adolescent experiences. The second *MeTelling Narrative* focuses on Black women's buttocks in visual media. I selected these two examples because their themes were the most prevalently discussed during the PAR's workshops. Also, their narratives convey the resurgence of Black women's butts and desirability similarly to the way images of Baartman and Amoy's remixed art have been used to criticize gender and racial discrimination. The PAR's remixed digital art proves they were able to see the continuity of stereotypes about Black women.

Associated Clusters in Acceptable

In the following discussion I use rhetorical analysis as a means to find significant themes in the *MeTelling Narratives*. Specifically, I analyze clusters of key terms that expose the interpretation and feelings a writer has about their *MeTelling* topic. The first poem, *Acceptable* conveys clusters associated around the theme hypersexuality. From a cluster analysis of the poem *Acceptable*, I noted that the most frequent and important terms to explore, are *why* and *acceptable*. The term *why* is the most frequent term, appearing four times in the poem. Its primary significance is that it provides insight into the poet's thought processes. The poem's author has many questions about the hypersexual representation

15. Rhetorical criticism, according to Foss (2009), "is the process of systematically investigating and explaining symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes. … [M]ost critics use the tangible product as the basis for criticism—a speech text, a building, a sculpture, a recorded song" (p. 7).

16. Cluster analysis is a method that appropriately can be used to examine written works. Foss (1996) describes cluster analysis: "Cluster analysis is a method developed by Kenneth Burke (1941) to help the rhetorical critic discover a writer's or orator's worldview. In this method, the meanings that key symbols have for the writer or orator are discovered by charting the symbols that cluster around those key symbols in the rhetorical artifact" (p. 64).

17. Rhetorical criticism fits well in analyzing the narratives in this study because these narratives are not meant to be representative perceptions of all Black women. My analysis was a layer of interpretation that added to the thick description of each participant's narrative. For each narrative, I followed the process of (a) formulating a research question and selecting an artifact (the research questions are the ones established at the beginning of this article and the artifacts are the *MeTelling Narratives* that participants constructed from the workshop); (b) selecting a unit of analysis (I used cluster analysis for each narrative); (c) analyzing the artifact; and (d) writing the critical essay (Foss, 2009).

18. A YouTube link is provided for each digital recording of the *MeTelling Narratives* that shows the end product of the artists/researchers analysis of a specific stereotype. A videographer taped the participant reciting her poem and aided in the production of the *MeTelling Narrative* by merging the recording with the images the participant chose to correlate with her narrative in an iMovie software program. Click on "Acceptable" and "Synecdoche"

19. Due to the nature of the research (video recordings in which the artists/researchers introduce themselves), the participants knowingly and willingly do not have anonymity.

of Black women. The term why is clustered with these terms: *allow, acceptable, confused,* and phrases such as "show your breast." These clusters convey that Rasheeda really wants to know what the purpose(s) of the images of "sultry stone idols" and overtly sexual Black women have in visual culture. The poet's line of questioning is rhetorical and is meant to provoke audiences to see how images of Black women *"twisted," "poked," "pricked,"* and *"prodded"* are in fact harmful to Black women and especially young Black girls. The author expresses her concern for the next generation of Black women in this line, "it makes me wonder why my little sisters are so confused."

The terms *twisted, poked, pricked,* and *prodded* along with *plastic, weave, Barbie dolls, moans,* and *giggles* are all negative cluster associations that express disapproval of the hypersexual imagery of Black women. These terms also establish the imagery of objectification and artificiality. Black women are posed salaciously in front of cameras because the message in society is that it is "cool to spread your legs." Yet, even before audiences see these images in the media, Rasheeda suggests that the process of objectification starts early. Her own personal experience of seeing and possibly participating in "booty shaking contests" and telling readers how "it was cooler to show your breast" by the time she was a teenager supports this claim. These activities often occur under the gaze of young boys and girls who are obsessed with the hypersexual performance and imagery of Black girls. Although most of the poem is questioning the hegemonic and offensive imagery of hypersexual Black women there is a turning point in which the writer provides a clear answer to her questions.

In the beginning of the poem the first line alludes to a group of people, "powerful *pervs"* that "run the world." Like Jewell (1993), Rasheeda alludes to the ideology that there is a hegemonic culture or group that is invested in the sexual imagery of Black women. These *pervs* developed and control the ideology of hypersexual Black women in visual culture and "when an ideology becomes hegemonic in a culture, certain interests or groups are served by it more than others" (Foss, 2009, p. 294). Rasheeda establishes this argument again and states "Boost your record sales, get the most perks for your flicks." The powerful *pervs* are now connected to entertainment industries, such as the music industry, that acquire economic gain from images of Black women "spreading their legs and slurping on a lollipop." The poet establishes this exchange of representation for money as covert or "legalized prostitution" and ends the poem by asking, readers to consider "why is this acceptable?" Readers are left with very intense images of salacious Black women that are supported by various still images of Black women provocatively dressed and posed. They are images of real Black women, models, and entertainers that Rasheeda found on the Internet. These images foster the question of acceptability.

Associated Clusters in Synecdoche

The second *MeTelling Narrative* focuses on Black women's butts. For the purposes of this study, artist/researcher, Jackie, explored the contentious relationship that Black women, and she personally experiences, which suggests the redux of Baartmanmania. Her poem *Synecdoche* gives great rhetorical insight on these experiences. After examining this poem I determined that *Synecdoche* rhetorically answers the preceding poem *Acceptable*. It gives a response to what is acceptable about Black women's representation in visual culture and how Jackie does not identify with some of these images. The key phrase in Jackie's poem is *"I accept."* This phrase occurs in the poem nine times and it is clustered around the concepts of identity, sexuality, and empowerment. The frequent use of the phrase reveals that the poet has come to terms with the fact that certain stereotypes are associated with Black women. The cluster association of sexuality and Black women's butts is heavily explored in this poem and is represented by adjectives and phrases such as: *bounces, swishes, dips, use for advance, gyrating, show it, bouncing, flouncing, adjust, fill it 'til it jiggles, set on top, bending it over, shaking it faster, clapping, slip into, pop it, drop it*, and *hydraulic it*. These words paint a picture of buttocks actively engaged in movements that are sexual in nature. These descriptions are supported by the performance of entertainers in music videos and models like *Buffie the Body*[20] who are

20. Buffie Carruth, also known as Buffie the Body, is a voluptuous video vixen, fitness model and instructor, magazine cover girl and adult video celebrity. Her work can be explored further at this site: www.buffiethebody.com

known for having a large butt and the ability to make their butts move and perform tricks.

What is most vivid is the reference Jackie makes to the rapper Nelly's video *Tip Drill*.[21] Jackie not only accepts that these activities are connected with Black women's buttocks, but she also engages inadvertently in some of these activities herself. She can't help that she "leads with said hips" or that her book bag rebounds off the switching of her hips and she reminds readers that, "It's a part of me." These lines in the poem express empowerment and there is a connection between Jackie's butt and her identity. Jackie explicitly explains, "I accept that it's attached to me; can't leave it at home, It's a part of me." Jackie can't separate herself physically from her butt because it is attached to her and this also means that she has difficulty detaching herself from everything else it represents. She can't separate from the synecdoche of the butt, standing for "hypersexual Black woman." Descriptions of the "donk" (a round attractive butt) paint a vivid image of the meta-narrative of Black women as lascivious, over-developed, and over-sexed beings in society. Jackie eventually disassociates herself from the butt narrative toward the end of the poem. The turning point in this *MeTelling Narrative* occurs when she writes, "I accept the synecdoche, but I accept that it's beneath me. I accept these things but I don't do that." Jackie accepts the fact that these images and connotations about the lewd Black woman exist but this has nothing to do with who she is. She blatantly rejects this meta-narrative and states, "I refuse to let it be my representative." This turning point shows Jackie's empowerment and even in her recorded performance, the audience understands that she is empowered because the tone and tempo of the remainder of the poem speeds up and gets louder in an effort to emphasize her rejection of negative representations of Black women. The rhetorical elements in this poem ask the audience to consider that many of the stereotypical representations of Black women in visual culture are unacceptable to many Black women. *Synecdoche* is a narrative or concept that is scarcely present in visual culture.

21."Tip Drill" is a 2003 music video by rapper, Nelly. The music video became controversial for its overt depiction of women as sexual objects, particularly because of the scene where Nelly takes a credit card and slides it down the crack of a video model's butt.

Reflections on How to Reclaim the Narrative of Black Female Body

In this study, the themes, key terms, and cluster associations that I found in the *MeTelling Narratives* are strongly related to the representation of Black women in visual culture. Furthermore, participants' *MeTelling Narratives* conveyed their perceptions that there are negative representations of Black women in visual culture. Their findings give significant insight to the longevity of social and cultural meta-narratives in visual culture and suggest that even in their most covert forms, the presence of historic hegemonic images such as Sarah Baartman are still identifiable and harmful. Consequently, "[t]he risk of not critically looking at and effectively interpreting these images and their messages is that we will be unwittingly buying, wearing, promoting, and otherwise consuming opinions with which we may or may not agree" (Barrett, 2003, p. 12).

Hostert (2010) contends that 21st century art educators need to move beyond a media rich art curriculum and guide students in the use of digital tools that promote critical understanding of the world, develops interpersonal communication and problem solving skills. The workshop activities that led to the making of digital narratives in this study provided the artists/researchers and me an opportunity to address ways that we identify with various forms of visual media of Black women, and better understand, and even change to a more positive perception of our bodies.

The Black women in this study addressed their sentiments toward various art and popular culture images of Black women through personal and collective points of view. Through cluster analysis I found evidence of both approval and disapproval of particular images of Black women. There were certain instances in a narrative when an artist/researcher was empowered as well as disempowered. There were also times when they could clearly identify with an image and other times when they explicitly said that they did not. Also, each artist/researcher mentioned instances when the images and themes had a direct impact on their community. These memories were intertwined in personal and collective experi-

that says that the stereotypical depiction of Black women's bodies do an injustice to our individual and community identities. This insight adds richness to the discourse of visual culture, and the representation of race and gender. In support of the qualitative findings that establish that these artists/researchers have a perception of themselves that rises above disempowering visual narratives, I contend that the process of creating these digital *MeTelling Narratives* is a pedagogical activity worth using for the (de)marginalization of other misrepresented or underrepresented groups in visual culture as well as visual art. Although there is a plethora of discourse dissecting negative images of Black women, what is equally problematic is the minimal representation of positive images of Black women. The *MeTelling Narratives* as digital work provides a platform to begin addressing this absence.

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Author's Bio

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Appendix A: Research Questions used to Guide Data Analysis:

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

Appendix B: Abridged List of Videos Used in the Workshop

1. Bamboozled a 2000 satirical film written and directed by Spike Lee
2. Ethnic Notions a 1987 documentary film directed by Marlon Riggs
3. YouTube video of Window Seat produced by Badu and James Poyser
   School Daze (1988) American musical-drama film, written and directed by Spike Lee
4. Boondocks (Season 1 & 2), produced by Aaron McGruder & Rodney Barnes
5. Good Hair (2009) Chris Rock Productions and HBO Films
6. YouTube video *Tip Drill* (2003) written by Nelly produced by David Banner
7. VH1 series *Flavor of Love* (2006) Cris Abrego, Mark Cronin, Ben Samek, 51 Minds Entertainment

Appendix C: Abridged List of Black Women Artists' Work Explored in the Workshop

1. Maya Freelon Asante
2. Renee Cox
3. Erika Ranee
4. Lorna Simpson
5. Kara Walker
6. Carrie Mae Weems

Appendix D

Literacy Narrative Prompt

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

You might want to focus on the best memory you have of the stereotype and image(s) that associated with it, the worst memory you have of the stereotype and image(s), or the first memory you have of the stereotype and image(s) of it.
The type of narrative you write is totally up to you and should incorporate your stance on this specific type of representation of Black women.

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

1. How do you define ____(The theme you are exploring)_____?
2. How is this term represented visually in popular culture?
3. Do you think Black women are positively or negatively associated with this term?
4. How are Black women represented in relation to this term? Where are you most likely to find this representation? Where are you least likely?
5. Does this term relate to you personally? If so how?
Please describe a visual image used in today's discussion and explain its relationship with today's term. (Please indicate the number tag of the item_____).