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Finding Sanctuary In Sisterhood: A Middle School Literacy Group Critically Analyzes Race, Gender, And Size

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FINDING SANCTUARY IN SISTERHOOD: A MIDDLE SCHOOL LITERACY GROUP CRITICALLY ANALYZES RACE, GENDER, AND SIZE

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Eugene and Ellen Marie Smith, for demonstrating the power of agape love, unconditional support, faith, and resilience. I am here because of you.

To my sister circle (Donna, Shanise, and Tish) for the love, support, and laughter. You are light in my life.

To Jen Wilson, a guardian angel, for starting me on the path of discovery. I promised you I would finish…and I did.

and

To my Blue Diamond Girls for proudly loving and embracing your Blackness. I have grown more as a scholar from listening to your stories:

I've cried alongside each of you.
Been both broken and reborn.
Baptized by the power of Black love and resilience,
I listened attentively and was
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Your stories are my roots.

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ABSTRACT

This critical qualitative study documented intersectionalities of race, gender, body image, and literacies as interpreted by five eighth grade Black female students during an eight-week after school literacy group. Ethnopoetic methodologies were used to represent findings and provide insights about how critical literacy engagements can be used to create discursive spaces where young Black girls describe and define these intersectionalities, how they are socialized into current beliefs, make meaning of beauty ideals portrayed in media, and interpret gender, obesity, and race. Through content analysis of field notes, audio recorded sessions, research partner interviews, researcher journals, and genre artifacts, this study documented the complexities of this literacy study group as a contested space for research partners and researcher to exchange affirming as well as conflicting perspectives; creating transformative and liberatory spaces where they critiqued and responded to body shaming, gender discrimination, colorism, and racism.

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CHAPTER ONE

FACING FEARS: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

I stood naked staring at my reflection in my parent's bathroom mirror. The face peering at me was both friend and stranger. While I gazed, tears streamed down her immense Black cheeks. Her mouth was twisted in pain. Though she did not speak, I knew her story; bearing the torment of classmates, friends, yelling "Fatso," calling her ugly, reminding her she could be beautiful, "if only she lost weight." Her corpulent form was foreign and alien. The mounds of fat repulsed her. If she could, she would be willing to take a knife and carve the vile deformities from her flesh. They preyed on her consuming her inch by inch; an omniscient presence reminding her that she was Not normal. She was Not beautiful. She was NOT allowed. What is the point of living if society denies you entrance?

Her gaze drops to the countertop and she stares at the pain medication, knowing the small, round White capsules can be both savior and escape. Unflinchingly, she pours the pills into her hand. As she slowly reaches to taste salvation, her father's footsteps can be heard in the hallway coming closer. Soon, his strong Black fists are pounding on the door, and he yells in a deep baritone, "Dee! Dee! You should be ready by now! Hurry up!" She stops. There is a moment of awareness; a moment of recognition that the man who cared for her and loved her would find her lifeless body. Once again, she stares at the capsules and though life was too much to live for herself, she realized she would try to do it for him. She pours the pills back into the bottle. As they hit the brown plastic,

their soft taps seem to call to her, tempting her back into their power. They whisper to her, "Only in death and darkness will you find acceptance." She closes the pill bottle to silence their temptation and looks in the mirror at her deep caramel skin, her repulsive fat curves, and cries; her anguish eclipsing her resolve.

Statement of the Problem

I begin this dissertation with my journey into self-actualization because it elucidates the struggle to find acceptance in a society where racism (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2004; Simson, 2004) sexism (Crenshaw, 1991; Hooper, 2012; Rios, 2003) and sizism (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008; Sobal, 1999) are paramount. As I moved into my profession as a middle school teacher and then as a teacher educator, I realized that messages about weight were sent from every corner of the world and were often conflated with messages about race and gender. These lessons were absorbed, not only by me, but by the young women I taught - in news reports (Ogden, 2010); in the novels they read (Cooner, 2012); in television programming (Marr, 2015); in depictions of fuller figures displayed in Ebony versus those pictured in Vogue; hearing the term "thick" used in hip hop songs (Graham, 2015); and observing infomercials for weight loss products (Hydroxycut, 2010). By worshipping Eurocentric ideals, many adolescent girls, learned normalcy can only be obtained through a thin White body.

Internalizing Eurocentric idealized beauty standards creates an oppressive construct and standard which many cannot achieve. This pervasive ideology relegates African-American adolescent girls, throughout the nation, to the margins of various spaces in society including school, fashion, and literature. In short, to exist within Eurocentric standards, young girls must erase themselves and comply with preconceived

racist, sexist, and sizist ideals (Collins, 1998, 2000; Gammage, 2015). Such erasures cause prolonged, if not permanent, damage to the psyche as they can be a permanent reminder of the legacy of colonialism around the world but certainly in the U.S. and predominantly in the lives of African-American adolescent girls (hooks, 1992, 2005; Patton, 2006; Rubin, Fitts, & Rubin, 2003). My concern for this issue comes not only from my personal experience but from my observations of numerous Black adolescent girls struggling with the unbearable burden of race, weight, and esteem and my careful examination of the literature surrounding these issues. I believe examining and critiquing racism, sexism, and sizism holistically in the lives of African-American adolescent girls can help make visible oppressive constructs and create alternative pathways that will allow them to rename and reclaim their future selves.

Research Purpose

To contribute to the literature that addresses the problem described above, this study explored and documented how an eighth grade literature study group responded to depictions of obesity in adolescent literature and media. The purpose of the study was to provide insights on how adolescent texts can be utilized to analyze societal constructs which can deny particular aspects of adolescent identity; understand how African-American middle school girls perceived obesity in media and their daily lives; and determine what happened when a group of 8th grade African-American adolescent girls were given the opportunity to create counternarratives about race and obesity. Specifically, I wanted to learn how these young Black girls responded to the discourse used to describe and define obesity, were socialized into their beliefs surrounding obesity, made meaning of the ideals of obesity and beauty portrayed in media, and interpreted

obesity in their everyday lives. Informed by Critical Race Theory and Black feminist Theory, I wanted to analyze the intersections of race, gender, and body image to note how intersectionalities may permit or prohibit access into society.

Type of Study and Research Questions

This study, designed to address the problem stated above, employed critical race narratives, ethnopoetics, and auto-ethnographic methods using critical race and pattern analysis approaches to examine data and determine findings. The research questions guiding the study were:

> How do a group of five eighth grade African-American girls at a middle school in the southeastern U.S. (*Houston Middle School, pseudonym*) respond to portrayals of size, race, and gender in adolescent texts and media?
>
> 1. How do these portrayals impact the girls, their identities and literacy practices?
> 2. What happens when they are given the opportunity to create counternarratives about gender, race, and obesity?

Significance of the Study

I believe this study to be significant in four interconnecting ways. In this section, I elaborate on each individually to provide clarity. First, this study, which centered on the convergence of race, gender and size, has the potential to fill gaps in the literature because little work exists that examines robust accounts of these converging social identities as articulated by adolescent Black girls. Second, the study examined the use of critical theories to support eighth grade girls in analyzing the body as a textual artifact, also a gap in the literature. While traditional texts, digital texts, and a range of other texts

are often analyzed critically by middle school students, there is a paucity of studies focusing on students' examination of body as text. The study also analyzed the ideology surrounding obesity through the eyes of these young women, a form of analysis rarely found in current literature. Finally, it potentially broadens knowledge in the field by offering strategies for changing schools as reproducers of societal inequities to become places of critical inquiry and examiners of dominant narratives about obesity, race, and gender.

Providing Robust Accounts of Black Adolescent Girls

Essential to this study is recognition of the objectification of the thin female form, for example, by turning the female form into objects such as cars, clothing, or liquor bottles; a practice which often occurs in commercials or advertisements. This objectification makes the female form susceptible to acts of violence, not always with traditional weapons, but with the discourse we use to describe young women (Kilbourne, 2012). For example, in 2009, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) introduced a Super Bowl advertisement which featured several scantily clad women bound and tied to poles because they could not resist the temptation of vegetable love (Bahadur, 2013). The advertisement which was created to promote vegetarianism, received fierce scrutiny and was later removed. To compound this complex matter, the White race has been normalized and because of the permanence of racism, also known as racial realism (Bell, 1992), the White female form will always be idealized (Crenshaw, 1991). Thus, as Black females, we are subject to both racism and society's brutal objectification (Kyrola, 2014). Additionally, social constructionists argue that, just as with race, body size – thinness in particular - is a normalized social construct (Cash &

Smolak, 2011). Barak (1998) declared, “There are no purely objective definitions; all definitions are value laden and biased to some degree,” (p. 21) and so biases about size unveil additional layers of weight stigma and discrimination. If an individual does not achieve these visions of constructed normality, they are ostracized and ridiculed (Brownell, 2005; Demarest & Allen, 2000).

This idea of the White and thin form as normal is depicted in novels, music, and movies and stands in marked contrast to depictions of the obese, fat, or overweight form (Kilbourne, 2012). Cahnman (1968) contended in a society which perpetually emphasizes beauty as status, being obese or overweight disgraces the individual and tarnishes physical appearance. Many social theorists further argue that the labels “overweight” and “obese” only serve to marginalize certain individuals in our society (Bordo, 1993; Oliver, 2006; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). These labels, when internalized, signify the need to lose weight for personal and social acceptance (Brownell, 2005; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Jutel, 2005). When understanding these realities in the lives of women in conjunction with the permanence of racism and how it operates within American society (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); it is easy to see how obese African-American females experience inequitable practices and institutional racism conflated with sizism on many levels.

This study created a contested space for African-American female adolescents to speak their truths about these intersecting identity factors, which allowed the research partners (participants) to confess past trauma, analyze and critique dominant narratives, and narrate new understandings. Johnson (2014) described the contested space as, “a site of cultural, racial, and ethnic struggle; therefore, this space is not perfectly harmonious or

a space of ease. A contested space can become a tool that pushes people to learn, expand understanding, take a new perspective, and stretch awareness" (p. 132). A contested space examines inequitable power distribution by analyzing historical and contemporary examples simultaneously which allows a multi-level examination of oppressive power constructs (Baszile, 2013). As a result of the contested spaces created through this study, it offers richer and more robust stories than currently exist in the field of education which largely neglects the inclusion and examination of young women's views and experiences with regard to the intersection of race, size, and gender.

Engaging Adolescents in Critically Examining the Body as Text

Oliver (2006) contended fat or obese bodies are read as lazy, lacking moral fortitude, a willing transgression of an established boundary. Similarly, Murray (2005) stated:

> We exist in a culture of negative collective 'knowingness' about fatness. As members of Western society, we presume we know the histories of all bodies, particularly those of fat women; we believe we know their desires (which must be out of control) and their will (which must be weak.) We read a fat body on the street and believe we 'know' its 'truth. (p. 154)

This "presumed knowing" leads to a politicized stigma for obese or overweight individuals (Brownell, 2005; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Kelley, 2001) and a narrow monolithic reading of body as text. This becomes a normalized reading, as the reader draws on society's messages to filter through information, lenses, and stances; constantly re-envisioning and reinterpreting a text. However, guiding students to use critical theory (or a critical lens) to examine the body as text (as well as other texts), has the potential to

allow the obese frame to be reimagined as beautiful, healthy, and worthy of validation (Farrel1, 2011; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Through this multifaceted process, students can go beyond superficial residuals; begin to question and challenge obesity; and find new meaning; thereby resisting traditional educational approaches which restrict the analysis and discussion of any text and deny critical and reflective thinking (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Mahiri, 2004). It is for this reason I believe classrooms should always employ critical literacy learning which encompasses social, political, and historical contexts and allows students to closely examine the influence of societal establishments on their everyday lives (Wood & Jocius, 2013).

Grounded in these convictions, my study created spaces for and examined the process of how adolescent girls used critical theories to examine the body as text within the wider examination of social representations of race, gender, and size. Not only did they examine these issues critically but with support provided for them to speak back to those issues, an important element of critical work.

In using this framework that puts body as text at its center, this study pushes the boundaries of existing research as students and teachers work to unmask and disrupt practices in oral, written, and popular culture. Students need to critically analyze texts such as young adolescent literature, social media, and/or music videos (Singhal & Rogers, 2002) with a specific focus on the inter-relationship of size, race, and gender (Selvester & Summers, 2012). Drawing from critical theories that emphasize power, privilege, and empowerment (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000), students and teacher worked collaboratively to critique dominant social practices through oppositional and resistant readings of text (Apple, 1982; Moje, 2001). In ways rarely seen in studies of adolescents,

my hope is that this research will broaden notions of what counts as text which can be read critically and thereby provide models for ways adolescents can be supported in tackling school and community issues (Morrell, 2008).

Analyzing Obesity Ideology

Simply put, ideology is a set of idea and doctrines which when combined create a distinct perspective of a social group; it is an essential component in maintaining domination of one group over another (Marx, Engels, & Hobsbawm, 1996). Gee (2012) noted Marx's belief that human beings' ideologies are a result of interacting with our physical and social environments and further postulated that societies have been created to ensure power and privilege for a few elites.

When considering obesity, ideology is paramount in the medical profession; for example, the ever-changing definitions of "health" which have occurred during the 20th Century. Oliver (2006) contended over the past two decades, select scientists, doctors, and health officials have:

> actively campaigned to define our growing weight as an epidemic. They have created a very low definition of what is 'overweight' and 'obese' so that tens of millions of Americans including archetypes such as basketball star Michael Jordon are now considered to weigh too much. And, most importantly, they have established body weight as a barometer of wellness, so that being thin is equated with being healthy. (p. 5)

This creation of polarizing dynamics, those who are thin and therefore healthy, and those who are obese and therefore unhealthy, establishes an ideology which provides criteria

and definition for who is allowed to fully participate in society and who must be marginalized (Bordo, 1993; Farrell, 2011). It also establishes a net worth for the body because a thin frame is more commercially profitable than an obese frame (NAAFA, 2014). Fat people can be terminated or suspended because of their weight, despite good job performance (Rothblum, 1990). Up to 6% less earnings than thin people in comparable positions and fat women suffer more than fat men (Baum, 2004). This is obesity ideology.

The ideology of obesity is not confined to the workplace alone; it is pervasive in schools as well. The statistics are startling:

- 1 of 3 children has experienced weight bias from a teacher (Rudd Report, 2008).
- 2 of every 3 children have experienced weight-related bias from a classmate (Rudd Report, 2008).
- Teachers have a lower expectation for fat students in comparison to thinner students (O'Brien, Latner, Ebneter, & Hunter, 2012).

More frightening is research which documents negative attitudes start in preschool and progress as students' age (Turnbull, Heaslip, & Mcleod, 2000). Addressing those alarming realities, this critical study created sorely needed alternative pathways to self-actualization and body image acceptance by unapologetically confronting obesity ideology and challenging the perceived wisdom of obesity ideology through the creation of counternarratives. It also allows for, as Freire (2000) stated, space for stakeholders to tell their stories of injustice: the bullying, teasing, and violence experienced because of size providing cathartic healing and allowing research partners to expose, critique, and

challenge the master narrative. Engaging in this study revealed the extent to which obesity ideology operates in conjunction with other systems of power and privilege in the lives of a small group of adolescent girls. By deeply analyzing such constructs, research partners became empowered and informed activists who help to dismantle the harmful effects of this ideology.

Schools as Critical Consumers of Societal Inequities

For many adolescent girls, body weight can be a complicated and sometimes multi-faceted issue and when there is no space in schools for learning to critically analyze messages they receive about their bodies, educational institutions become reproducers of social inequities. This study sought to change that reality by supporting students in critically analyzing messages about body size including those that emphasize and even at times rewards fat shaming (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Consider the successful reality series *The Biggest Loser* in which obese contestants battle to see which one can lose the most weight over a week long period. The show's climactic moment is always the weekly weigh-in where contestants stand on a massive scale displaying their weekly weight loss. Ultimately, the winner of *The Biggest Loser* challenge receives a cash prize and the praises of coaches, trainers, family members and friends adoring their new thinner frame.

Viewers are so immersed in the grueling exercise programs and motivational speeches; they never seem to consider the duality of the show's name. Honestly, I did not ponder this subject long myself until 2012, when a former seventh grade student discussed how she considered the show to be rude and thought it should immediately be removed from the weekly line-up. When I inquired as to why she held staunchly to this belief, she quickly rolled her eyes and said, "Come on, Ms. Smith!" She used her

forefinger and thumb to form an "L" and placed it on her forehead. "That show says you are not just losing weight, you are going to lose your loser status as well. It's really a joke." Her astute observation aligns with contestant testimonies. Kai Hibbard, a Biggest Loser contestant in 2006, lost 121 pounds and ridiculed the show because fat-shaming was paramount. She reflected on how trainers would tell contestants, "You're going to die before your children grow up;" "You're going to die, just like your mother;" and "We've picked out your fat-person coffin" (Marr, 2015). These insensitive remarks were to be inspiration to drop the dreaded and evil weight; but also serve to reinforce the notion to be obese is to be relegated to the margins of society (Cash & Smolak, 2011; McMichael, 2013).

Though the contestants may be the source of shaming, they are praised for eradicating their fat, but why? Being thin is not synonymous with better health; just as being overweight is not synonymous with poor health (Farrell, 2011; Oliver, 2006). Yet, our adolescent girls often experience pressure to conform to normative ideals that equate being thin with being healthy and beautiful (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003; Nichter, 2000). The decision, however, to adopt or reject the thin-as-healthy-and-beautiful ideal is dependent upon experiences with size and body ideals in the contexts of their lives (Christakis & Fowler, 2007; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2005; Milkie, 1999). Because schools are often sites of transformation or reproducers of dominant ideology (Giroux, 2001), I was led to examine possibilities for the role of educational institutions in interrupting marginalizing ideologies.

Ironically, the role of schools as critical sites to examine and interrogate body image, obesity, fat-shaming, and ultimately fat-acceptance has little been explored in

qualitative literature. Mueller, Pearson, Muller, Frank, & Turner (2010) maintained that schools blend together "developmentally-similar adolescents for long periods of time provide a social context that is ripe for observation, judgment, and social comparison. The foods girls eat, size of their bodies, weight values and behaviors they verbally or visibly endorse, and their appearance can be observed and used to judge" (p. 65). Because schools are instrumental in socializing female adolescents, it is crucial to examine the role schools play in creating weight-related cultural values (Jones, 2001; Milkie, 1999; Nichter, 2000). Equally important is to examine how schools can become sites of resistance to hegemony (Langman, 2003), particularly with regard to singular definitions of beauty, size, and health. Resistance to these dominant definitions can only be achieved by critically examining the fear and hatred surrounding the obese frame (Bordo, 1993; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). This takes a critically courageous stance rarely exhibited in curriculum and in professional literature.

Freire described courage as a state of being characterized by action "in spite of" fear (Freire, 2000). For him, courage and fear are alternating sides of the same coin; one cannot exist without the other. The only way to begin controlling the fear that binds is to educate it (Freire, 2000). If schools are to be transformational catalysts, adolescent girls need contested spaces to explore the curiosities and fears regarding obesity. Classrooms must become dialogic spaces where students are buffered from emotional turmoil, encouraged to hear, analyze, and interpret alternative points of view; a critical space which fosters a new way of "knowing" and validating the obese body (Blackburn, 2011; hooks, 1994). It is this criticality and focus on the need for change in schools which marks the heart of this study.

Theoretical Framework

For my theoretical framework I evoked two complementing lenses: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Studies (Figure 1.1). Both theories tackle the complexities of race and racism associated with being Black and female in America. CRT examines the endemic nature of racism and the intersections of race and gender. It does not, however, directly address the Black female body. The issue of the Black female form being both hypervisible while remaining partially invisible is dissected in Black Feminist Studies. Both theories help to problematize how obese Black females view themselves through the distortion of dominant ideology. June Jordan (1988) eloquently used the metaphor of the distorted mirror to illustrate this principle. She noted:

> We begin to group up in a house where every true mirror shows us the face of somebody who does not belong there, whose walk and whose talk will never look or sound 'right,' because that house was meant to shelter a family that is alien and hostile to us. (p. 161)

Though the Black obese body will never meet White mainstream society's mark of desirability because of racism's endemic presence (Bell, 1992) it is still expected to strive to obtain this lofty objective. Ironically, it is these failed attempts at desirability which serve to further mar the spirit and nurture further confusion (Jones & Shorter-Goodman, 2003; Mulholland & Mintz, 2001). The obese Black female form is confined to a "house" that never has or, accepting the tenant of racial realism, never will love its inherent beauty. Existing within such warring ideals, trying to love the obese body while being simultaneously told to abhor it, prohibits liberation and reifies the thin White ideal (hooks, 1992; Kraig & Keel, 2001).

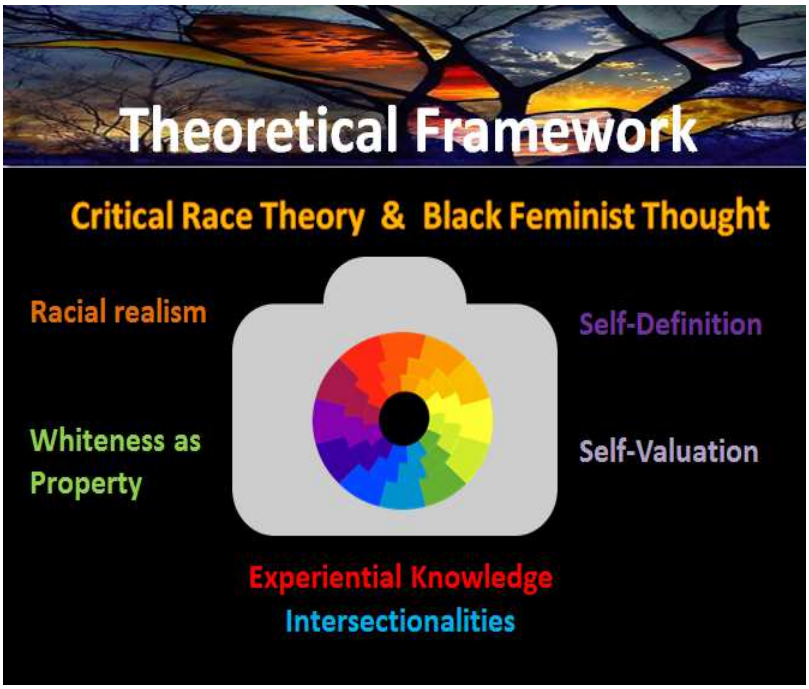


Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

Critical Theory as a general conceptual base informs my interest in Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in legal scholarship with such pioneers as Derrick Bell (1992), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Richard Delgado (2001) and Mari Matsuda (1993). Evolving from Critical Legal Studies (CLS), CRT challenged the fundamental failings of the court system to create and sustain meaningful reform (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Whereas, CLS critiqued liberalism it did very little to address the deeply rooted role of racism in American life (West, 1993). Legal scholars realized new theories and strategies were necessary to challenge more subtle forms of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Loosely defined, CRT is "a strategy that accounts for the role of race and racism in U.S. education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating other forms of subordination such as gender, class, and sexual orientation" (Yosso, Delgado-Bernal, & Solorzano, 1998, p. 90). A traditional

perspective of racism would contend racism is an extraordinary occurrence which is willingly enacted by individuals who are propelled by extreme hatred. In contrast, a critical view of racism argues racism is institutionalized and occurs on a daily basis, it is sanctioned through color-blind policies and discourse and is sustained by actions assumed to apply fairly to all (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Therefore, CRT analyzes how race, racism, and power maneuver with individuals, groups, or institutions in American society by deconstructing dominant ideology and discourse, challenging hegemonic forces that marginalize and oppress people of Color and provides a platform for social transformation by reconstructing agency and power distribution (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Parker, 2006).

CRT is a set of interrelated beliefs comprised of five main tenets. It (a) acknowledges racism is endemic in American life and is observed and felt at various legal, cultural and psychological levels (Tate, 1997); (b) challenges the dominant ideology of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Tate, 1997); (c) challenges White supremacy as the notion of Whiteness as property (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1998) ; (d) recognizes the intersectionality and compounding jeopardies of race, racism, and power with other forms of oppression such as sexism or classism (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Soloranzo & Yosso, 2001); (e) recognizes the power and legitimacy of experiential knowledge and voices of Color (Gillborn, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Soloranzo & Yosso, 2001). Four of these tenets are pertinent for this study: Racism's endemic presence, Whiteness as Property, intersectionalities, and experiential knowledge from voices of Color as transformative sites.

From a CRT perspective, racism cannot be rigidly defined by acts of overt discrimination or violence against people of Color; instead, racism must be understood as a more institutionalized and nuanced presence that is interwoven into the fabric of our lives and is often unrecognizable by those with power and privilege (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). The belief of racial realism is that racism is a permanent fixture. Critics would argue we live in a post-racial America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; West, 2008) where the dreams and goals of the Civil Rights era have been achieved and with hard work and dedication anyone can make it. The myth of post-racial America is just as strong as the myth of meritocracy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and does not give credence to the on-going struggles of Blacks in America to make progress in a society which would deny its existence. Since our forced appearance on the America's shores, Blacks have held a precarious position. "Tolerated in good times, despised when things go wrong, as a people we [Blacks] are scapegoated and sacrificed as distraction or catalyst for compromise to facilitate resolution of political differences or relieve economic adversity" (Bell, 1992, p. 7). Nearly 22 years after Bell wrote these words, this fact still holds true. Being born Black in America means a daily struggle to remain visible and heard in a society which would deem you invisible and mute unless your presence can enhance society or individuals' vitality or livelihood. In truth, being Black in America means striving to uplift and redefine oneself in a society laden with racial disparities by health, education, employment, income and wealth. The reasons given for these disparities regularly put the blame unjustly on those who suffer the consequences of these statistics rather than on the systems of oppression, privilege, profiling, and discrimination that lead to them. The statistics are unsettling:

- Black infants are twice as likely as White infants to die before their first birthday (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).
- Today, nearly half (48%) of all Black boys drop out of high school and 42 percent of all Black boys have failed an entire grade at least once (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012).
- It is estimated that in their lifetimes, a total of 1 in 32 Black women and 1 in 16 Black men will be infected with HIV (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).
- It is estimated that 1 in 6 African-American men have been incarcerated and 1 in 100 African-American women are in prison. Nearly half of the total prison population consists of African-Americans (Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, 2010). Prison is T*he New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2010) and has become America's unspoken economic stimulus.
- Black Americans account for nearly 49 percent of all homicide victims in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007).
- The poverty rate of Black Americans is 27 percent, compared to 9.8 percent for White Americans (Shierholz & Gould, 2012).
- The median household income of Black Americans is 61 percent of that of White Americans, roughly $32,229 compared to $55,412 (Shierholz & Gould, 2012).

After analyzing the data, it is easy to understand although race is not biologically real, but it is socially and politically constructed via law, public policy and social practice to perpetuate power structures historically designed to create race so dominance is assured

(Anyon, 2005; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2009). The effects of this design are far reaching and pervasive across generations (Darden & Cavendish, 2011; Wilson, 1997). From society, we are flooded by the message, "race is only skin deep" Culp (1998) countered this belief by stating, "race is only skin deep, but White supremacy runs to the core…and the work of Critical Race Theory is to go beyond the socially constructed boundaries understanding race's importance" (p. 1639).

Finally, Ladson-Billings (1998) emphasized Delgado's (1989) rationale for understanding the importance of experiential knowledge and voices of Color by stating, "it provides members of the out-group a vehicle for psychic self-preservation and the exchange of stories from teller to listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious (cited in King, 1991) drive or need to view the world in one way" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 23). In a discourse and construct where fat or obese bodies are read as lazy, gluttonous, or lacking moral fortitude (Farrell, 2011; McMichael, 2013; Oliver, 2006); experiential knowledge provides a site for a counterstory and reconstruction of mainstream ideology. In this manner, CRT challenges the many distortions, omissions, and deficit thinking embedded in traditional school curriculum and creates a space for critical analysis.

Black Feminist Studies

Black Feminist Studies was an outcome of the Civil Rights struggles and the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Pioneered by such greats as Frances Beal (1979), Patricia Hill Collins (1991), Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (1981), and Angela Davis (1983), Black Feminist Studies argues Black women are positioned differently in oppressive power structures than their White female or Black male counterparts. Unlike

traditional feminist critique which is largely grounded in the White female experience, Black Feminist Studies "probes the silences, erasures, distortions, and complexities surrounding the experiences of African-American women" (Guy-Sheftall, 2009, p. 11). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) described how Black women were often excluded from feminist studies because it was "predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often did not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (p. 58). Therefore, Black Feminist Studies is grounded in the principle of intersectionality which postulates that oppressive patterns are interrelated and influenced by intersecting systems including race, gender, class, ability, ethnicity and size (Collins, 2000). These converging identities create compounding jeopardies which cannot be fully explained by examining each identity in isolation.

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks (1992) examined the intricacies of analyzing the Black female shape by discussing how media and its representation of the Black female form are used as pedagogical tools which oppress and exploit. Using this lens, the body may be viewed as a text which can be read and a text to which society can add meaning. hooks argues while promoting the hegemony of the thin White ideal, Black women and adolescent girls are marginalized and their beauty is not seen as being worthy of visibility and desire. These ideals become prototypes which African-American women and girls use to assess and judge their bodies (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Melancon & Braxton, 2015).

Black feminist theorist Collins (2000) claimed this homogenized approach to beauty removes racial and ethnic differences that disturb the thin White norm. Thinness becomes a dominant ideology to which all must subscribe. This is done through

bombardment of media, film, music and social media which all reinforce White supremacy with the ultimate goal being the annihilation of Black female subjectivity (hooks, 1992, 2005). According to Black feminists, beauty, then, is not a matter of objectivity; it is a matter of judgment. Theorists have long contended social values can be read through the body (Bordo, 1993; Cahnman, 1968; Glassner, 1988; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). In Eurocentric society, the thin White frame denotes happiness, success and social acceptability (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Melacon & Braxton, 2015). In contrast, the obese Black frame is perceived as being a deviant, lazy, or excessive (Bailey, 2008; Oliver, 2006; Patton, 2006). Framing the Black female body in this manner is oppressive and creates a whirlwind of emotion including self-loathing, guilt, and rage (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Jones & Gooden, 2003). Furthermore, since many Black girls have not critically confronted these images they have no way to acknowledge, name, and speak their pain (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989, 1992, 2005; Poran, 2006) thereby prohibiting healing.

This suffering and marginalization of women of Color as they internalize negative representations has been a corner of Black Feminist Thought (Beal, 1979; Davis, 1983; Lorde, 1984). To resist racist representations Black girls must confront the colonizing ideology by developing a critical consciousness (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990). This requires Black females to critique representations for falsehoods and creating new forms of representations which uplift the Black body. hooks argued (1992) "As long as black folks are taught that the only way we can…be materially privileged is by first rejecting blackness, our history and culture, and then there will always be a crisis in black identity. Internalized racism will continue to erode collective struggle for self-determination" (p.

18). In short, we must confront massive hate by fully loving and embracing our Blackness. Participation in this study allowed five Black adolescent females to build a critical conscious in a space designed to allow them to voice their emotional and psychological turmoil. Being members of a critical and collaborative community which centered dialogues on race, gender, size and the myriad of intersectionalities which exist within and across those dialogues, allowed the participants in this study to "engage in critical dialogue without fear of emotional collapse" in spaces where they could "hear and know one another in difference and complexities of experience" (hooks, 1994, p. 110). When such transformation takes place, schools and teachers create places of sanctuary against White domination and hegemonic forces. By invoking Black Feminism, Black female adolescents are able to view the world through a dual lens which creates an awakened consciousness and an empowered individual; both states are vital for social, political and educational reform.

Intersectionalities and Experiential Knowledge: Applying Dual Lens

If theory is the proverbial camera, an instrument which affords the opportunity to take snapshots of the world to make predictions, analyze patterns or note discrepancies according to a particular paradigm, research base and/or ideology; then applying both Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Theory to the camera only sharpens and refines the image. The combination of the dual lenses allows both the researcher and reader to use CRT to closely analyze and interrogate the presence and use of racial realism and Whiteness as property while drawing on Black Feminist theory to understand how self-definition and self-valuation can be used as resistance strategies. Dual lenses also allow the investigation of connections within and across the tenets of the two complementing

theories: intersectionalities and experiential knowledge until a picture which was once distorted comes into a heightened sense of focus and awareness. These two powerful theories form the backbone of my theoretical framework.

Consider the intersectional and experiential nature of the following example: in the film, *Precious Knowledge* (2011), Director Ari Palos documented the student and community reaction and criticism as the Tucson Unified School District attempted to dismantle the Mexican American/Raza Ethnic Studies program. In a pivotal scene, the documentary main's antagonist, Arizona's Attorney General Tom Horne, is surrounded by protestors and supporters while he gives a speech whose keynote line is, "We are all part of one race: The human race" (Palos, 2011). At first glance, this line appears innocent, but by delving into the heart of both CRT and Black Feminist Theory, it is clear that this myopic belief leads to and is derived from oppression, marginalization and invisibility.

Consider again Attorney General Horne's statement, "We are all part of one race: The human race" (Palos, 2011). It melds the whole of human existence to one single story that is fraught with multiple dangers because it flattens humanity's experience into singular silos and overlooks how our many stories intersect to form our diverse world and our perceptions of it. When reflecting on the importance of stories told about her and those she tells about others, Chimamanda Adichie (2010) explained, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." Adichie is resoundingly accurate because she recognizes many lenses shape our experiences and tint our view of the world; for this study those lenses incorporate perceptions of gender, race,

and body size. In much the same way, a theoretical framework grounds how researchers recognize, name, evaluate, and write about the spaces, places, people, and events in their work. Thus theory selection must be an introspective and reflective process. Both CRT and Black Feminist Theory were carefully chosen because they celebrate the strength of intersectional identities and experiential knowledge. These overlapping identities provide knowledge and wisdom which must be shared an innovative and liberatory format. For this reason, I assert this entire dissertation as an example of ethnopoetics. This powerful theoretical combination and liberating format allow for new stories, often the stories overlooked because they are deemed unworthy, to be shared with the world.

Definition of Terms

For this study, I utilized the following terms:

Black Feminist Theory: This theory argues that sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably bound together. Unlike traditional feminist theories which often focus on White females, Black Feminist Theory analyzes the nuances of the Black feminine experience (Collins, 1991).

Body Mass Index or (BMI): This term refers to a number calculated from a person's weight and height. BMI provides an indicator of body fatness for most people and is used in health care to screen for weight categories (CDC, 2012).

Critical Theory: This is a social theory and philosophy oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole. It aims to delve beneath the surface of social life and normality to analyze and address issues of power, privilege, silencing and marginalization which exist within an oppressive construct and uncover the assumptions that keep us from a full and true understanding of how the world works and how we are

all interconnected (DuBois, 1903; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2000; hooks, 1992; Kincheloe, 2008).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) This theory analyzes race and power in society and comprised of five main tenets (a) racism is endemic in American life (b) challenges the dominant ideology of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy; (c) recognizes experiential knowledge; (d) challenges he notion of Whiteness as property; (e) recognizes the intersectionalities with other forms of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Fat: This is popular culture terminology in the United States to define a person who is overweight or obese based on most Eurocentric Standards. The term serves to reinforce Eurocentric ideals. In the early 1990's, however, the term was appropriated to refer to someone who is (P.H.A.T.) pretty, hot, and thick (Oliver, 2006).

Obese: This is the term used by the United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) to describe anyone with a certain body mass; when the term is applied to adolescents, the "obese" body mass index or BMI is equivalent or above the 95th percentile for individuals in the United States of the same age and sex (CDC, 2012).

Overweight: This is the term used by the United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) to describe anyone with a certain body mass; when the term is applied to adolescents, the "overweight" body mass index or BMI is at or above the 85th percentile and lower than the 95th percentile for individuals of the same age and sex (CDC, 2012).

Text: Text (in this study) refers to any object printed or unprinted, which can be read, interpreted or analyzed. Examples of texts include (but or not limited to) books, poems,

movies/film, songs, graffiti, social media, gestures, facial expressions, movements, and the human body.

Thick: This term is popular African-American culture terminology in the United States to describe a young woman who is curvaceous and has an ample bosom and buttocks. The term thick is inclusive and does allow for a range of body sizes.

Conclusion to the Introduction

Race, body image, and gender are multidimensional as they represent the racial, cultural, gendered, and social interpretations of what beauty is and who counts as beautiful. Yet, within Eurocentric ideals, the definition of beauty is limited and often contains the descriptors White, female, thin, blond hair and blue eyes. This rigid definition is repeatedly conveyed through different mediums to reinforce the ideal that only one definition of beauty is allowed, creating a case of the "haves" and the "have nots." Operating on various levels, this oppressive socialization process provides trauma for many adolescent African-American girls throughout our nation. This study explored the heart of the converging identities of race, gender, and size in the lives of five adolescent, African-American girls. The next chapter will provide a synthesis of related research within which the study is situated. It begins by analyzing obesity definitions and discourse, delves into the multiple dimensions of Black female representation and concludes with insights into Black female adolescent literacy practices which were inherent to the study.

CHAPTER TWO

MALIGNED AND MISREAD: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Prior to beginning this study, I reviewed existing literature in education and social sciences which would inform the study. My inquiry centered on distinct bodies of literature: obesity and adolescents, the Black female form (Black looks and representation), and African-American female literacies. These bodies of literature were the stimuli which motivated this particular research study. After collecting and analyzing data, they continue to be foundational. For these reasons, I review them in this chapter. The discussion of these bodies of work is prefaced by a brief a look at critical theory because of its focus on transformation and social change. A critical lens is also necessary to analyze the differing perspectives on obesity discourse and to examine the interpretations of the Black female form which has been maligned and misread throughout history. Finally, critical theory is essential when understanding African-American female literacies as it moves beyond the traditional notion of literacy as only reading and writing. Critical theory allows for the recognition of multiple literacies existing simultaneously and views literacies as "fluid and social practices, which are forged by attitudes, beliefs, values, and social relationships" (Johnson, 2014, p. 26).

Critical Theory

Critical theory is a social theory and philosophy oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole (Tyson, 2006). By definition, criticism involves the application of principles or values in order to make judgments for the purpose of bringing

about positive change (Gillespie, 2010). Noncritical theories are the amalgamation of propositions, conclusions tightly interwoven which attempt to explain the world and how it arrived to its present state (Given, 2008). Typically flawed many theoretical models, including critical theory, are largely disseminated as the work of White male researchers who are grounded in Eurocentric beliefs and values. For this reason, certain aspects, which formulate Eurocentric value system, go overlooked or unchallenged. In particular, the lack of attention to the legacy of colonialism leads to a major tension with how we view and utilize theory as contextualizing the institution of research.

Since colonial times Europeans have perceived most of the world open to conquest, control and domination. This belief divided the world into two fragments: the colonizers who maintained power and privilege and the colonized who are purposely denied power (Smith, 2012). Eurocentrism is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing emphasis on European concerns, culture and values at the expense of those of other cultures. Eurocentrism involves claiming cultures that are not white or European as being such, or denying their existence at all (Bhambra, 2007). Growing out of this historical reality, many theoretical models are founded upon European and Euro-American ideologies and beliefs which become reified as the theory of the status quo, designed to maintain the functioning of the world as it presently exists.

With this caveat in mind, I embrace elements of critical theories that aim to delve beneath the surface of social life and normality and uncover the assumptions that keep us from a full and true understanding of how the world works and how we are all interconnected (Green & LeBihan, 1996). At its core, Critical Theory advocates that changes and transformation cannot occur without assessing governing structures such as

social, political, and economic systems which affords power, privilege and wealth to a selective, often, predetermined few (Tyson, 2006). Freeman and Vasconselos (2010) contend Critical Theory is an overarching label for participatory, pedagogical, and action-oriented theoretical approaches. Participatory approaches recognize that knowledge cannot stand in isolation but must instead be contextualized. True participation can also not occur without engaging the oppressed in the naming and recounting the injustices inflicted by the oppressor (Freire, 1998, 2000). Pedagogical approaches describe how Critical Theory views the world through an enhanced lens which allows for the reconceptualization of knowledge and power to resist oppressive constructs (Tyson, 2006). Critical Theory is action-oriented because it cannot rely on rhetoric alone, but instead, must enact change. Embedded in Critical Theory is the belief in a radical hope (hooks, 1994); an understanding that oppressive sites can be transformed into liberatory spaces where all voices and stories are recognized.

It is the criticality of Critical Theory which assumes that everything can and should be interrogated, seeking to overturn unjust power structures and recognize and dismantle oppression. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2005), criticality encompasses "the ability of individuals to disengage themselves from the tacit assumptions of discursive practices and power relations in order to exert more conscious control over their everyday lives" (p. 24). They argued that criticality is built upon introspection and acknowledging privilege and implicit biases which may tint our perception. Because of this there were and are critical theorists who lack certain criticality because of their own Whiteness and privilege which still is grounded in this White epistemological way of operating in the world.

When reviewing Critical Theory, I was directed to information on Max Horkheimer Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse (Given, 2008) of the Frankfurt School of philosophers often cited as the original source of the Critical Theory movement originating in the 1920s. I recognize Critical Theory has a longstanding history however; I challenge the idea the Frankfurt theorists were the only critical theorists of the time period. It is hard to note that these names are grounded in a Eurocentric Patriarchy and a premise that is heavily based upon Big "T" theories and little "t" theories derived from the work of primarily European scholars. Traditionally, Big "T" theories are usually highly recognized and widely accepted within a field (Tyson, 2006). For example, the work of theorists such as Marx; members of the Frankfurt school; French philosophers such as Barthes, Derrida, and Bourdieu; and contemporary critical pedagogues such as Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux, have long been reified in the study of critical theory. Once again, it is important to note the commonalities among them - White and Male. Contrastingly, Little "t" theories may be little known and highly relevant theories more generally recognized and appreciated by specific practitioners (Tyson, 2006).

Foundational to the adoption of critical theory that undergirds this dissertation is my believe that the insistence of Big "T" theorists and little "t" theorists reinforce a hierarchal structure for knowledge construction, and ignores racism's endemic presence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Tate, 1997). Thus, I approach critical theory recognizing that if it is to be truly analytical it must be critical of: "capitalism, but also racism, sexism, and colonialism, and how each of the aforementioned overlaps, interconnects, and intersects to deform and destroy life and the ongoing prospects of liberation and democratic socialist transformation. (Rabaka, 2009, p. xiii)

While it may go without saying that the adoption of critical theory requires criticality on the part of the researcher, this is not always the case when it is identified as foundational to empirical work. Thus, I use a critical lens to express my appreciation for basic tenets of critical theory but also to challenge its historical reification of predominantly European scholars. I stand on shoulders of Big "T" theorists who are foundational to the critical movement but too often left out of the dominant discourse in critical theory: Sojourner Truth (1863), W.E.B. DuBois (1903), Anna J. Cooper (1998) and Carter G. Woodson (1933), to name a few. These scholars unapologetically challenged race and inequitable practices and emphasized the importance of service to others because it nurtures compassion and deepens insight as it recognizes humanity (hooks, 1994). They are foundational to my understanding of what critical theory can be. In addition, if I accept that everyone is a theorist, then Critical Theory's radical hope and I would argue, love, allows everyone, students included, to become theorists and activists further educating themselves and others to recognize and take action against the oppression, marginalization and power struggles continuing to wage within our world.

Analyzing Obesity in Adolescents

Over the last 30 years, adolescent obesity has quadrupled in the United States (Ogden, 2010). In 2012, more than one third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014). The United States Center for Disease Control argues that adolescent obesity has many important implications for the healthy well-being of individuals and the American society including heart disease and an increased risk for developing diabetes (CDC, 2012). It is reported that adolescents who are obese are at greater risk for joint problems, sleep apnea, and poor self-esteem (Baum,

2004). A reported $14 billion dollars per year is attributed to medical costs and overweight and obese adolescents (Ogden, 2010). In addition, health analysts argue that adolescent obesity affects our nation's ability to protect itself; as more than a quarter of 17- to 24-year-olds are not fit to enroll in the military due to their weight (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014). These reasons have led to childhood and adolescent obesity being described as a pandemic of the new millennia (Ogden, 2010).

Defining Obesity

If the issue of adolescent obesity is to be properly addressed, it must be defined. Yet, the process of defining obesity has led to many differences in the field of obesity research (Baum, 2004; Christakis & Fowler, 2007). In many health circles, obesity is determined by using Body Mass Index (BMI), a measure of body fat based on height and weight (Ogden, 2010). Using this determinant, adolescents in the 85th to 94th percentile BMI are classified as overweight. Those in the 95th percentile or above are classified as obese (CDC, 2012).

For adolescents, there are not clear definitions for the terms "overweight," or "obesity." The definition of those terms can differ across countries and research studies meaning what is seen as overweight and obese can vary from country to country and culture to culture (Kim & Willis, 2007). As described in the following section, this is particularly true when analyzing the differences in comparing obesity perceptions in African-American female adolescents to Caucasian female adolescents. It is important to further document these contradictions in order to better understand how definitions of body image and beauty can be expanded and become more inclusive.

Cultural Differences

It is important to keep in mind positive aspects of Black culture as they relate to obesity. For African-American adolescents there is a higher rate of obesity with 42.5 Black girls ages 12 to 19 being obese or overweight compared to 37.3 of Black boys (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). Despite the fact African-American adolescent females are classified as being more obese or morbidly obese than their racial/ethnic peers; some sources describe them as more accepting of being overweight or obese and less likely to try to lose weight (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003; Nishina, Ammon, Bellmore, & Graham , 2006; Poran, 2006; Puhl & Latner, 2007). Nichter (2000) conducted a study which examined culturally-valued forms of self-presentation, as identified by African American girls, and, in particular, the context and stimulus in which these forms are illustrated. Her findings revealed while white girls in the study maintained a fixed concept of beauty, the African American girls defined beauty through different criteria including attitude, style, and personality. This finding corresponds to Collins' (2000) argument that while Eurocentric beauty ideals are rigidly constructed, the Afrocentric beauty is "not based solely on physical criteria" (1990, p. 89). This perception is frequently reinforced by popular African American celebrities such as Monique, Queen Latifah, and Gabby Sidibe and reinforced in other mediums such as magazines. Among cover models featured on *Ebony*, a magazine targeting African American readers, 76.4% were average weight, and just 5.7% were underweight (Thompson-Brenner, Boisseau, & Paul, 2011) according to the CDC healthcare guidelines. These images of Black women's diverse body range in television and magazines are slowly changing as each of the aforementioned celebrities have had drastic

weight loss. Botta (2000) hypothesizes this can produce a devastating effect. She contends Black adolescents need:

> not identify strongly with White culture in order to be affected by thin ideals because the thin ideals are no longer just White. Therefore, as more thin Black ideals appear in the media, we would expect more African-American adolescents to make comparisons with those images. (p. 147)

Black adolescent girls need a space, such as the one suggested in this study, to interrogate these changing ideals and analyze impact on identity development and esteem.

Stigma and Violence

For the last 50 years, researchers have documented the prevalence and effects of obesity stigma in children and adolescents (Kraig & Keel, 2001). Much of the research has focused on the negative attitudes children and adolescents have regarding obese individuals (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003; Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Studies have also documented females report teasing, bullying and physical violence more often than males (Latner, Rosewall, & Simmonds, 2007; Latner, Stunkard, & Wilson, 2005). Prevalent obesity stereotypes portray obese individuals are lazy, weak-willed, unsuccessful, unintelligent, lack self-discipline, have poor willpower, and refuse to comply with weight-loss treatment (Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004; Puhl & Latner, 2007).

Davison & Birch (2004) documented the effects of weight-based stigma including depression, decreased academic performance, low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. The longitudinal study including 165 participants revealed that for those participants peer rejection began at an early age and became more pronounced as years go by. Limitations

of the study included a non-diversified population as all participants studied were White. An extant review of literature however reveals a scant number of studies (Braziel & Besco, 2001; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009) which elucidate obesity and literacy studies; in particular, studies examining the impact and portrayal of obesity in adolescent literature and everyday texts.

In 2010, Martínez-Aguilar et al. documented Mexican a group of adolescents' perceptions of obesity and body image. Set at a public school in Tamaulipas, Mexico the qualitative study included 24 participants in the seventh to ninth grades with Body Mass Indexes (BMI) greater than the 95th percentile. The study was conducted over a four month period and utilized semi-structured interviews for data collection. After coding the data, researchers identified six salient themes including the limitations imposed by obesity and various examples of peer rejection. Members discussed difficulty in finding fashionable clothing and being frequently ostracized by teachers as well as peers. It is important to note that participants did not discuss school as providing a safe space in which to discuss and analyze obesity. The lack of conversation surrounding obesity and weight-related stigma can have dire outcomes. One of the most dangerous consequences of obesity stigma is the risk of suicide (Latner, Rosewall, & Simmonds, 2007). My own personal experience stands testimony to this fact as I contemplated suicide being a weary eighth grade student searching for escape. It is a harsh truth that obese adolescents consider suicide more often than that of their average-weight peers.

Although powerful, this topic is little discussed in schools despite a multitude of research displaying obese adolescents often face peer rejection, isolation, humiliation, and hostility during a time in their lives when social acceptance is critical (O'Brien,

Latner, Ebneter, & Hunter, 2012; Puhl & Latner, 2007). Literature provides an avenue of multiple opportunities which enable human beings to meet the various possibilities that life has to offer; therefore, the exclusion of adolescent literature portraying obesity could lead to the prohibition of the adolescent youth speaking their truths (Morrell, 2008; Selvester & Summers, 2012).

Fat Acceptance

Currently, there is a fat acceptance movement which emphasizes health at every size (Campos, 2004; Jutel, 2005; Kelley, 2001; Oliver, 2006; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Dr. Linda Bacon author of *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight* argues:

> The war on obesity has taken its toll. Extensive 'collateral damage' has resulted: Food and body preoccupation, self-hatred, eating disorders, discrimination, poor health, etc. Few of us are at peace with our bodies, whether because we're fat or because we fear becoming fat. Health at Every Size is the new peace movement. It supports people of all sizes in addressing health directly by adopting healthy behaviors. It is an inclusive movement, recognizing that our social characteristics, such as our size, race, national origin, sexuality, gender, disability status, and other attributes, are assets, and acknowledges and challenges the structural and systemic forces that impinge on living well. (p. 4)

The war on obesity has created body dissatisfaction and self-hatred (Bacon, 2008; Oliver, 2006; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). I was one of its many casualties. At the heart of the fat acceptance movement is a criticality which celebrates body diversity; challenges scientific assumptions; and values lived experiences of individuals from varying body

sizes. As the issue of "Black looks and representation" (hooks, 1994) is vitally important, there is a need for critical qualitative research which interrogates body image, obesity, and popular texts and invites adolescent girls to give voice to describe their personal realities and perceptions.

Black Looks and Representation

From its arrival on America's shores, the Black female form has been maligned and misread (Bailey, 2008; Banks, 2002; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; hooks, 1994). Hated from the onset; mocked for its differences; mimicked for its form; its entire essence has been researched, dissected, and reconstructed to reflect the antithesis of White beauty therefore White Supremacy (Collins, 2000; Wallace-Saunders, 2002; Yancy, 2008). Bordo (1993) maintained that Western media representation sustains a homogenized female beauty standard which is devoid of racial or ethnic differences that "disturb Anglo-Saxon heterosexual expectations and identifications (p. 25). This creates a persistent "controlling image" of Black aesthetics (Collins, 1991, p. 68) and become prototypical standards which Black women and adolescents judge, measure, and castigate their bodies (Bailey, 2008; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; hooks, 1994). Although these images are an unrealistic standard for any women to obtain, they are particularly oppressive for women of color as their body size, features and shape which differ from Eurocentric standards of beauty (Collins, 1998, 2000; Gammage, 2015; hooks, 1991, 1994, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Because of this the Black female form has been vilified or eliminated for mainstream media (Bailey, 2008; Banks, 2002; Wallace-Saunders, 2002; Yancy, 2008). hooks (1992) thereby contends, Black women and adolescents must, "critically interrogate old narratives, suggesting alternative ways to

look at blackness, black subjectivity, and, of necessity. Whiteness" (p. 11). This critical examination was the basis of this study. This study is of special significance as there is a paucity of analyses of Black female intersections of race, gender, and size by Black women scholars themselves.

Historical Roots

The claiming of the Black female form dates back to colonization and dehumanizing institution of slavery (Collins, 2000; Harris, 1993; hooks, 1994; Yancy, 2008). One horrific yet realistic example of this is Saartjie Baartman.

Baartman was a South African woman belonging to the population now named Khoisan who was forcibly taken and then exhibited at the Picadilly Circus in London because of the perceived abnormality of her sexual organs (Yancy, 2008). Baartmann endured the indignity of public exhibition and became the subject of popular lore and body shaming before her premature death. Even in death, Baartman's body would find no solace as it was subsequently dissected at the hands of Georges Cuvier, a French anatomist (Harris, 1993). Furthermore, Baartman's body was used as justification to create a permanent perceptual link between the Black female form and hypersexuality as she was indelibly marked as being both lewd and savage; a false naming which still exists today and relegates the Black female form as the antithesis of virtuous, European women (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994, 2000; Townsend, Thomas, & Jackson-Lowman, 2013). Wallace-Saunders (2002) argues that since slavery:

> Black women [and thereby adolescents] are trapped by the externally imposed second skin of misconception and misrepresentation. This shell is both skin deep, as it emphasizes the most superficial versions of Black women, and skin tight, as

> it has proved to be nearly inescapable, even in Black women's self-conception and self-representation. Shedding this illusive layer is a daunting task, yet it is an imperative one of Black women are ever to be seen and to see themselves in a more humane light. (p. 4)

There is an enduring irony in Baartman's subjugation because the media is saturated with images of White celebrities who pay enormous rates to obtain the very same features Baartman was exhibited for: pronounced buttocks and large breasts (Bailey, 2008; Townsend, Thomas, & Jackson-Lowman, 2013). Although these attributes were denigrated on Baartman, somehow, when ascribed to the White female form, it becomes socially acceptable and alluring (Collins, 2000; Poran, 2006; Wallace-Saunders, 2002). As Eurocentric culture has been deeply embedded in controlling the Black female form, a place must be provided where these enduring double-standards are interrogated, challenged, and dismantled.

Reclaiming Representations

Both Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory appeal to resisting the hegemonic ideals present in Eurocentric standards (Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) particularly regarding the Black female form. Collins (2000) postulates that "the controlling images applied to black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance" (p. 100) Therefore, Black female adolescents must focus on their lived realities as a critical back- drop to discussions of their weight and body (hooks, 1994; Townsend, Thomas, & Jackson-Lowman, 2013). If the wounds inflicted by Eurocentric standard of beauty are ever to be cured, a "radical intervention" (hooks,

1994, p. 4) is necessary and Black female adolescents must delve into layers of misrepresentation which permeate the Black female form.

Black Female Adolescent Literacies

As Kellner and Share (2005) emphasize, "Coming to voice is important for people who have seldom been allowed to speak for themselves, but without critical analysis it is not enough" (p. 371). For Black girls and the community of young Black women as a whole, it is imperative to have a space and an opportunity to give voice to their life experiences (Brooks, 2006; McArthur, 2016; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Winn, 2011). Much like the Black female form, Black girls' narratives have been falsified or incompletely told (Muhammad, 2015). Scholars have called for the need to center Black girls in literacy research by speaking to the invisibility of girls in schools, classrooms, and research literature (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; McArthur, 2016; Winn, 2011), the ways in which they are misrepresented and dehumanized in the public media (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015), and the disconnect between their lives and interests with sanctioned curriculum (Evans-Winters, 2005).

While writing among these problems, researchers have pointed to the intricacies of Black girlhood and how their literacies are deeply complex and the need to center their ways of knowing and being in the world (Evans-Winters, 2005; Winn, 2016). Redefining literacies would provide space in which invisible beings become visible and voices that were once overlooked finally become heard. It is through this use of personal narrative and storytelling, that readers begin to "shift the lens through which many in dominant culture view people of color and also empower people of color to counteract the stories of the dominant culture" (Dixson and Rousseau, 2006, p. 122).

Davis (2000) concluded that African-American students positively responded to literature mirroring their own lives and experiences because they felt validated. Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot (2010) noted that this validation can only occur if students are familiar with African-American history. Other studies have documented the occurrences of African-American students feeling conflicted with depictions that were unfamiliar or presented scenarios, such as racism, which they actively sought to avoid (Moller & Allen, 2000).

Brooks (2006) references previous research examining the parallels of culturally conscious literature and literary understanding. A study by Copenhaver (2001) recognized that literature depicting students' cultural backgrounds can aid in increasing engagement and understanding in narrative conventions such as plot and conflict. Utilizing culturally conscious African-American literature deepened the interpretations of student participants as they could connect their lives and experiences to the texts they read (Evans-Winter, 2005; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Winn, 2016). Yet still, there is a vast disconnect between literacy policy and practice. Street (2001) asserts that educators, researchers, and policy-makers must "be wary of assuming a single literacy where we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people's literacies" (p. 430), reinforcing the value of all literacies. While this truth is the foundation of Critical Theory, it is not one that is equitably applied.

Traditionally the stories of Black girls have been misrepresented, overlooked, or completely unwritten; however, the significance of these experiences can no longer be cast aside (Chang, 2016; Crenshaw & Nanda, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2016; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). We must endeavor to analyze those same

experiences so that we may learn more and better prepare and inform the next generations. It is through these shared experiences that we gain insight in the political, social, economic and cultural impetus that accompanies being black and female.

Conclusion to Chapter Two

Freire and Macedo (1987) argue "reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world…this movement from the word to the world is always present" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 25), thereby making reading any text, even reading the body, an ongoing, critical, political, literacy practices. Freire (2000) literacy moves beyond being a cognitive skill and it must incorporate an in-depth critique of power relationships. Since this is a real-issue, adolescents are more likely to be engaged. This study invites engagement because it "explicitly teaches adolescents how their personal and collective power is related to influence and access to resources, or that the degree of ease to which their rights are exercised in America is related to socioeconomics, race, language and gender" (Selvester & Summers, 2012, p. 10). By participating in such curriculum, like the members of this research study, educators are linking effective literacy practices with critical pedagogy, identity development, youth engagement, and activism.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study utilized critical race narrative, ethnopoetics, and auto-ethnography methodologies to explore and document how an eighth grade literature study group responded to depictions of obesity in adolescent literature and media for the purpose of providing insights on how adolescent literature discussion groups can be utilized to analyze societal constructs regarding the confluence of messages about size, gender, and race.

Rationale: Methodological Stance

To develop a qualitative methodological stance, I drew upon my knowledge of auto-ethnography, critical race counternarrative, and arts-based research - specifically ethnopoetics. explained below. Each is briefly

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative method which blends the characteristics of autobiography and ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Autoethnography builds upon the idea of transformation because it alters time allowing past events to be viewed and analyzed from several different perspectives including event member and researcher in the present; engages vulnerability helping to clarify purpose; embodies creativity and innovation as it allows unique experiences - in this case by experiences with racism,

gender bias, and sizism to be illuminated, reviewed and redefined (Custer, 2014; Denzin, 1994). Utilizing autoethnography permits productions of evocative personal and interpersonal memories by having the researcher discern patterns of her or his own experience (Goodall, 2001; hooks, 1994). Incorporating such methodology not only allowed me to examine and share my personal stories related to race, body image and gender, it also allowed me to serve as a witness (Denzin, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006) for the brutal and often subtle cruelties of the obesity experience and a co-narrator with the students as we examined texts to hopefully validate others and inspire change.

Critical Race Counternarratives

Delgado & Stefancic (2012) defined counternarratives in the service of Critical Race Theory as the telling the stories of marginalized individuals, which serve as sites and stories of resistance. Counternarratives recognize the rich history of story-telling in African and African-American heritage and build upon the myriad of unheard and untold stories and experiences for people of Color. Since stories are told in a variety of manners, counternarratives exist in a variety of styles including personal stories (Espinoza, 1990), narratives (Fernandez, 2002), and composite stories (Bell, 1992). Soloranzo and Yosso (2002) declared, “Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 32). In essence, racist ideology creates and strengthens the “master narrative” which perpetuates White female privilege and the idea of thin and beautiful being synonymous. This oppressive ideology silences voices of Color and erodes Black beauty values and beliefs. The power of counternarratives lies in their ability to speak back and critique the majoritarian narrative and proudly declares that White privilege cannot and does not allow the right to tell a

story which is not yours (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). By emphasizing experiential knowledge from people of Color, counternarratives allow for the witnessing of truths long silenced as it critiques social, political and cultural constructs.

Critical race counternarrative was foundational to my methodology because it provided a way for me to capture the voices of my research partners. Delgado (2002) affirmed "an emphasis on experiential knowledge also allows researchers to embrace the use of counterstories, narratives, testimonios, and oral histories to illuminate the unique experiences of students of Color" (p. 109). In traditional educational approaches, experiential knowledge of oppressed and marginalized people, is regularly viewed and dismissed as a deficit (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Critical Race Theory (CRT), however, proudly proclaims it as strength that must be heard, validated, and acted upon. Embracing such methodology allows researchers to strive to create contexts in which research partners may speak their truths – share and utilize experiential knowledge - in a manner which is both comfortable and heart-felt; reaffirming their positions as creators and holders of knowledge. This opportunity was at the foundation of the literature discussion sessions I designed for and with this study's research partners (the students), creating rich contexts for the collection and analysis of data and our consideration of action for the future.

Ethnopoetics

Barone and Eisner (2011) affirmed arts based research as a methodology that allows researchers to "revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it with fresh eyes and thereby calling into question a singular orthodox point of view" (p. 16). For this study, I draw on the arts by using ethnopoetics as a methodological tool. Given (2008)

described ethnopoetics as a verbal art form which exists in all languages and cultures and utilizes such techniques as prayers, chants, and praises. Ethnopoetics allowed me to analyze and represent data in ways which have the potential to cast a new light on issues of body image, race, and gender. As a resistance platform, ethnopoems assert poetry as a truth-bearing and deconstructive tool which challenges the idea of "normality" because for there to be a normal an "other" must exist (Collins, 2000). In particular, because normalized, singular Western views of body image have long served as social markers of acceptance, a moral barometer and a tool of marginalization and disenfranchisement (Murray, 2005), ethnopoetics provided an opportunity for me to revisit the world from a different direction as I called into question orthodoxies that view the obese form as a transgression of "acceptable" boundaries, as not normal (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). In a discourse and construct where overweight or obese bodies are read as a moral and physical violation and where race and gender are melded into a singular social identity, experiential knowledge articulated through ethnopoetics allows for a reimagining of the body. Ethnopoetics is a perfect tool to create such moments as different poetic forms create new meaning and new understandings (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Context

This study was conducted at a middle school in the Southeastern United States, where data were collected after school hours during a literature discussion group that I held for five eighth grade girls. Described below are the contexts within and beyond the middle school setting and rationale for the study's placement in those contexts.

South Carolina

According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2015 South Carolina's demographic population was comprised of 67% White, 30% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 1% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). South Carolina has a long-standing history of being mired in issues which have negatively impacted race and race relations including controversies over the Confederate Flag which flew over the statehouse capital building from 1961 to 2015 (Cooper & Knots, 2006; Webster & Lieb, 2001) and recent incidents of racial profiling and brutality which include police officers detaining and in some cases murdered Black citizens simply because they were seen driving in predominantly white neighborhoods (CNN, 2013). These stories, just as the stories of myself and the young women in this study, are not exclusive to South Carolina and provide rich examples of African-Americans and lived experiences dealing with the race and racism in the United States. South Carolina is also a state with high obesity rates according to recent health measures. In 2012, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) ranked South Carolina seventh in the nation for obesity stating 31.6 % of adults in South Carolina are obese and 33.4% of women are obese (p. 10).

Raven School District (pseudonym)

At the time of this study, the district in which it was conducted enrolled 23, 000 students from 41 countries. The district is geographically situated over 480 square miles and houses 28 elementary schools, nine middle schools, seven high schools and eight specialty or charter schools. Its demographics include 73% African-American, 19% White and 8% students from other ethnicities. Seventy-three percent of the population

participates in the free or reduced lunch program and 27% of the student population pay full-price for their lunch.

Houston Middle School (pseudonym)

The study was situated within Houston Middle School which houses students in the sixth through eighth grades and is located within a community in the district. Its 2014 report card noted a school enrollment of 896 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students comprised of 54.2% African-American, 35.6% White and 10.2% other ethnicities. Houston Middle was also chosen due to my relationship between the local university and the teacher education department in that university. At the time of study, I worked with the local university serving as a professional development liaison as the school was a Professional Development School (PDS). A PDS is a school that is in partnership with the local university which allows for teaching interns to be placed with coaching teachers within the building and professional development to be provided for the school. As a liaison, I supervised the interns and provided professional development on school-selected topics. I also previously worked at this middle school as a reading specialist and taught in the after-school program for three years. Therefore, I have a long-term established relationship with teachers, administrators, and students in the school that allowed for easy access to the study's members.

Houston's After-School Program

Houston Middle School utilizes an after-school program in grades six-to-eight. The program services students who have not met mastery of specific literacy and mathematics skills according to the state's assessment system. The program was also developed to meet Raven School District's six identified purposes for academic

improvement including tutorials, homework assistance, childcare, compensatory remediation, enrichment and test preparation. The ultimate goal of the afterschool program was to provide a safe-haven for students to engage in structured activities that would benefit them academically, emotionally, and physically. The program operated on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Students entered the cafeteria at 4:00 pm to receive an evening meal. After their meal, students received homework assistance from the teachers. This occurred in a small-group setting with teachers serving as content level specialists across grade level bands. At 4:30 pm, students were released to their content and grade level specific classes and remained with their instructors until dismissal at 5:55 pm. At this time, students were dismissed to their school buses or to meet awaiting parents/guardians.

Literature Group Meeting Area

The five young women who were members in this study met with me in Houston's Media Center Conference Room (see Figure 3.1) as a part of the tutorial element of the after-school program. The conference room was a private area situated within the school's Media Center which housed their professional development resources. The room featured a large oblong table and comfortable chairs which reclined or rocked. The table was large and offered group members space to spread out their belongings. The room had a large dry-erase board which we used to chronicle information such as charting group responses to journals and other texts. I selected this room for the reasons outlined above and arranged for our use of the room by speaking with Houston's media specialist. The door was locked at all times during literature group

meeting times and a sign hung outside the door to note that a literature group was in session and should not be disturbed.

Figure 3.1: Media Center Conference Room

Research Partners

I am proud of the criticality and awareness in this study. For this study, rather than using the term, participant, I described the young women in my study as my research partners or literature group members. Freire and Macedo (1987) suggest that critical literacy should engage students in developing a critical consciousness which they use to probe the interrelated structures in which they come to know and learn the world around them. Such analysis moves a member from solely consuming information to building a critical consciousness. Developing a sense of critical consciousness is also an underlying principle of CRT and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Thus, I utilize the labels*, research partner* and *literature group member* to reflect my commitment to anchoring this study in what I hoped to establish as a culture of reciprocal knowledge construction. Through our discussions, I learned from the students just as they learned from my contributions. As research partners, they helped me collect, analyze, and

decide how to write about data. Through these activities we all became more critically conscious.

I utilized criterion sampling for research partner/group member selection. Patton (2001) defined criterion sampling as the researcher's attempt to, "review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (p. 238). Described below, the five research partners were selected based on several criteria including (a) race; (b) gender; (c) grade level attainment; and (d) participation in the middle school after-school program.

All members in this group were African-American females. While I recognize that the issue of obesity is far-reaching affecting both females and males, this study focused on African-American females as it was my tumultuous journey through adolescence and my concern with former students struggling to deal with obesity which sparked the inquiry. The female research partners were from a range of social economic backgrounds. The partners also comprised variety of body sizes. This is because our understanding of body size does not occur with obese individuals alone. We utilize the knowledge of both thin and that which is not thin to formulate perception. It is the constant tension between the obese body and the "thin ideal" where knowledge construction is formed (Bordo, 1993; Glassner, 1988; Latner, Roswell, & Simmons, 2007; Latner, Stunkard, & Wilson, 2005).

All members of the group were eighth grade students. I sought research partners from the oldest students in the school because my plan was to utilize texts that were not appropriate for younger audiences – movies with PG-13 ratings, musical excerpts with explicit lyrics such as profane words and young adult novels that were rated by the

American Library Association to be appropriate for eighth graders. Since, these criteria yielded a large result of possible partners; I also employed snowballing sampling. Patton (2001) defined snowballing sampling as "identifying cases of interest from sampling people who know people who know what cases are information rich" (p. 243). Employing this method, I interviewed Houston Middle School's after-school coordinator and teachers and as a result determined the five students who became partners in the study.

Most important, the research partners were members of the after-school program. Since the study partners were a part of this program for their entire middle school experience, there was already a strong established community. Since I had served as a university supervisor and PDS liaison, I had the pleasure of interacting with the after-school program prior to the initiation of this study.

The research partners decided the literature group needed a name. As a group they tossed out and discarded suggestions. Jennifer offered the suggestion of the name blue devils as this was the mascot of the high school in which they all would attend. Kelsey suggested dropping the name devils as it had a negative connotation and emphasized, "We ain't devils anyway. We good. We shine like diamonds." Marie exclaimed, "That's it! That's it right there!" As a group, the members voted and all agreed on the name, and the Blue Diamonds were formed. As an observer/facilitator (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996), I could not assume that I was a Blue Diamond; this right could only be obtained through invitation. So, rather than imposing myself as a Blue Diamond, I joined in as seamlessly as possible, while recognizing that they would always see me as teacher and in some ways, other: I listened to discussions, shared my journal as they shared theirs,

assisted with homework and celebrated academic successes. When the girls discussed family drama, I did not judge. Instead, I shared examples from my family's saga. On day three, the girls were hugging goodbye. I sat back and observed the support and love. Suddenly, Melody looked at me and proclaimed, "Why ain't you in this?" I did not know what to reply. Kelsey sensed my confusion and stated, "You supposed to be a part of this hug. You know you a Blue Diamond too."

Each of the Blue Diamonds selected a personal pseudonym. Using their pseudonyms, the members of the group are described briefly below.

Amir

Amir was well-known throughout Houston Middle School for her dynamic personality. She could often be heard shouting from one end of the hallway to the next enthusiastically greeting her friends. Amir was a year behind the other Blue Diamond girls as she had been retained during her seventh grade year. Amir and I already knew each other as we met when I observed her seventh grade English/language arts class. When I first met Amir, I interpreted her to be belligerent because she was arguing with her teacher and used her personality to disrupt the class by telling jokes. After talking with her outside of the class, however, she confessed to not understanding the material and being bored by the teacher's reading selection. I helped Amir find a book which interested her and a bond was formed. Amir was energetic, loved track and talking on her cell-phone.

Marie

Consultation with the after-school coordinator revealed that Marie had never completed an entire school term due to suspensions or expulsions. The repeated absences

affected her academic performance and she was often in danger of failing her grade. Despite this, Marie was an avid reader and could often be seen in the media center but admitted that she would hide her books because she did not want anyone to know how much she loved reading. She would, however, discuss reading with me; as long as I agreed to read her recommended texts. At first, Marie was distant and would not engage in conversation beyond the pleasantries of greetings, but once we began to discuss the novel she was reading at the time, she opened up and began discuss to other interests such as music and cooking. As she did, I realized, Marie had an infectious smile.

Jennifer

I met Jennifer when she was in the sixth grade and I was a guest speaker in her English/language arts class. During the lesson, Jennifer could constantly be observed turning around in her seat and talking to her classmates. When redirected, Jennifer would quickly scribble something down on paper and immediately resume her previous discussion. The day I was the guest teacher, to keep her engaged, I modified Jennifer's writing assignment asking her to describe her ideas orally and then put it on paper. The class time elapsed and Jennifer was still writing. The next day, she begged her teacher to allow her to travel to my office to share her finished piece.

Kelsey

Kelsey and I met for the first time during the fall semester of 2013. Kelsey was an academic conundrum as she was in advanced placement classes for math and English/language arts but did not meet mastery on the ELA portion of the state's assessment program. Kelsey typically always smiled and could be observed mediating

arguments between her friends. She was a technology junkie and would easily describe how to use social media. She loved music, dance, and of course, boys.

Melody

Melody and I also met for the first time during the fall semester of 2013. Melody was a member in the poetry club which I helped sponsor as a liaison and I had the pleasure of reading her work Melody was quite reserved and often did not talk in her classes. If she had a question, Melody would approach the teacher only after all other students were dismissed. She was grade conscious and wanted to do well. She would not readily admit that she disliked reading and writing. She loved music, videos, and fashion and often shifted through magazines. She did not, however, consider those activities a form of reading.

Dywanna

Dywanna was a researcher, scholar, and middle school educator with 12 years of middle level experience. As a teacher, Dywanna worked within Houston Middle School until she decided to become a full-time student to pursue her doctoral degree. She became a graduate student at the local university. One of her job duties was to be a liaison between the school and university serving as a supervisor for pre-service teachers and providing professional development for Houston. She is an avid reader and writer who claims poetry as her heart's language and self-identifies as being fat; a moniker which has served various roles within her life including shame, depression, and finally a loving acceptance.

Obtaining Partner Consent

Letters were sent home to the research partners' families requesting permission to allow their children to participate in an afterschool literature group which would focus on how adolescents respond to body image, gender, and race in adolescent texts (see Appendix A). The letter identified this study's goals and provided a brief description of its parameters as well as explaining the benefits of participating which included the academic skills students would learn while participating. The letter also explained how participating in this project had the potential to provide a greater understanding into the ways negotiating race, gender, and size could impact educational practices. The letter informed parents all interviews and other materials would remain confidential and explained that under no circumstances would data be shared with anyone without their explicit permission, nor would research partners experience any discomfort as a result of participation in this study. The letter explained how the results of this research project may be presented at academic conferences, professional meetings, or in publications; however pseudonyms would be used for the students and the school. Finally, the letter stated that their children's involvement was entirely voluntary and they had the right to discontinue participation at any time. The signed parental permission forms are kept in a locked file cabinet in my office. I have the only key to this cabinet.

Obtaining Human Subjects Approval (IRB)

I submitted my Human Subjects Approval plan to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the same time I submitted this proposal to my dissertation committee. The plan contained a description of the study, questions, research partners, and data collection

methods. The plan also included sample student consent forms and described methods of ensuring safety and privacy. The proposal was approved on April 15, 2015.

Data Collection Methods

A variety of data collection methods were utilized in this study. Data were collected in the forms of semi-structured interviews, literature group discussions; students' counternarratives, students' journaling, researcher's field journal, and my own poetry. Table 3.1 illustrates the research questions for the study as they were aligned with data sources and my methods of analysis. Each form is described below.

Table 3.1

Research Questions, Data Sources, and Analysis

Research Questions	Data Sources	Method of Analysis
1. How do a group of five eighth grade African-American girls at a middle school in the southeastern U.S. (Houston Middle School, pseudonym) respond to portrayals of size, race, and gender in adolescent texts and media?	• Literature Study Artifacts • Research Partner Journals • Field Journal/Research Journal • Semi-structured individual interviews • Audio-Recordings of Sessions	• Protocol coding, In Vivo coding of journals, field notes, transcriptions and observations to identify how the members' perceptions and beliefs about race, gender, and body size changed throughout the study • Descriptive coding, Protocol coding, Emotional coding and In Vivo coding of literature group artifacts, transcriptions, and journals
2. How do these portrayals impact the girls and their identities and literacy practices?	• Literature Study Artifacts • Research Partner Journals • Field Journal/Research Journal • semi-structured individual interviews • Audio-Recordings of Sessions	• Protocol coding, In Vivo coding of journals, field notes, transcriptions and observations to identify how obesity/body image portrayals impact their identities and literacy practices • Descriptive coding, Protocol coding, Emotional coding and In Vivo coding of literature group artifacts, transcriptions, and journals

3. What happens when they are given the opportunity to create counternarratives about gender, race, and obesity?	• Counternarratives • Research Partner Journals • Field Journal/Research Journal • Semi-structured individual interviews • Audio-Recordings of Sessions	• Protocol coding, In Vivo coding of journals, field notes, transcriptions and observations to identify how girls experienced the process of creating counternarratives • Descriptive coding, Protocol coding, Emotional coding and In Vivo coding of counternarratives, transcriptions, and journals

Interviews

Interviews were one method of data collection for this study. Our ideas of obesity are socially constructed so interviews were important dialogic spaces that allowed research partners to verbally illustrate events and experiences they deemed to have significance to their understanding and construction of obesity and beauty (Brinkmann, 2013). To obtain information regarding how students' interpreted ideals of beauty as represented in the media are interpreted and passed down from parents to their children cultural interviews were utilized. Through these interviews, I was able to ask the students about "their memories, experiences, and understandings of events in their lives [using interviews as a] kind of a witnessing that challeng[ed] and counter[ed]'the official story' document[ing] voices silenced and ignored by mainstream culture" (Glesne, 2011, p. 103-104). Cultural interviews allowed the research partners to share their stories of how they learned their views of obesity.

Interviews were conducted at the beginning and end of a six-week research period using a semi-structured format. Interviews were scheduled to take place after school upon securing transportation for the students to be able to travel home afterward. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis and coding. During the interviews,

I also utilized a field journal (Schwandt, 2007) to triangulate (Denzin, 1994) data as well as take notes on emotional and nonverbal responses which are not detected by audio-only devices. Conducting these interviews at the beginning and end of the study allowed me to note growths and shifts in patterns of thought and served as a reflection and monitoring tool for members. Interview questions are provided below. The questions were developed to promote reflective thinking and help capture research partners' lived experiences:

- What comes to mind when you hear the words obese or fat? Why do you think you have those thoughts/feelings? Where and how do you think you learned them?
- What is it like being a Black adolescent female? Can you think of examples?
- What are the expectations of Black adolescent females in your home? In schools? In American society?
- What stigmas, if any, do you feel are associated with obesity or fat? Can you think of examples?
- What do you believe is society's ideal body size? Why do you think that? How did you come to this belief?
- What do you feel is your ideal body size? Do you feel there is a conflict with that ideal and society's ideal? Why or why not? Why do you think that? How did you come to this thought?
- What messages did you receive regarding body image and size? Who or what sent those messages? Where and how do you receive those messages?

- How do the media continue or stop body image and size tension? Give examples.
- Tell me a story about a time you have seen an obese or fat person in your life. How did you feel? How do you think that person felt? Why do you think you and the person felt that way?
- Do you think young people need assistance to deal with body and size issues in terms of identity? Should schools play a role? Why? Why not? How do you think schools can assist with body size and identity issues?

Literature Study Group/Artifacts

The literature study group was the foundation of the afterschool experience served as another point of data collection. The girls analyzed adolescent memoirs, popular music that discussed body images, photographs and magazine images through informal spontaneous conversations as well as discussion questions I developed to facilitate our talk around each text (see Table 3.2). Each text was specifically chosen because of its ability to interrogate race, gender, and size. By analyzing the intended message, observing and reflecting on presence or absence of stories, and sharing their own lived experiences, research partners were able to examine converging social identities. Data which included literacy group artifacts, member journals, researcher and field notes were gathered from the study group sessions as the students and I discussed literature and analyzed artifacts from the media pertaining to obesity and body image.

Table 3.2:

Text Selection

Session:	Texts:	Discussion Questions:
1: Body Size Images	Google images of adolescent girls from various body types including skinny, thick, and obese.	What words come to mind when you see her? What is her life like inside of school? What is her life like outside of school?
2: Social Media Analysis	Images from girls social media pages	Why did you decided to post this image? What does it reveal about you? How do you decide what images to keep or delete on your social media pages?
3: Body Image Analysis: Race	Skin Tone Chart	Which tone do you find the most appealing? Why? Which do you find the most unattractive? Why? What issues or problems, if any, arise with skin tone? Explain.
4: Body Image Analysis	Body Image Scale	Which size do you find the most appealing? Why? Which size do you find the most unattractive? Why? What issues or problems, if any, arise with size? Explain.
5: Musical Analysis	"All About the Bass"	What does this song reveal about body image? Which line(s) reveal this? What does it reveal about race, gender, or size? What memories or experiences does the song provoke?
6: Magazine Analysis	Barbie Sports Illustrated Cover Nigerian Doll Article	What does this image/article reveal about body image? How do you know this? What does it reveal about race, gender, or size?

		What memories or experiences does the image/article provoke?
7 & 8: Literary Texts	Adolescent Obesity Memoir	What is the message of the story?
		How do you know this?
		What memories or experiences does the article provoke?
9 & 10: Body Image Collages	Google images selected by research partners	Why did you select the image(s)?
		What patterns or trends did you notice?
		What does this reveal about body image, race, or size?
11-15: Counternarratives	Selected by Research Partners	Why did you select this style?
		What were the benefits? What were the disadvantages?
		How was the process of creating the counter-narrative?
		What does this reveal about body image, race, or size?

Each meeting of the Blue Diamond Literature Group had a structured format. On day one, research partners introduced themselves by using a photograph and words to describe themselves. The girls created taxonomies or lists of introductions. The introductions included items such as names, favorite colors, number of siblings, favorite subjects in school, and favorite musicians. Interestingly enough, all girls admitted to hating reading and writing. This is correlated in their Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) and Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) scores which are all below grade level. The research partners then examined three pictures and wrote their "gut" reactions to three images of overweight or obese individuals. The pictures consisted of a fashionably skinny woman, a woman who is overweight but not by American standards,

and an extremely obese teenager. Partners were instructed to annotate the images, explaining their reactions and how they imagined the person's life.

The remaining Blue Diamond literature group meetings followed a similar structure. Each day, however, featured a new textual artifact. Members read and annotated textual artifacts. Research partners volunteered to lead the group discussion. All discussions were audiotaped and fully transcribed. The discussion was organic and pertained to research partners' interests and queries. Since the community was well-established and close-knit, all members spoke in every book discussion. Two questions were utilized to begin discussion (a) How did the text depict the overweight or obese individual; and (b) What tools or were utilized to describe or define the obese individual?

Although these were not formal focus group sessions, they utilized aspects of focus group methodology. For example, Berg (2007) asserted that focus groups allow researchers to, "strive to learn through discussion about conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious psychological and sociocultural characteristics and process among groups" (p. 145). This is the process which occurred through our literature discussions. I served as facilitator using a semi-structured format. I wanted the opportunity to "delve deeper" with data collection by being a part of the research process as not merely an observer, but a member observer.

Creating Counternarratives

As a part of our literature study, the research partners were charged with the task of creating counternarratives for females struggling with pressures of race and size. To begin this task, I asked the girls to reflect on ways in which we tell the stories of our lives. Their responses included songs, photographs, books, dance and poetry.

Once each girl individually reflected, we began to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of each method. Afterwards, the girls were allowed to select one or two methods to create a counternarrative from the aforementioned genres. Four days were provided in the media center for the research partners to brainstorm ideas about their selected methods before creating their own counternarratives. As the girls worked, I served as an archivist to write down ideas and take notes.

Journaling

Throughout the study, students recorded their thoughts in journals. Each member was provided with journal to collect their thoughts and insights on group activities. This allowed research partners to continue engaging with activities after the conclusion of each session by adding insights, comments, or questions as necessary; which they often did. It also allowed for research partners who are reluctant to speak out in the group a less intimidating manner of participating. As adolescence is a period of time when young girls seek acceptance from their peers, the journal provided a contested space for members to reveal their innermost truths; a truth they may not have felt comfortable sharing with the entire group.

Research partners journaled on a weekly basis around topics I provided to support their reflection on their experiences as Black female adolescents, discuss their definitions of body image, and to describe the life of an obese adolescent as seen through their eyes. They also wrote about self-selected topics including dealing with anger when reprimanded in school and how to determine if your outfit has slayed.

Journaling time occurred during the last fifteen minutes of each study session. To help protect member privacy and confidentiality, when journals were not in use they were

locked inside of a file cabinet in my office. I was the only individual with a key to access the cabinet.

Journals were a part of the supplies distributed to each member at the beginning of the literature group. Each member was presented with a suitcase containing a journal, ink pens, markers, and candy (see Figures 3.2) and were decorated by the students (see Figure 3.3). The suitcase contained a lock and provided an extra amount of security. I wanted each individual to feel welcomed to the community and wanted to demonstrate my commitment to learning from them. For this reason, I shared notes from my research journal. Like the Blue Diamond Girls, my journal shared the same dates and topics but also included my personal insights and interpretations. I shared these selections because I hoped it would make each member feel more welcomed into the community and it also displayed my commitment to grow and learn alongside them. I realized this was the case when the girls began to comment on my responses explaining what they enjoyed the most. This also allowed me to fact check by asking members about the interpretations.

Figure 3.2: Journaling Supplies

Figure 3.3: Partners with Research Supplies

Researcher's Field Journal and Notes

My researcher's reflective journal and field notes which were recorded electronically. The journal allowed me to describe my feelings and observations about conducting research in this area of study. According to Morrow and Smith (2000), the use of a reflective journal adds rigor to qualitative inquiry as the investigator is able to record his/her reactions, assumptions, expectations, and biases about the research process. In this way, the field notes provided additional data. I recorded reflections in my field journal daily. Reflections include my interpretive descriptions about the overall tone of the sessions, descriptions of the girls including body language and vocal tone, and questions which arose throughout the session. Capturing such thoughts helped with data triangulation and member checking because they became pausing and reflection points in which to ask the girls for further clarification to ensure what occurred was properly interpreted. To ensure this occurred, I devoted time after each session to record insights

into the field journal. When I was not using the journal, it remained locked in my file cabinet.

Throughout the study, this field journal was utilized to construct the auto-ethnographic sections of this dissertation. As the research partners traversed through their journey of identity and awareness, their testimonies and stories served as markers and reminders of my own experience. When these moments occurred, I chronicled the memory and its catalyst into my field notes which served to create an auto-ethnographic roadmap. Oftentimes when I reflected, my thoughts did form in typical sentence/narrative format. At times, my mind immediately directed me to write in a style in which I felt more comfortable: poetry. Therefore, my reflections comprised a range of formats including outlines, bulleted notes, lists, prose, and poetry. These formats were eventually combined to capture multiple elements and perspectives of the study experience which included my own.

Data Organization

Data were collected electronically and downloaded into folders on my computer. The journals were spiral notebooks. Each individual journal was scanned and placed into a folder titled with each of the girls' names. Each folder was password protected to ensure confidentiality. I also backed up data on an external drive, both of which required passwords to access study files. Hard copies of journals and artifacts were organized chronologically into folders which was an important way to back up and store data. All data were kept in a secure location – my locked office at home and/or at work – to ensure confidentiality.

Data Coding

To code and analyze the data, I engaged in four coding cycles. For the first coding cycle, I utilized protocol coding which is described by Saldana (2013) as appropriate for qualitative studies in disciplines with pre-established and field-tested coding systems if the researcher's goals harmonize with the protocol's outcomes" (p. 130). As this study is informed by Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, codes were established and color-coded for the tenets of Whiteness as Property, Racial Realism, and Intersectionalities as well as other categories (see Figure 3.4). The remaining codes were created by reading and reading data to observe patterns. Patterns were collapsed or expanded as necessary to the final codes were formed. Subsequently, I employed descriptive coding. Saldana (2013) defines descriptive coding as using a word or phrase which encapsulates the topic of an excerpt of qualitative data. For the first round of reading, I searched for examples of Whiteness as property and racial realism building on my CRT and Black Feminist Theory frameworks. These examples were highlighted in gray to denote their significance. I then read and reread the data to note early emerging descriptive coding patters and then utilized a color-coded method for identifying the descriptive codes.

As I further analyzed the codes, I realized that several codes revealed intersectionalities. For example, one of the research partners, Kelsey vividly described an encounter in which she was told by an administrator she must change her clothes because her body shape made her skirt too revealing. This was despite the fact her skirt length met the school's required standards. As this experience of racism involved gendered clothing

and her naturally given attributes it occurred at an intersection of gender, race, and body type. Such intersectionalites are denoted by asterisks in Figure 3.4.

Color	Descriptive Code

	• Whiteness as Property
	  o White Supremacy in defining beauty
	• Describing White
	  o Cultural Appropriation
	  o Privilege

	• Racial Realism
	  o Internalized Racism*
	  o Experiences with Racism*
	  o Colorism*
	  o Stereotypes/Stereotypical Images*
	  ▪ Race*
	  ▪ Gender*
	  ▪ Size*

	• Describing Black
	  o AAL*
	  o Hair*
	  o Culture*

	• Body Dissatisfaction
	  o Hair*
	  o Skin tone*
	  o Weight*
	  o Size *

	• Describing Fat
	  o Perceptions*
	  o Messages Regarding Fat*
	  o Stigma and Violence *

	• Resisting Oppressive Constructs
	  o Asking for assistance
	  o Speaking Out
	  o Seeking Community

Figure 3.4: Descriptive Codes Utilized for Data Analysis
**Stars have been used to denote intersectionalities.

For the third round of coding, I utilized In Vivo coding which is defined as capturing and categorizing literal words or phrases from the research partners (Saldana, 2013). In Vivo coding was employed to capture the research partners' voices and examples for each of the color-coded descriptive codes. In this manner, I could depict my

interpretation of each member's individual essence and personality as I engaged in analysis. For example, when discussing struggles with obesity, Marie discussed an example of what I interpreted to be exclusionary behavior. When describing relationships, this exchange between Marie and Amir took place:

> Marie: I wrote about desire because some people change their bodies to fit in. Yeah, sometimes if they are in a relationship and she's big.
>
> Amir: [co-narrating (Boutte, 2015), concluding Marie's thought] And he might not want her….He might not like it.

The dual voices illustrate the concept of symbolic exclusion exemplifying the idea society, particularly adolescents, excludes the obese or overweight frame. The idea their male counterparts will deny access, in this case the status of a relationship, because of weight is voiced by two girls displaying adolescent conflict and tension. It seems that for the Blue Diamond Girls being obese and popular rarely occurs (Kraig & Keel, 2001). This is an example of how my coding strategies allowed me to connect the research partners' words and experiences (and my own) to the basic tenets of the study.

For the final round of coding, I employed emotional coding to capture how the research partners were responding to obesity portrayals. Saldana (2013) argued that "since emotions are a universal human experience, our acknowledgement of them in our research provides deep insight into the members' perspectives, world views and life conditions" (p. 106). This can clearly be observed when Jennifer described how the "the struggle is real" for obese and overweight adolescents by stating, "Fat people be struggling to put on their clothes. They struggle to put on their pants. …Their clothes." For the selected excerpt, I inferred emotional coding as pity or empathy as Jennifer

confessed to never having personal experience with these issues; and later used member checking (Schwandt, 2007) by asking Jennifer to explain what she was feeling when she made that statement. In this way, I had some verification of my interpretation of her words.

Trustworthiness, Triangulation, and Member Checking

I engaged in a variety of data collection methods (i.e. field notes, interviews, focus group transcriptions and recordings, photographs and annotated artifacts) to ensure trustworthiness and triangulate data. It was imperative that I observed and participated in the interactions of the group sessions as possible in order to illustrate a clearer picture of how members recognized, interpreted, and defined obesity. Throughout the study, I shared transcripts and my interpretations of data with the girls to ensure I captured their thoughts, ideas, inflections, and tones with as much integrity regarding their intent as possible. At the same time, my methodological stance includes acknowledgement that no interpretation of another person's words can ever be "accurate" because words written or spoken in a moment may be interpreted differently, even by the author, in the next moment or another moment in time. However, this process allowed me to gain further insights about their experiences.

Positionality

During this study, there were many considerations of positionality – mine and the research partners'. My position as a teacher and coach, however, marked me as an outsider, and I was at first viewed as a spy garnering information for an administrative enemy (Glesne, 2011). This was not an interpretation. In fact, it was a question directly asked by Amir and Marie. This position changed as our community bonded and

strengthened discussions and reading journal entries, particularly as I shared my own experiences and validated theirs. However, I recognize all of my positions (adult, teacher, coach, and researcher, to name a few) come with power and privilege. Although members seemed comfortable enough to joke and reveal their stories, there was also a barrier because I am not a middle school student. My positioning as researcher and member had both benefits and disadvantages. There was a difference in age between the Blue Diamond Girls and me, as they were adolescents and I was 37 years old at the time of the study. The age gap could have created a barrier for discussion. Yet, in my teaching experience I have found that when students recognize that their opinions are appreciated and heard, they fully participate and extend themselves in critical discussions. As such I did not position myself as an expert. Instead, I positioned myself as a learner, growing right beside them. I honestly shared my fears, questions, and insecurities. Once I demonstrated my willingness to be vulnerable, the girls welcomed me into the community.

In addition, my body size marked me both a group insider and an outsider. To the members who conformed to a thin ideal, my obese body could potentially be viewed from a range of biased views which could lead to a range of perceptions about me. To the members who self-identified as being obese or overweight, my body could be seen as comforting, I could be seen as a potential ally. Since body size is the nexus of my study, I needed to negotiate these conflicting perspectives and endeavored to create an environment in which my members were open and felt comfortable as they shared their stories. I believe such an environment was established by the sharing of personal family stories, tears openly shed, and hugs freely given. As a researcher, I navigated these

shifting positions so I could acknowledge my own partial knowledge and the members' voices and expertise.

Timeline

This study from conception to defense covered a six-week period of time. Table 3.3 displays the timeframe for the initiation of the study through the dissertation defense.

Table 3.3:

Research Timeline

March 2015	*Met with Afterschool Coordinator* *Met with Afterschool Teachers* *Member Selection*
April 2015	*Mail Research Partner Parent Approval Letters* (see Appendix A) *Literature Groups Meetings were initiated.* Week One • April 21st from 4:30- 6:00 • April 22nd from 4:30-6:00 • April 23rd from 4:30- 6:00 Week Two • April 28th from 4:30- 6:00 • Member Checking/Share with Committee • April 29th from 4:30- 6:00 • April 30th from 4:30- 6:00
May 2015	*Literature Groups continued:* Week Three: May 5th • May 6th from 4:30- 6:00 • Initial member checking/ • May 7th from 4:30- 6:00 Week Four: • May 12th from 4:30- 6:00 • May 13th from 4:30- 6:00 • May 14th from 4:30- 6:00 • Member Checking Week Five: • May 19th from 4:30- 6:00 • May 20th from 4:30- 6:00 • May 21st from 4:30- 6:00 • Member Checking Week Six: • May 28th from 4:30- 6:00
June – December 2015	Data Analysis Final Member Checking
January- October 2016	Writing the Dissertation
October 27, 2016	Dissertation Defense

Conclusion to Chapter Three

For this study, I employed Black Feminist Theory, Critical Race Counternarrative, and an arts based research and representational style of Ethnopoetics which Barone and Eisner (2011) affirm allows research to "revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it with fresh eyes and thereby calling into question a singular orthodox point of view" (p. 16). I did so intentionally to produce a much needed disruption to the view the body in its myriad subtleties is viewed. This dissertation as disruption speaks truths as I interpreted the students' words and experiences in hopes that it allows readers to celebrate in the power and potency of our stories. The use of ethnopoetics also joins a large body of work that disrupts traditional representations of research (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Caughmann-Taylor, 2009; Prendergast & Leggo, 2009).

The remainder of this dissertation is presented using the following format. Chapter Four shares autoethnographic data in the form of a memoir which introduces the reader to my journey as an ethnopoet embedded in stories that led me to this study, that were experienced through this study, and that intersect issues of race, size, and gender.

Chapter Five presents findings focusing on data from the five students. These findings are presented as a *novel in verse* – a series of ethnopoems standing alone. Commentary beyond that offered through the poems would stop voices that have been silenced enough. I also made this choice because I believe poetry cannot be gulped down, and it should not be diluted or interrupted by excessive dissection. To fully internalize the words representing experiences, poetry must be sipped slowly and savored. I would like for the reader to ponder and deeply reflect on the themes of fat, colorism,

intersectionalities, and counternarratives which unfold in the findings, bear witness to our realities, acknowledge our pain, and celebrate our resolve and growth. This allows an authenticity of the reading and interpretive experience, which is what all research, is anyway, a personal interpretation of someone else's experiences, data, life. Thus, the first time the reader engages with findings, they are presented as uninterrupted poems. As hooks (1990) argued, I privilege the poetic voice as transformational stepping stones.

In Chapter Six, I explain the power of ethnopoetry, particularly in the lives of Black women followed by a description of the analytic and representational moves I made in the construction of each poem. Finally, Chapter Seven provides implications and thoughts for further research.

Both CRT and Black Feminist Theory revel in experiential knowledge and counternarratives as liberatory spaces to shake loose oppressive bonds (Bell, 1992; Collins, 2000; Cook, 2013; Delgado, 1989) and create spaces of sanctuary; this alone is not enough for actualization. Healing can only begin when we own our pain and share our stories (hooks, 2005; Lorde, 1990). I ask the reader to read with critical eyes, listen with critical ears; and to stand present before the text with an open and willing heart. Now, I invite you to bear witness to our truths, our pains, and our triumphs.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVOLUTION OF AN ETHNOPOET

To Fern: A Tribute to *P.S. Be Eleven*

Some poems don't start like a flowing river
rippling over page.
Some poems don't start like a storm
pounding out truths.
Some poems aren't the tides
washing over you.
Some poems aren't tears
relieving pain...voicing heartache.
Every now and then,
we stumble onto poetry;
tripping over the words,
sauntering around the rhyme,
and swaying back and forth
to its rhythm.
We breathe in the poem
and exhale its meaning;
and a once unwilling mouth
stutters over a newly found joy.
After said,
its sweet juices are an oasis to a voice long barren.
We savor it…
Letting its flavor slide down our throats
Because now that it has been tasted…
No, now that it has been devoured whole,
we know full well what we've always known:
We are hungry for the written word.
We crave its attention.
We lust for its freedom.
We claim our voice.
Somehow in the chaos of ignorance
an epiphany dawns
and we…
we fall
hopelessly
and helplessly

in
love
with
poetry.

Dywanna Smith, 2012

I did not begin my writing life as a poet; it was a circuitous journey. Poetry was a genre which I recognized but deemed worthy only for those talented writers who could blend words on paper as an artist would colors on canvas. I can still remember being tasked with the intricate style in the fifth grade. We were to write an ode to Thanksgiving. I wanted to write a story but my teacher denied my request. To appease her, I hastily flung words down on the page and created a haphazard collision of sentences. It met the perquisite standards that I ascribed to poetry: it was short and rhymed. Still, I had faced my challenge and eagerly went home to share my poem with my big brother. He listened attentively and as I finished reciting the last line, he let loose this huge burst of laughter. I was heartbroken but his reaction confirmed what I had accepted: Poetry would not be in my writing repertoire and I walked away from it that very day. It was a genre too sophisticated and learned for a writer such as myself. I didn't realize it then but poetry would later be my savior.

Learning to Hate Myself: Ingesting Dominant Ideology

As a child, I remembered being surrounded with family and friends; all faces that looked like mine and reflected my beauty. I can remember walking hand in hand with my grandmother and loving the variations in hues of skin; my tawny brown against her dark black leather; aged, cracked, yet perfectly soft. I wrapped myself in bear hugs from my uncles whose skin resembled the midnight sky. My family taught me how to love my body. I never once heard the word fat; instead, my family, in the African-American

Language that constituted the sounds of love and home and community always said, "Ain't she fine." Their words embraced my body and I knew that I was beautiful.

At first, I thought these carefully timed events were fortuitous; but age brings wisdom and hindsight often refines our vision until that which was once indistinct becomes focused and rich. The fond memories my family so carefully wove were not chance; they were by strategic creation. It was not by chance that every face I saw on magazines in my household looked like mine. My mother dusted the coffee table and tucked the Good Housekeeping behind the couch so my brothers, sister, and I could stare at the faces on *Ebony* and *Jet*[1] magazines. Family pictures decorated our halls to show that beauty was not static; it was fluid and came in a variety of hues and forms. It was not by chance I never had a White doll baby as a child. I loved peering into the dark brown eyes of my baby, Ezmeralda, because she looked like me. It was not by chance we studied scientists, authors, poets, and actors of Color so that we could know despite everything; there were people who sacrificed their lives so we could move our people further. It was not by chance, it was strategy; because my parents fully realized when I left the refuge of my home, I would be besieged by a powerful discourse of hate (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992). So, they taught me early, how to love my blackness.

Their strategy worked well as I learned what Black was by learning from close family. It was only until I started school the strategy needed to be reworked. Until my fourth grade year, the majority of my teachers were Black obese females; the only exception being my second grade teacher as she was a tall thin Black woman. As I was growing up, it was not a thought on which I tarried long. It was simply a portion of my

[1] *Ebony* and *Jet* are magazines created and written by Black authors who celebrate Black beauty, art, music, entertainment and fashion.

existence, my Kingstree if you will. I cannot remember being teased about my size in primary school. In fact, my teachers' mere presence dared any student to try taunts or insults. They would move their large bodies between desks and chairs with the poise and confidence of African dancers. With hands placed upon hips, students were reminded to remember their place. Their smiles lay firmly placed between dimpled cheeks. They embodied beauty. How could I not be beautiful when surrounded by such women?

During sixth grade, everything changed. I had my first of several White teachers and somehow things shifted. My teachers whose very presence modeled the message that beauty comes in every size, disappeared. I was surrounded by thinness and those who were not thin discussed their plans for obtaining the ideal. I would overhear conversations about dieting and the need to get back into some former size. I cannot pinpoint when it began, but I do remember my classmates teasing me. The boys were especially cruel. They would call me "fatty" and pull at my dresses. One classmate, Xavier (pseudonym), was especially mean-spirited. He would stand behind me and mimic my walk extending his arms wide and inhaling air until his cheeks puffed. Teasing my fat was not just a hobby; to him it was full time occupation.

The memories are still vivid in my mind. Xavier would always start his comedic routine by screaming, "Boom! Boom!" I tried to imagine the sound of thunder shattering the sky. I tried to pretend I was such a powerful and dynamic force, but my musings were always interrupted by snickers and howling laughter. "Boom! Boom!" One would think at some time the joke would get old, but apparently like the classic black dress or vintage cars, some jokes were timeless. That Monday, as with any other day, my attempts to walk to class were a cause for hilarity. Perhaps it was because my body jiggled while others

had a smooth gait. I never fully understood. I just wanted to be in the safety of the classroom, huddled in a desk, longing to be invisible.

His deafening screams would increase. “Boom! Boom! E-A-R-T-H-Q-U-A-K-E!” By now, others joined in on the joke. They would grab onto their book bags and pretend to lose their equilibrium. At times, I wished I were an earthquake. I wished I could split the earth and fall between its crevices, but I did not possess that power. I only possessed the power to continue walking; to put one foot in front of the other, to finally cross the threshold of safety. In such awful times, tears are not an option, as they only mark you as prey. Instead, I walked bravely over to my desk removing books, preparing for class, pretending not to care. I was a master pretender. Like many before me, I wore “the mask that grins and lies” (Dunbar, 1975). My mask of stoicism was so firmly planted, I often fooled myself. At some point, my emotions flooded their fragile banks, the mask dropped and reality crept into being. I could no longer pretend I was not injured or scarred; because inwardly I recognized I was damaged goods. I was left only wondering if I would ever heal.

I knew my teacher heard his teasing. Once I even witnessed her turn her head to laugh. She did precious little to protect me. When I approached her about it privately, she pointedly told me, “I needed to develop thicker skin because life was tough.” My world was crushed. My supposed advocate betrayed me. I dropped my head and started walking out of the classroom, determined for her not to see my tears. Although I resolved to be strong, she noticed my slumped shoulders and called me back over to her. She leaned down gently rubbed my face and said, “Sweetie, if you don’t like them teasing you, you can do something. You can lose weight.” Somehow, in the span of a few short years, I

drifted from being someone beautiful, to some "thing" needing to be fixed. That day, everything changed and my teacher opened my eyes to sizism, and hate.

My journey into the actualization I feel today and through which I am able to write this dissertation, was derailed because of events like these and those that followed. In the next two years I learned to abhor my body and view it as foreign and grotesque. I did not realize it at the time, as I ingested food for nourishment; I also internalized Western beauty standards. I learned that Barbie dolls, with their long glossy blond hair, striking blue eyes and tiny cinched waists, closely resembled perfection and my rotund form was the direct opposite. The language I used to describe myself changed from "so fine" to thinking of my chipmunk cheeks, pudgy hands, and elephantine buttocks. The cruel insults thrown at me every day just reinforced the larger world around me did not believe that I was "fine." At 12, I would duck into closets or hide behind locked doors to grieve. I would scream into towels and wipe tears from my face. I carried this self-loathing internally for years, diving into darkness and depression.

The darkness continued well into junior high. I tried to find solace by joining the school newspaper, thinking the clever wordplay and creativity would shield me. I clung to words as my lifeboat; finding temporary relief. My counselor noticed my low self-esteem and advised my teachers to allow me leadership duties. I became office courier, assisted with bulletin boards and helped organize the school science fair. It was here that my lifeboat disappeared. While setting up the science fair displays, a White male classmate assaulted me. I was left feeling vulnerable and violated. I have often tried to write or discuss the experience and my words will not come in prose story-telling fashion. They come in short, stilted phrases. I grasped at each phrase for 25 years and

finally, finally, I was able to weave that horrific event into a poem. It is not prose but it is

my testimony and truth:

Power?
Power is only having your words as weapons.
Power is saying that if I did not do
EXACTLY
as you demanded,
YOU would ruin
My NAME.
My name…
the one thing in this world I was freely given.

Power?
Power is looking me in the face,
watching my disbelief,
and allowing your
words to create
an atmosphere of fear
which sweetly suffocates;
one …
to which I foolishly succumbed.

Power?
Power is making me doubt myself;
making me question the audacity of my own voice.
My actions were paradoxical.
Slow labored and ragged breaths
juxtaposed by
thoughts rushing through my mind;
Most of which were
a torrent of your vulgarities:
"Who would believe you?"
"It's your fault anyway!"
"They will think you lied!"
"Why would anyone want you fatty?"
"You know you Black girls are always so damn fast…"
My head was a tornado of confusion.
Thoughts moving so swiftly,
they crashed into each other
and a headache ensued.
I clutched my head between my hands
trying to shake loose this horrid experience,
no relief comes.

Power?
Is a vice-grip!
Your power takes hold…
Seizing me.
Tearing into me.
You don't even have to speak.
Your eyes compel me to kneel.
It's not who I am
It's not what I want to be doing.
Yet… it's who I am forced to become.
More pain.
More ragged breaths.
More horrific silence.
I cry afterwards.
But you'll never know that.
Even if you did,
you would not have cared.
Because you were…
Consumed with power.
Enamored with power.
Infected by power.
My subjugation only
fueled a ravenous appetite.
Afterwards you sat stuffed,
victoriously sated.
While I …
I was instantly debilitated.
Decades have passed,
And I am both
scarred;
Yet, mercifully healed.
Decades have passed.
and
I can still feel your power.

I never told anyone. I kept this secret from family and friends. I silently berated myself for being so naïve. My assault was my mistake. His words were knives to my spirit. I internalized his racist and sexist verbiage. I was one of those promiscuous Black girls. I was fat and hideous. Yet, another experience moving further away from being "so fine." Who would believe me because no one, at least no one in their right mind, would want

me? This was indeed my fault and I hated myself for it. The once happy and dedicated student transformed into a sullen and depressed girl. I wanted to fade away from existence. I withdrew from my friends and family and tried to find comfort in insolation. I wore a well-constructed mask and I played my part so well, I lost myself in the pretend role.

During that time, the one reassuring space in my school life was in the classroom of my eighth grade English teacher Mrs. Roberts. Mrs. Roberts was a forced to which to be reckoned. She stood five feet four inches tall with dark ebony skin. She was one of the few Black teachers I encountered that year. When she spoke, she commanded respect. She greeted each and every student at her door with a smile and took time to ask about our siblings, many of which she had taught. Her class became my sanctuary.

It was there that I fell hopelessly in love with English/language arts. We did not read a text; we experienced it through role play, music, and art. I became an educator because I wanted to be Mrs. Roberts. This was the one time of the day where my mask dropped and I allowed myself to smile - at least until the assault. Afterwards, I did not often speak in class. I did not raise my hand to answer questions or to take part in role-play. I complied and completed every assignment. My body was present but my mind was not and although I was like this in all of my classes, it was Mrs. Robert's who reached out to me. I am alive because she gave me poetry as a saving grace.

One day after class, Mrs. Roberts asked me to stay back. Ashamed, I hung my head. I was not used to being chastised by a teacher. I remember watching her walk over to the door and softly close it. She then walked slowly to my desk where I tried to make the desktop my horizon, gazing squarely it. She reached out, gently took my chin in her

hands, and lifted my head until I looked her squarely in the eyes. With her other hand, she cupped my cheek and said, “My darling, I am going to lose you and I do not want that to happen. I don’t know what happened to you but I know you are in a lot of pain and if you do not find some way to release it, I will be attending your funeral and I love you too much to see that happen.”

I was astounded. How did she know my secret? How did she know that the tiny capsules were still calling my name and trying to tempt me to death? She read the truth in my eyes and released my face. Once again, I watched her motions as she traveled to her desk and opened its drawer. From its depths, she pulled a spiral notebook with a purple cover. Her heels clicked on the floor as she walked back over to me. She placed the notebook in my hands, and said one word, “Write.” With tears streaming down my face, I softly replied, “I don’t have the words. I don’t know what to say.” I thought this revelation would end the conversation and I turned my body to try to leave my desk and the notebook. Mrs. Roberts did not allow me to move, she placed her body in front of the desk as a deterrent. Once again, she picked up the notebook forced into my clenched hands. Once again, she said, “Write. Repeat that phrase over and over into this notebook until something comes. My child, you are in pain. There is something inside of you that wants to be released and if you are not going to speak that pain, then you must write it.” I realized that my escape would only come if I took ownership of the notebook. I did not want the burden of writing but I kept the notebook in my hands. Only then did Mrs. Roberts move, and I quickly fled from the classroom.

Despite my angst, I went home and tried to write, but the words would not come. Yet, I remembered Mrs. Roberts’ advice and I wrote, “I don’t have the words. I don’t

know what to say" over and over in my notebook. My handwriting shifted from a practiced scrawl to a feverish frenzy because as I filled each line in the notebook my rage swelled and before my body realized, my mind began to release the rage. I could not form complete sentences but the words group together formed phrases. It was incomplete. It was imperfect; yet, I put pen to my paper.

The next day, I did not speak to Mrs. Roberts. I arrived to class early and placed the notebook on her desk. While we completed an assignment, I noticed she picked up my notebook and began to read. I felt vulnerable as her eyes darted across the notebook. My thoughts settled on the imperfections of the writing. There was no topic sentence and I had not used vivid words, nor did I utilize transitions. As an essay, it was disastrous. When she finished reading, Mrs. Roberts placed the notebook on the desk. Her face stoic but I knew, I just knew, I had failed my task.

She didn't have to ask me to stay after class, I waited. She walked over to her desk and grabbed the notebook and began to speak but I interrupted her with my insecurities, "I know it's not good. I know it doesn't have a topic sentence and sophisticated words but I tried. I really tried." My words trailed off into silence because there was nothing else for me to say. I waited for Mrs. Roberts to respond. It seemed endless. She passed me the notebook, and asked me to read it aloud to her, reciting her classroom rule, "Words cannot just be seen, they must be heard." I open my mouth and I read:

Last night I showered
trying to get you out of me
wash out the dirt of you and find myself in the ashes
scrubbed my skin and I wanted to bleed.
I wanted to feel pain.
One harsh enough to cover the bruises,
you created in my body.

Forced into me.
I can still feel you inside my mind.
GET OUT OF MY HEAD!
GET OUT OF MY HEAD!
GET OUT OF MY HEAD!
You're trying to take over,
but I can't let you.
I still don't have the words to stop you.
I don't know what to say.
I just want you gone.
Please get off of my skin.
Even water, can't take your stench away.
You took what mattered away.
YOU STOLE my confidence.
But you didn't just take that
you stole so much more.

We stared at each other in silence. Mrs. Roberts came over to me and as she hugged me she replied, "Dywanna, you are a poet." I pushed her away from me and screamed, "I am not a poet! I don't do poetry! I don't understand it and poetry is hard. This isn't hard! This is just truth! This is just me!" She pulled me back into her embrace and said, "Poetry is pure emotion. You bleed yourself on the page. It does not need topic sentences. It does not need punctuation. It needs to be powerful and raw. You are bearing witness to your own life through your writing. This is what I see. You ***are*** a writer. You ***are*** a poet."

I did not believe her. It could not be that simple. Poets were artists and I was simply an actor playing the part of a happy adolescent girl. I continued to write in my notebook and it became my constant companion; a concrete object manifesting my pain. I would study words trying to make them connect in an organic fashion. As I read books, I would try to discern how an author compelled me to feel. Time passed and pages filled, and I needed a new companion. I found a new journal and continued to write. I realize that as I wrote, I was not alone; a presence was always with me. She, my poetic muse,

was both demanding and accepting. She was curious and playful. She was my close confidant and one of the few individuals who saw me in my totality. I could no longer call poetry a thing. She was person, a radiant individual, and she understood me. I was a poet.

Since eighth grade, writing has always been cathartic. My pen has been steadfast through a torrid love affair. Now my pen is my confidant; so much so I coined an ode of thanks.

To My Pen:
You have always loved me.
I've walked away from you countless times
and you sit waiting patiently for my return.
You cast no judgment;
instead, welcome me
when I'm vulnerable.
You've captured a thousand tears
and transformed them
into a cathartic ocean.
You've held my secrets
tightly bound in your grasp
until I was ready to speak their truth.
You've danced to the melody
of my heartbeat and sang
soft, lilting lullabies.
You are wisdom and healing.
I am my most perfect self
when I hold you in my fingers.
How can I thank you for
loving me so purely?
You are life.
Always!

My pen is more than an instrument of communication. It is a tool of comprehension and discernment. This is why writing is transformational because writing, poetry in particular, has now also become a place to both understand and express the research experience. This required comprehension, discernment, and pondering

emotional baggage – both mine and my research partners. As I traversed the data, I used my pen to ponder emotional baggage, celebrate successes, and mourn loss. Once again, I used my pen and my words as a lens to analyze and interpret the world as an offering to teachers who have the power to make a difference in the lives of students most oppressed.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS: A NOVEL IN VERSE

Human kind has forever been attracted to poetry because of the musicality and poignancy it portrays in the rhythms of its contracted form, and because of the mystery it suggests in the ambiguity it retains. So much can be said in so few words and in such compelling ways. Poetry is an imaginative awareness of experience expressed through meaning, sound, and rhythmic language choices so as to evoke an embodied response . . . It portrays particular qualities of being, elicits metaphorical wondering, synthesizes various modes of perception, and shows a way of paying attention . . . It is a form of inquiry (Smith, 2003 p. 3).

Researcher's Note: Preface to the Novel

Can I really do this?
Can I bravely stand before five adolescent girls
pretending I'm fixed?
Declaring I'm healed
but knowing healing denotes recovery from injury.
My pain?
My pain is emotional trauma
and
physical assault.
My scars are but red bandages applied
to various positions on my body;
and though decades have passed,
they sometimes still pulse and feel raw.

Can I really do this?
Can I listen to their stories
and not fall back into the abyss of depression
from which I have crawled out?
Macabre nightmares;
Blood shedding;
Fingernails torn;
Bruised spirit …
but I'm fine.
Right?
Fixed?
Healed?
Confident?

Can I really do this?
Can I confront demons
I have locked into closets,
deep in the recesses
of my mind?
I've named each.
in an attempt to absorb their power.
And…I feel stronger;
but even strength
can be but a dull dream
on which to cling.
So….
Can I do this?
Can I really do this?

Introductions: A Poem in Five Stanzas

My name is…
No! I am Amir!
Loud!
Crazy
and only 14!
I love boys, music…anything that's green.
I am that tough girl everybody knows.
Big Mouth.
Big Personality.
Those stylish cornrows.
Step a little closer!
Come closer!
There's a secret I always hide.
I may seem quite confident,
but I hate myself on the inside.

Hi!
I'm Melody.
I don't know what you want me to say!
I really…don't...do this… public speaking thing anyway.
I'm quiet.
Shy.
Yeah, I choose not to speak.
I'd rather listen, laugh, and watch the world…
You know…
be chill and meek.
I'm kind of use to hiding,
behind my eyes
and my smile.
But …
If I really trust you, I'll let you in…
at least, for a while.

Sup! I'm Kelsey!
Or would you rather I say, "Hello!"
I'm the confident chameleon;
shifting codes wherever I go.
When you see me, you best respect.
I know my stuff on fleek.
Boys love me.
Girls want to be me.

I'm cute! I'm beautiful! Stylish and chic!
Am I opinionated?
No.
I am just informed and knowledgeable.
Yes, baby, trust and believe…
I share my wisdom wherever I go!

Hello. Jennifer, here!
How you want me to describe me?
My mama says I talk too much.
My teachers would say I'm mean.
You know what?
I'm not one thing or the other…
At best, I'm in-between.
I'm the middle child.
I'm the second girl.
Not a baby but not an adult.
I just want someone to hear me…
really see me.
I don't think that's asking too much!

Hey! I'm Marie.
Wha'cha want me to describe?
I'm me!
Plain and simple.
All truths.
Nothing to hide.
Straight up: I don't trust people.
That ish gets you hurt.
Some would say I'm rude…
Possibly I'm a little curt.
Speak my mind.
Never lie.
Got all this anger bottled up inside.
But I am quite loving, I ain't even gonna deny.
You hurt?
You need a hug?
I'll be happy to oblige!

Fat: A Definition Poem

[fat]
Adjective

1. an extension of identity;
2. a stigma;
3. a medical definition which marks an individual as "abnormal or different. By calling people 'overweight' or 'obese,' we are simply not delineating them by their body mass, but we are relegating them to the margins of society;"[2]
4. a label which "becomes internalized by the 'overweight' or 'obese' who think that something is wrong with them or that they must change their behavior in order to meet a particular physical ideal;"[3]
5. an acceptable form of prejudice, which encompasses "a system of damaging beliefs that pre-judge people – in this case, those with large bodies. Discrimination intensifies as weight increases, but size bigotry also affects those who are only 20% above their ideal weight"[4]
6. a site of resistance and love;

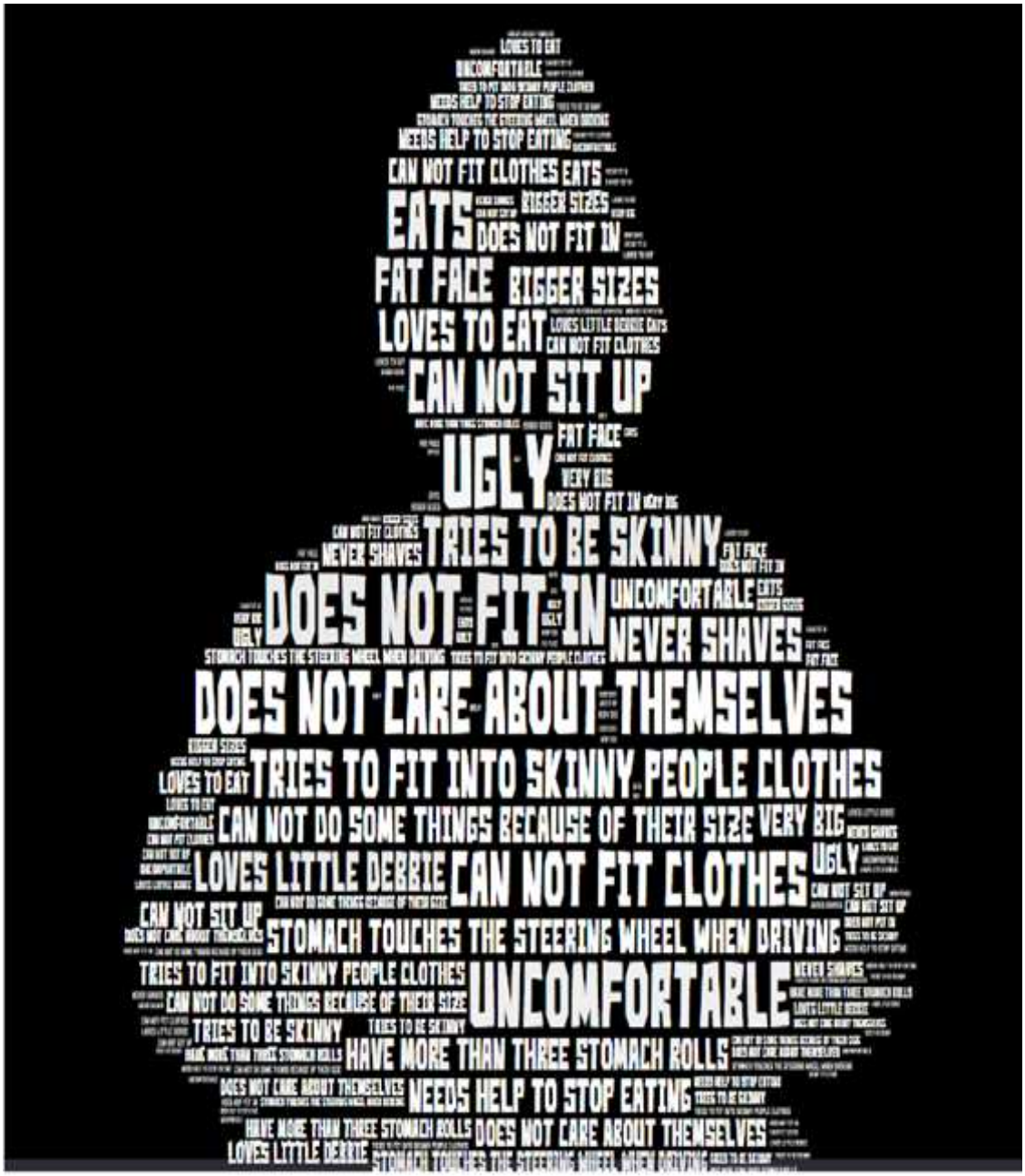
Synonyms: overweight; obese

[2] Oliver, J. E. (2006). *Fat politics: The real story behind America's obesity epidemic*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press

[3] Oliver, J. E. (2006). *Fat politics: The real story behind America's obesity epidemic*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

[4] Maine, M. (1999). *Body wars: Making peace with women's bodies: An activist's guide*. Carlsbad, CA: Gürze Books.

Fat: A Visual Poem



FAT: A Biography in Five Short Chapters

A Visual Poem

I.

II.

III.

IV.

V.

I'm out of control.
Never had it
and I question
if I ever will.

I live my life
in **EXCESS**.
EXCESSIVE food.
Over-sized portions
which drip off of the plate.
Super-sized hamburgers
with triple…no quadruple patties.
Best believe I go from 0 to 100
real quick.
I straight flex on my food.

My stomach is **life-sized!**
Rolls upon rolls of fat.
I'm butter oozing everywhere.
I hemorrhage weight the
way others would blood.
It bypasses ***the borders***
of my skirts
It peeks behind my blouses;
exposing the repugnance.
I need a bigger shirt!
I need a bigger everything.
Can someone stop feeding me?

STEP BACK!
I **NEED** space.
My smell may be
deemed offensive.
Besides, I need room to
BREATHE!
It's hard…
It's so hard…
taking in …

taking in…
air.
It's an ongoing
altercation between me
and the world.
It, like you,
must detest me.

I always try to
SQUEEZE…
well…fit into life.
Pulling clothes
over □□**l**□□□**s**□
mounds.
I want to
be stylish.
Fashion, like you,
ignores me.

I know you pity me.
It saddens me
but what can I do?
Moving is **torture**.
BREATHING is agony.
Living is **misery**.
I did this to myself.
I deserve no mercy.

I know it is
EASY
to lose weight.
I only need to
Stop **shoveling**□
food in my mouth;
but I cling to my food
as I cling to my fat.
I need help.
Please!
Please…help me!
I'm just so tired!

Fat: A Confessional
Spoken-Word Performance Poem

The stage opens with the spotlight shining on a metal chair: the confessional room of a popular reality television show. In the confessional room the participants reveal their true feelings on any subject matter of which they choose. The confessional room only requires complete honesty. To ensure honesty occurs, the room contains two items: a chair and a video camera.

A Black adolescent walks onto the stage and takes a seat in the chair. She stares straight into the audience looking into it as if it is her mirror. She takes lipstick from her pocket and gently glides it over her lips. She makes kissy faces at the audience and tilts her head back and forth as she fluffs her afro-puffs. The girl reaches over with her hand and makes a motion to switch on the video camera. When she speaks, it is with a clear, loud, and confident voice.

Is this thing on?
Is this thing on?
How am I looking?
Um! Girl, you look good!
Looking sexy!
What am I 'posed to be doing?
What am I 'posed to be talking about again?
Oh, yeah!
You want me to talk about those big girls in middle school.
Being fat in middle school...it ain't easy.
It's tough.
Straight difficult;
an emotional roller coaster.
It's confusing because
you ain't one thing or the other.
You ain't on people's radar;
yet, somehow you always there.
People know your every move.
You ain't got no secrets.
Chile…fat can't have secrets.
It's all out in the public for everyone to see.
You get watched because you are a show.
A sadistic reality show...
Comedy and tragedy rolled into one.
People laugh at you.
You always the butt of someone's joke.
HA!
Now that's funny…the BIIIIIGGGG butt of someone's joke!
People just glare at you in the hallways.
Staring at you as you grow outside your clothes.

You must upset your parents with all that growing.
nobody got time to keep buying you clothes.
It’s too expensive.
They laugh at you.
They laugh at the fat.
They laugh at ...
They just laugh.
People point at you on the stairwells.
Push you up over each rise because they want to "help."
“Help!”
HA!
More like “help” push you to your limits.
They listen to your ragged breaths as you push your bulk forward.
It's not normal...exhaling like that.
Every breath a moment's recording ...a staccato tempo of death.
Someone should help;
provide an escalator or something.
We got an elevator but being that fat ain’t no disability…
is it?
Keepin' it 100...everyone pities you;
gawk at you barely able to move...to do simple things like walking.
It's sad...depressin' really.
At lunch, it's worse.
The entire event is a performance.
Everyone stops to watch them shovel in junk food...
Chicken wings...
Burgers...
Cookies...
It's repulsive!
Being fat in middle school...it ain't easy.
It's tough.
Straight difficult;
an emotional rollercoaster.
They laugh at you.
They laugh at the fat.
They laugh at...
They just laugh.
Guess I shouldn’t have said all that.
But they the ones said they wanted the truth.
And what I said honey…that is straight truth.

(*She reaches over to turn the camera off, makes one last kissy face at the audience, stands up and walks confidently off the stage*.)

Researcher's Note: The Skinny on Fat

What is it about fat that makes society hate it so much?
Is it the extra pounds which surround bodies?
Is it the images of excess?
Is it the increased revenue which emerges from a war on weight?
I pondered this question as a child, adolescent, and
it still lingers as an adult.
I came to this topic hoping for insight;
hoping adolescent truth would garner new wisdoms.
As we journeyed together, I realized…
my girls were just as confused about fat as I.
While we talked, they ruminated on health.
One cannot be fat and healthy
It was too far-fetched an idea to contemplate.
One thing was clear: fat created a distance.
It provided a divide in its owner:
One of love and hate.
It created a divide in the casual observer
because they did not know how to respond.
Should I despise?
Should I laugh at it?
Should I pity it?
Can I ...love it?
Can a person possibly love their fat?
Even more, this feeling of uncertainty,
of not knowing how to react to fat,
endured into the very last meeting.
During our sessions…
No, during our confessionals…
adolescent minds contemplated this complex topic.
Some of their girls loved their curves.
Others denied them.
I observed and listened.
I wiped away tears.
I gave hugs to heal painful scars.
I praised confidence and self-love…and I realized…
This is what we need to combat the hate surrounding fat:
a contested space within the walls of schools to speak our minds;
to discuss our realities;
to ponder our confusions.
Solutions never come quickly,
but resolve can be found with time.
If a space can be offered,
perhaps we can finally get the skinny on fat.

Colorism: A Definition Poem

Col/or/ism
/kələrˌizəm/
Noun

1. Coined by author Alice Walker in 1982, colorism is "the prejudicial treatment of individuals falling within the same racial group on the basis of skin color;"[5]
2. "A hierarchically based skin tone bias, one that poses a psychological obstacle for
    a. various racial groups, specifically with regard to variances within racial groups;"[6]
3. "A process that privileges light-skinned people of Color over dark in areas such as
    a. income, education, housing, beauty, and the marriage market;"[7]
    b. For example, in education, "students of Color who have lighter skin could have access to increased social capital that can convert into educational and economic capital;" [8]
4. Colorism's roots are "located in the European colonial project plantation, life for enslaved African-Americans, and the early class hierarchies of Asia. Despite its disparate roots, today, colorism in the USA is broadly maintained by a system of White supremacy;"[9]
5. Emotional terrorism which can potentially block self-actualization.

[5] Jones, T. (2000). Shades of brown: The law of skin color. *Duke Law Journal*, *49*(6), 1489.

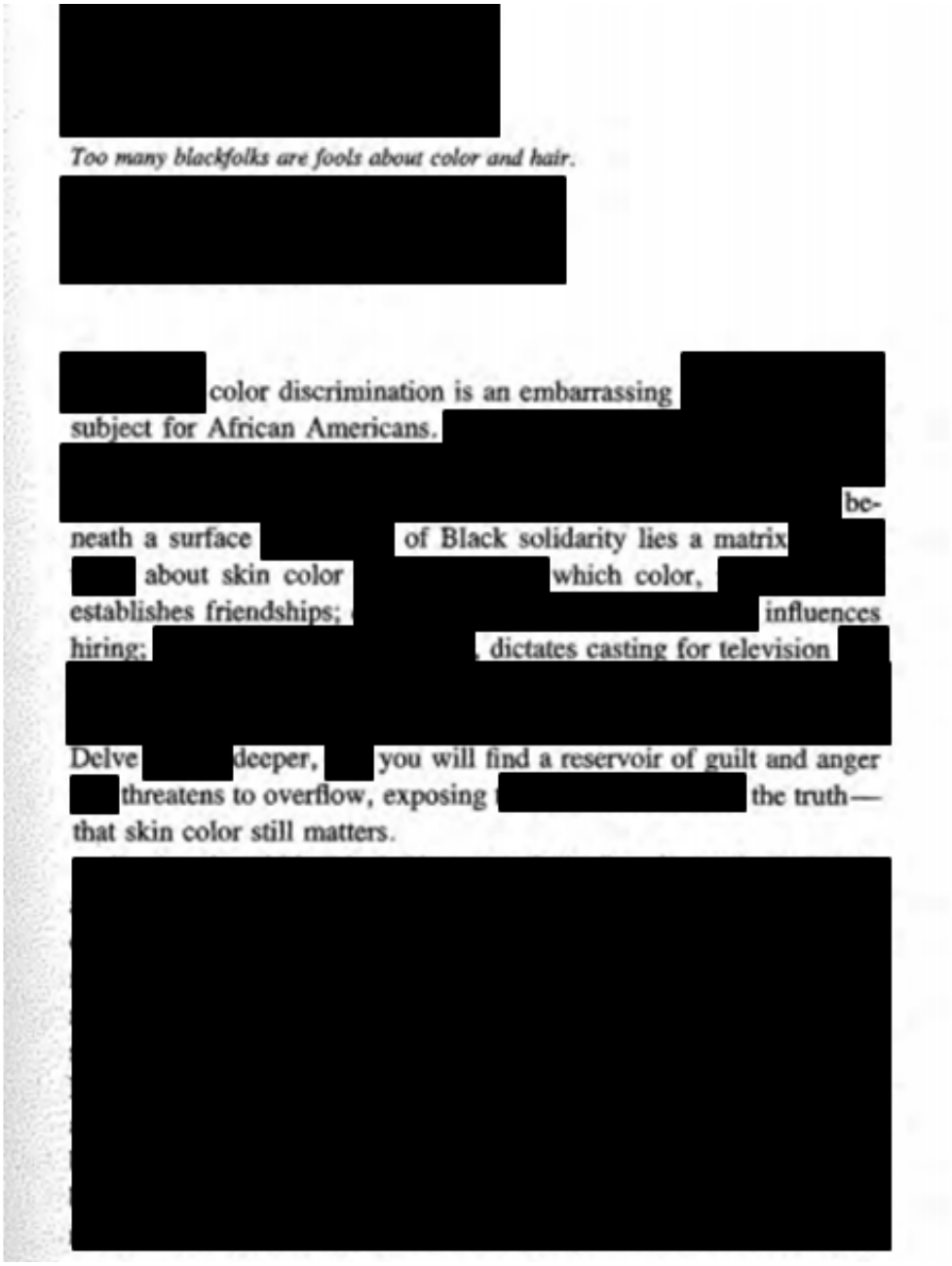
[6] Mcgee, E. O., Alvarez, A., & Milner, H. R. (2015). Colorism as a salient space for understanding in teacher preparation. *Theory into Practice*, *55*(1), 73.

[7] Hunter, M. (2007). The persistent problem of colorism: Skin tone, status, and inequality. *Sociology Compass*, *1*(1), 237.

[8] Mcgee, E. O., Alvarez, A., & Milner, H. R. (2015). Colorism as a salient space for understanding in teacher preparation. *Theory into Practice*, *55*(1), 75.

[9] Hunter, M. (2007). The persistent problem of colorism: Skin tone, status, and Inequality. *Sociology Compass, 1*(1), 238.

The Color Complex: An Introduction
A Black Out Poem



Too many blackfolks are fools about color and hair.

color discrimination is an embarrassing
subject for African Americans.
be-
neath a surface of Black solidarity lies a matrix
about skin color which color,
establishes friendships; influences
hiring; , dictates casting for television
Delve deeper, you will find a reservoir of guilt and anger
threatens to overflow, exposing the truth—
that skin color still matters.

Russell-Cole, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. E. (2013). *The color complex: The politics of skin color in a new millennium*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Dark Girls: A Poem in Two Voices

Can dark skin be beautiful?		
No!		Of course!
	What? How can you say that?	
Dark skin and I mean real, dark skin…Dark skin, like mine, is the least attractive.		
		No! Black is always beautiful! It's just the way we are!
	Dark skin is…	
Hideous!		Sexy!
	What? How can you say that?	
No one can see if you are too dark!		
		Dark skin with chocolate brown eyes… Girl, Please! It's just pure sexy!
	If you have dark skin people think…	
you African or say you are from Haiti.		
		What's wrong with that? All I'm hearing you say is that there are different types of Black beauty.
	The perfect skin tone is…	
Light and bright. You know…Melody's color. That skin tone always gets more attention and more boys.		
		What? Dark girls get boys too! I'm dark and I can get any boy I want.
	But light skin does have it perks. Light-skinned students do get treated better in classes. Like Christian.	
He can do anything!		
		Talk back to teachers.
And nothing happens! They just look at him and say, "Now, now! You know better!"		
	Yeah. Light-skin does have its perks but dark skin is …	
Black and ugly. I'm sick and tired of the color Black. It's just too dark.		
		But that's who we are. It's my skin tone and it's your skin tone. You are…
Hideous!		Beautiful!

Heart's Desire: Colorism in Action

I don't want no dark skin boys!
I really think a light-skinned guy is the best!
A light-skinned guy.
You know the type…mulatto colored.
They act right.
They act better.
Light-skinned boys lick their lips and it's really sexy.
A dark-skinned boy does that and it's just like…
"What are you doin' son?"
I ain't never seen a light-skinned boy who didn't look good.
Perfect faces with their hair slick down.
They walk into a room like they own it.
But I…
I don't even want a light-skinned guy.
I want a White man.
They say if you marry a White man, then…
your baby's eyes will be blue.
So, I am gonna marry a White man…
And I …
I
will
have
a
light-skinned
baby
with
pretty
blue
eyes.

Researcher's Note: Delving into Skin

My mother's skin,
like her mother before her,
and her mother before,
is reminiscient of Gabon Ebony.
darker than the midnight sky;
deeper than oblivion;
revealing an uncomprising strength;
an unmitigated joy;
When polished its surface
becomes a mirror
reflecting her elegance
and beauty.

My father's skin,
like his father before him,
and his father before,
evokes the fruit
from the cacao tree.
Enriched by the fertile earth;
drenched in the sun's rays,
absorbing its essence
until it matures into perfection:
An aged and weathered copper.
One that is malleable to change
and radiates power.

My skin blends ebony and copper
creating a composite of color;
my patchwork quilt of beauty.
Part cinnamon,
part carob.
Affectionately labeled
pecan tan by my grandma.
Though I now love it,
and revel its its exquisteness;
as an adolescent,
I loathed it.
Desired to change it,
I wanted to bleach it pure;
Dissolving the darkest melanin
Until only alabaster beauty remained.

I'd internalized
That "White is Right,"

but light was still acceptable.
And if I was neither,
then I was
nothing.
Simply put, I was
colorstruck.
Blinded by a complex,
compliation of
Western values.
It blocked my acctualization
and imprisoned me in my skin.
It would take years
of affirmations
and soul-searching
before I would
free myself of those
confining ideals;
Shedding hate
and embracing love.

But…
that was my sojourn into being.
It had to be better today.
Decades have passed.
My story predates the
"My Black is beautiful" and
"Pretty Brown Girls" Movements.
My story predates Lupita Nyong'o
being heralded for her beauty.
It just had to be better today.
I foolishly clung to my
optimism as a security blanket;
hoping that these five girls'
identity quest,
partiularly race and skin tone,
would be easier than mine.
Yet, as I faced their truths,
and bore witness to their stories,
I grimly realized,
These girls…my girls…
were also colorstruck.

A generation may have passed,
but the legacy of colorism endured.

Intersectionality: A Definition Poem

In/ter/sec/tion/al/ity
/intərsekSHəˈnalədē/
Noun

1. Coined by legal scholar Kimberle` Crenshaw, intersectionality emerged from CRT and analyzes the "multidimensionality of marginalized subjects' lived experiences;[10]";
2. Interprets the "various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's...experiences[11]";
3. Embraced by both CRT and Black feminist scholars;
4. Multi-faceted and serves several purposes:
    a. Challenges the race/gender binaries most often used in identity politics
    b. provides a vocabulary to challenge dominant ideology
    c. provides a framework for recognizing and acknowledging exclusionary practices used to analyze lived experiences of Black women[12];
5. Expanded to include "the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations[13]";
6. A lens which to better study and understand the politics of survival for Black females.

[10] Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139.
[11] Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1244.
[12] Nash, J. C. (2008). Re-thinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review*, *89*(1), 1-15.
[13] McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women In Culture and Society*, *30*(31), 1771.

A Tale of Two Girls: Life as a Black Girl

You!
Hey, you!
Are you listening to me?
You want to know what is like
being a Black girl in
middle school?
At this school?
Fine!
I'll tell you but
you ain't gonna like it.
Let's call this…
A tale of two girls.

So, it was this Black girl.
She don't go to this
school anymore but
I ain't gonna speak her name.
And it was this White girl.
The White girl,
she was passing
the Black girl in the hallway,
but had to stop.
A bunch of boys
surrounded the Black girl.
You know…she was kind of cute.
Ain't nothing was wrong with her.

Now, the Black girl,
she don't like what the
boys are doing.
She's telling the boys
to back off.
She ain't trying to
draw no attention
to what's happening.
She trying to
handle it herself
and keep it quiet,
but it doesn't work.
She looks around for help
and makes eye contact with
guess who?
Yup! The White Girl.

She looks this Black girl
in her eyes.
She saw the
fear on her face.
She watched as these boys
try to rub their hands
on the Black girl's butt.
Trying to touch it
like they own it.
I mean the
boys were trying
to assault her.
The White girl
observes all of this
and do you know
what she did?
She turned her back
and walked away.

That's bad enough right?
But, it doesn't end there.
The Black girl fights and
breaks free of the boys.
She calmly walks
to her math class.
Guess what?
You know it!
She's in the same class
as the White girl.
Sits right beside
her EVERY day.
EVERY day!
I'm sitting behind them,
watching all this
foolishness play out.

Now, this is an
honors class
so ain't no
dummies here.
The teacher is
going on about something
and the Black girl, she
misses something.
She looks at the
White girl and she says,

“I did not get the answer
to number four and I
left my notes in my locker.”
She sounded real sophisticated.
Once again, she was asking
the White girl for help.
That White girl looked at her
and was like, “I don’t know either.”
She ain’t tried to help her.
AGAIN!
You could tell by the
way she was looking
at the Black girl like …
like…
she …was ignoring her;
just like she ignored
what happened
in the hallway.
She was
just a bystander
to the Black girl’s
pain.

I told you,
you wasn’t gonna like it.
I told you,
it wouldn’t be pretty;
but life never is
for a Black girl
at this school.

<u>Incident</u> Remixed: Countee Cullen's Experience in 2015

Once while walking down a middle-school hallway,
Joyous heart and content as could be,
I saw a fellow middle school student
boldly staring almost challenging me.

Now, I am a knowledgeable 8th grader
and she was not smarter nor bigger,
She said not one word of compassion.
Instead, glared and called me, "Nigger!"

I saw humanity's creulty that day
My pride she hoped I'd surrender.
Of all the things I learned that year,
That is the only lesson I remember.

I walked away both shock and saddened;
Bruised heart and spirit torn uncontrollably,
I did not share my pain with one teacher,
because why would they believe me?[14]

[14] Cullen, C. (2013). *Collected poems*. New Orleans, LA: Amistad Research Center.

Enabling the System: A Cry for Help Denied

How many times?
How many times?
How many times?
I've told teachers.
I've told counselors.
You still don't do nothing.
You don't even care.
You know what...
My voice grows hoarse from asking the words:
How many times?
How many times do I ask for your help and you ignore me?
You just walk away or give me some sort nonsense about life not being fair.
You look at me and see and child and think...she can't even understand.
But you don't get it.
I was born black and female.
I learned that life is not fair before I could clearly say my name.
I learned that life is not fair when you don't respond when I cry, "Help me!"
I learned that life is not fair when I have to work three times as hard to get your attention.
That takes me back to my point.
How many times will you see me in pain and close the door on my face?
I just want equity.
I repeatedly remind you that you ain't even right.
You respond to my pain by telling me that I am being rude or defiant.
Defiant?
How can I be defiant by asking you to just see me?
How can I be defiant when I am simply asking you for help?
How can I be defiant when you, my teacher, refuse to fight for me?
How can I be defiant for asking you to care?
Because I best not ask for anything more.
I didn't realize that genuine love is offensive,
But then again…
How many times have you shown me that it is?

A Pocket Full of Wishes: Attracting the Opposite Sex

I wish...
I wish...
I wish…
I wish my thighs were thicker.
I wish my butt was bigger.
I wish my my skin was lighter.
I wish my smile was brigher.
I wish I could capture your heart
and be everything you need.
But....
If I'm all of those things, would I still be me?

What is Body Image?

What is body image?
It's how I see myself when I look in the mirror.
Short.
Tall.
Over-weight.
Small.
It's how I picture myself in my mind.

What is body image?
It's how I see myself when I look in the mirror.
It encompasses all.
Hair color
and length.
Eyes.
Skin tone.
Even a smile.
It's how I picture myself in my mind.

What is body image?
It's how I see myself when I look in the mirror.
It's authentic;
can't be faked.
Though it may change,
from day to day.
A dynamic,
moving force;
which shifts
and moves
as I alter my course.
It's how I picture myself in my mind.

What is body image?
It's how I see myself when I look in the mirror.
All the words and
images that construct who I am.
Beautiful.
Bold.
Or hideous to behold.
It's how I picture myself in my mind.

Blessings upon Blessings: The Body as a Source of Conflict

I can't help it that
when God was passing out
blessings he granted
me extra favor in some
areas of my body.
I'm proud of
who I am.
When I come to
school, however,
you want me
toss my pride
aside
and exist
in your
world of ups
and downs.
You know:
Shut up!
Cover up!
Sit down!
Back down?
Never that.
I was not
made to hide.

Despite their
confusing nature,
I follow all your rules!
When I wear skirts,
they are long
enough to reach
my fingertips.
Don't believe me?
Then ask my mama!
She checks everyday
before I walk out
the door.
I almost always seem
to make her approval;
but somehow,
I never can get yours.

I walk down the
hallways like
it's a runway.
Hair and outfit
on fleek.
You take one
passing glance
at my outfit
Don't even say,
“Good Morning,”
or “Hello.”
You just give me two
options:
Put on some
long, old, T-Shirt
or
Call my mom
to bring a change of
clothes.

The reason
you want me
to cover up
and shut up is
because my
skirt rises
in the back
when I walk.
So, now it’s not
just my clothes
that are offensive.
It’s me.

I can't change
that.
Can't remove
my assets and
wouldn't if I could.
So I begin to
fight this
war.
It’s a war
you started
because I…I
wanted to learn

I choose option two.
I call my mother
and she refuses to
bring me
clothes because
I was respectfully dressed
for her house;
just not for yours.
But does that matter?
No!
No one asks me
how I feel.
No one
wants to
hear my voice.
My refusal
is coded
as “disruptive
behavior,”
and I
am sent
to in-school
suspension.

I have to sit there
all day
because
I'm blessed
and highly favored.
Missing lessons.
Missing friends.
Missing my teachers.
Missing what
truly matters.

I seethe
all day
knowing this is
injustice in a simpler form.
The bell rings.
The day ends
and I walk
out from the
shadows.
What do I see?
My principal.

The same
woman who
banished me
without saying hello,
complimenting
dear, sweet,
White, Mary Alice
on her outfit.

I stare at
Mary Alice's clothes
and I rage
because we are
practically wearing
the same thing.
Only her skirt doesn't
ride up it just sits
there on her thin frame.

I'm confused!
I'm livid!
What the hell
do you want me
to do?
Trim down my ass?
Bind my breasts?
Would that be enough?
Would it be enough for you?
No! It won't!
Let's face it!
In your eyes,
I'll never be acceptable.
My skirts will always be too short.
My tops just a tad too tight.
See, I'm almost close…
But never... Never right!

I know we will
battle again
soon;
and once again
I'll be sent
to in –school.
Honestly,
I'd rather
stay there

and be true
to myself
then to give
in and appease
your injust
requests.
You see…
I refuse to stop.
I refuse to change.

Researcher's Note: Examining Intersectionalities

Identity is a complex thing.
To analyze it, we must
first begin with the whole;
the totality of being.
The culmination of
memories, experiences, and knowledge.
It is this which forms our shape.
Still, we are not simply the sum of all those things,
because the whole is comprised
of separate yet equally relevant pieces,
Race.
Gender.
Size.
Religion.
Age.
Sexuality.
Along with many others.
It is the amalgamation of these things
which form our substance.
Sometimes still, these fragments
will converge and align
in such a way
that a new form
of examination
can take place.
Intersectionalities.
Our core
is made up
these powerful
yet often
overlooked junctures.

I wanted to delve
deeper into the
intersections of adolescence:
when race, gender, and
body image intersect.
I asked my girls
to speak truths
about questions
which may
be seldom asked
in schools.
What is it like being a Black girl

in middle school?
What have you encountered
because of your race and gender?
What have you experienced
because of your race,
gender, and size?
My inquiry was not cautious;
and neither were their responses.
I heard their rage.
I heard their sadness.
I heard their doubt.
I also heard a staunch
resistance to conform
to that which was not right.
At the end, I was
awed, outraged, and proud.
Afterwards, I applauded
our mutual honesty.
Without missing a beat,
they each thanked me
for be willing
to ask difficult questions.

Counternarratives: A Definition Poem

coun·ter •nar·ra·tive
ˈkoun(t)ər/ˈnerədiv/
Noun

1) A powerful pedagogical tool to "challenge majoritarian stories rooted in a dominant Eurocentric perspective that justify social inequities and normalize White superiority and thus, White supremacy;"[15]
2) "A method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told;"[16]
    a. Examples include Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992)[17] and Richard Delgado's *Rodrigo's Chronicles* (1995)[18];
3) Types of Counternarratives:
    a. Personal Stories;
    b. Other People's Stories;
    c. Composite Stories;[19]
4) Purposes:
    a. Build and sustain community for people often marginalized and overlooked;
    b. Critique/Challenge commonly held ideas or notions;
    c. Create a new perspective into reality; open possibilities;
    d. Combine current reality with open possibilities to create a new rich world;[20]
5) A mirror revealing one's true self;

[15] Huber, L. (2008). Building critical race methodologies in educational research: A research note on critical race testimonio. *FIU Law Review*, *4*(1), 167.

[16] Solorzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-Story telling as an analytical framework for education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(1), 26.

[17] Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

[18] Delgado, R. (1995). *The Rodrigo chronicles: Conversations about America and race*. New York: New York University Press.

[19] Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

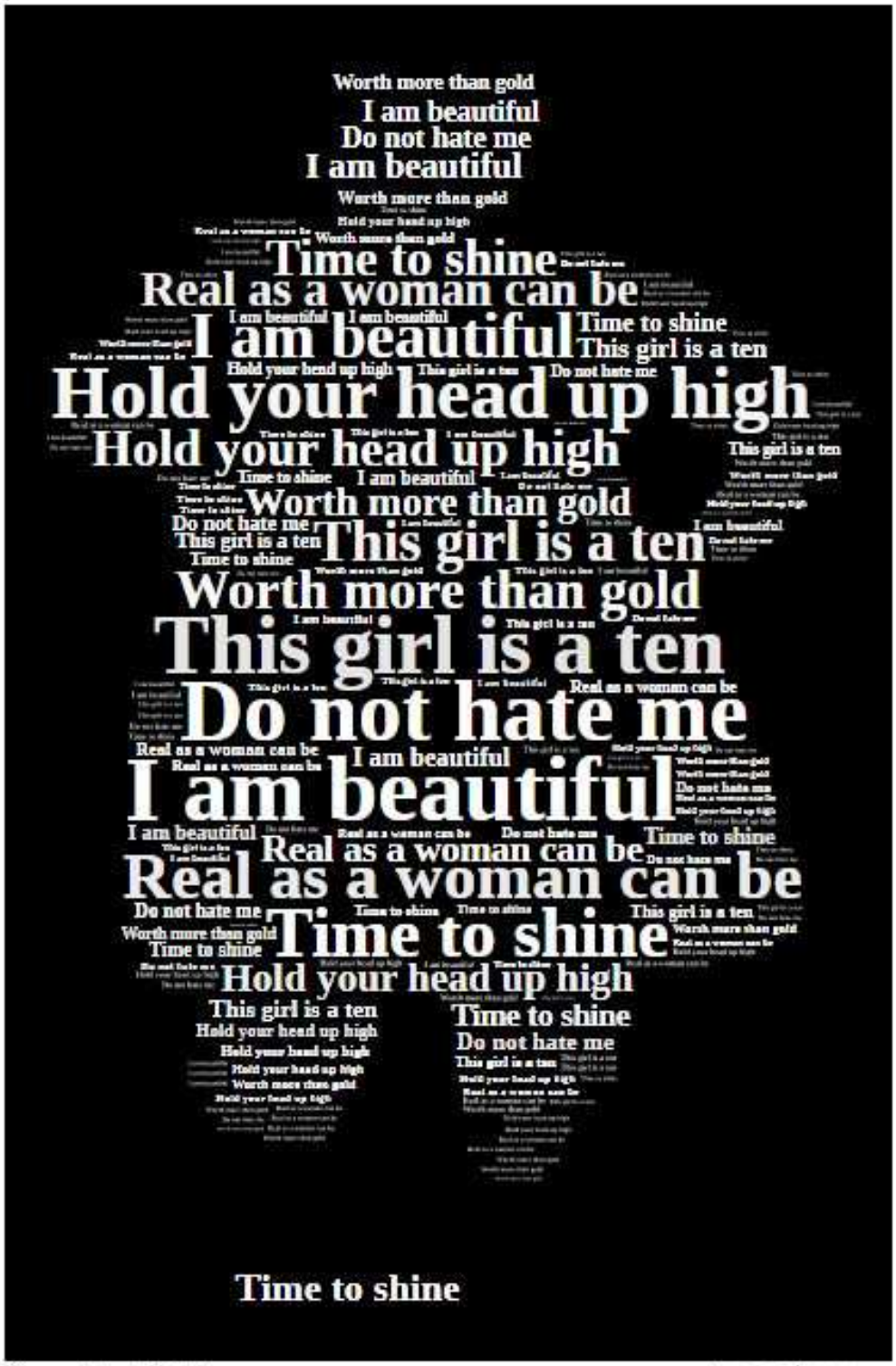
[20] Delgado, R. (2014). *Critical race theory an introduction* (2nd Ed.). NYU Press.

Naming Myself: A Body Image Visual Poem

No Apologies: A Counternarrative

I don't have an amazing figure or a flat stomach.
I'm far from being considered a model, but I'm me.
I eat food.
I have curves.
I have scars because I have history.
Some people love me.
Some people like me.
Some people hate me.
I have done good.
I have done bad.
I love my makeup and
can sometimes go without my makeup
and sometimes don't get my hair done.
I'm random and I'm crazy.
I don't pretend to be someone I'm not.
I am who I am.
I won't change!!
And if I love you, I do it with my heart!
I make no excuses for the way I am.

Fat: A Counternarrative in Visual Form



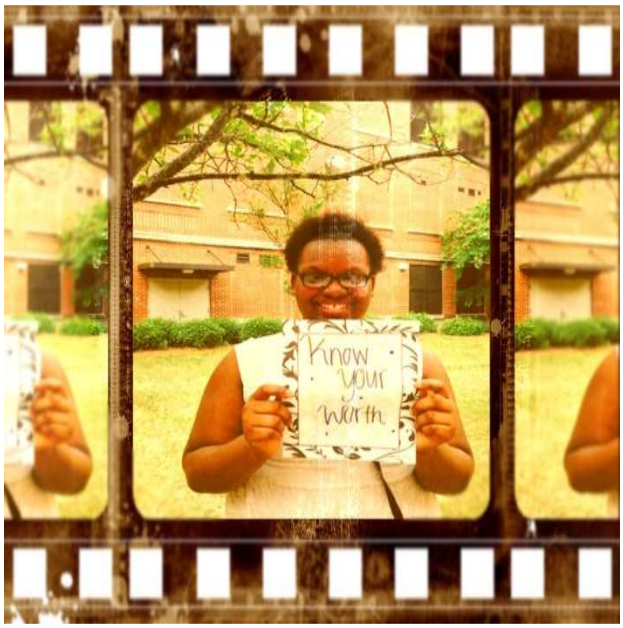
Greater is Cominng: Praise in Lyrics and Movement

Body Love: An Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

A Visual Poem

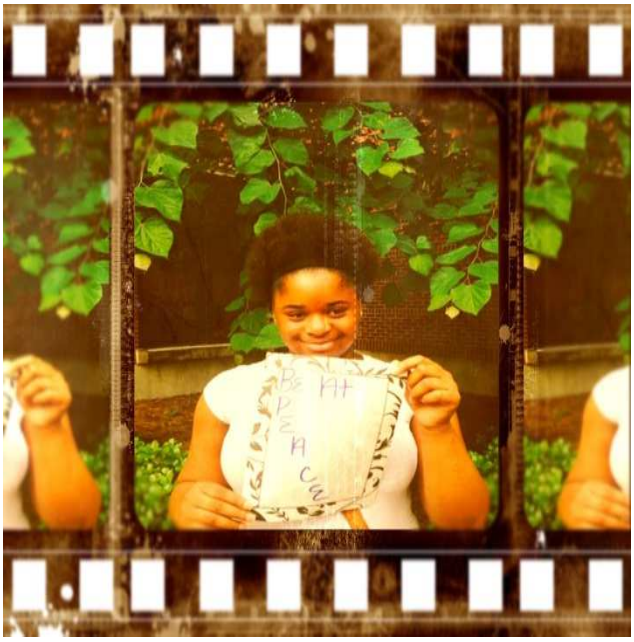
I. Respect All Bodies*!*

II. Know Your Worth!



III. Live Your Life Without Negative Thoughts!

IV. Be at peace!



V. Love Yourself

CHAPTER SIX

ETHNOPOETICS AS AN INTERPRETIVE TOOL: A REPOSITORY OF WISDOM AND POSSIBILITY (LORDE, 1984)

> Human kind has forever been attracted to poetry because of the musicality and poignancy it portrays in the rhythms of its contracted form, and because of the mystery it suggests in the ambiguity it retains. So much can be said in so few words and in such compelling ways. Poetry is an imaginative awareness of experience expressed through meaning, sound, and rhythmic language choices so as to evoke an embodied response . . . It portrays particular qualities of being, elicits metaphorical wondering, synthesizes various modes of perception, and shows a way of paying attention . . . It is a form of inquiry (Smith, 2003, p. 3).

To many it may seem awkward: the juxtaposition of poetry and research. Poetry lends itself to beauty and aesthetics and at first glance it does not appear to be an appropriate tool to interpret the political world of educational research. Yet, it is exactly this creative aesthetic which makes poetry fertile ground for qualitative study. Saunders (2003) suggests poetry has seven specific functions as it (a) presents rather than argue; (b) offers insight; (c) adds to the sense of the world's variety; (d) offers a space to play with ideas; (e) makes new of the mundane; (f) immerses a reader in a world of emotions such as surprise, shock or dread; and (g) connects the seemingly unconnected as a way to awaken memory (p. 176). These poetic functions reveal poetry's inherent and awesome

power: Poetry permits an author to communicate something ultimately nameless or often indescribable allowing researchers to move beyond traditional discursive research limitations (Barone & Eisner, 2011).

As an arts-based research methodology, poetry sanctions far more than a mental connection because art is not designed just to appeal to the mind; it evokes all five senses and combines both kinesthetic and spatial awareness. This heightened analysis elicits a mental, emotional, and physical connection (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Ward, 2011). This new awareness, however, is built upon a language which is familiar. As can be seen in my findings chapter, poetry is an amalgamation of words from everyday speech which are familiar but placed "in a sequence and order that surprises us out of our normal speech rhythms and linear thought processes. Its effect is to illuminate our lives and breathe new life, new seeing into the world we thought we knew (Housden, 2011). In this way, I have attempted to use data to craft poems that will communicate the mental, emotional and physical connections that Barone & Eisner (2011) describe. By appealing to our humanity, poetic inquiry is a gateway to possibility; a new way of representing knowing (Caughmann-Taylor, 2009; Prendergast & Leggo, 2009).

It is not by chance but by calculated and strategic maneuver that Black authors have long invoked the poetic form as a socio-political and critical act of resistance and as an effective tool to speak against hegemonic and oppressive power structures (Bolden, 2011; Jofe, 2001; Leonard, 2011). For over 300 years, Black authors have utilized poetic language and devices such as metaphor, lyric, rhythm, imagery alongside emotion and critical consciousness to bring about revelations on the harsh realities of their existence (Christensen & Watson, 2015). Phillis Wheatley (1770) elucidated the emotional

dissonance of the demands of being asked to write about freedom while still enslaved. Flash forward nearly 150 years, W. E. B. DuBois (1985) signified "My Country 'Tis of Thee" to display the hypocrisy of America being declared a "sweet land of liberty," when its supposed greatness was created and sustained by the enslavement and attempted eradication of a people. Langston Hughes (2001) staunchly declared, "I, Too, Am America" to speak against a dominant power who sought only his silence and erasure (Hughes & Rampersad, 2001). Gwendolyn Brooks (1963) audaciously proclaimed, "My Dreams, My Works, Must Wait to After Hell," to illustrate the double-standard of having to work twice as hard to only have access to the bare minimum needed for survival. Through bold strokes, melding metaphor, rhythm, and a complex reality, Black authors utilized poetry to celebrate and analyze their experiential knowledge and to enact and perform their literate (Gates & Smith, 2014; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Jordan, 2004; Shockley, 2011).

In particular, poetry held a special place for Black women to express affective experiences, specifically the intersectionalities of those experiences, and provide social commentary on being a Black, being a woman, and size in a hostile environment. Through poetic enterprise, Black female authors claimed authority and agency over the representations of their gender, race, and size. Wallace-Saunders (2002) calls this issue of representation, 'body dramas,' and argued being Black and female is characterized by the private being made public, which invalidates the need to hide and render invisible women's sexuality and private parts. For the Black female form, there is nothing sacred or off limits; all aspects are subjected to public scrutiny, exhibition, and derisive judgment creating a master-narrative about what is desirable in beauty ideals.

To challenge dominant opinion and prevent self-hatred, Black female authors invoked the poetic genre as a counternarrative to affirm what is often only objectified (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Lucille Clifton's (1980) "Homage to My Hips" stands in testimony to the power of the counternarrative. The poem begins by unapologetically declaring:

> these hips are big hips/
> they need space to/
> move around in./
> they don't fit into little/
> petty places. these hips/
> are free hips./ (Clifton, 1980, p. 52).

Not only does the rhythm of the poem mimic the swaying of a woman's hip, Clifton asserts and revels in the fact that her hips need space to move. Her "hips" are both literal and symbolic as their vastness transcends the narrowness of dominant culture—with its focus on thinness and weight management--is too constraining for the glorious hips to which Clifton pays homage. The hips also symbolize the inherent strength of the Black woman and the Black female body and serve as a reminder that liberation and empowerment can only come with self-love and affirmation (Brumberg, 1998; Saguy, 2013). It is for this reason that Audre Lorde (1984) declared poetry cannot be a luxury for Black Women. Instead, it must be a repository of wisdom and possibility. She states:

> It [poetry] is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the

> way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. As they become known and accepted to ourselves, our feelings, and the honest exploration of them, become sanctuaries and fortresses and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas, the house of difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. (pp. 37-38)

Lorde refers to poetry as a place of enlightenment, recovery, and healing. It is through poetry where Black women and, I assert, Black female adolescents, can reveal their experiences in a familiar form and find the power to restore that which was ripped away.

Despite this literacy-rich lineage, I greeted my poetic muse as a newfound friend versus a beloved family member. I needed to take time and reflect upon how this division occurred. Poetry was created and refined by Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Dickinson. Poetry was "theirs" and I was once again an “other” coming into foreign territory. This aspect of the West claiming knowledge ownership is not a new phenomenon. Smith (2012) author of *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* asserts:

> It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. (p. 1)

Not only does the practice of claiming knowledge serve a gatekeeping mechanism to prevent educational attainment, actualization, and awareness (Delpit, 2006; 2012; DuBois, 1903; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Rickford, 2016) it also creates a

distorted mirror in which to view an individual, a culture, and the world. (Jordan, 1988). It was as Carter G. Woodson (1933) declared and, as Chapter Four revealed, I was not instructed until a particular teacher intervened. Instead, I was indoctrinated by an oppressive ideology which prevented me from claiming a better position in the classroom and in life. I did not recognize the poetic elements existing in my everyday experience; yet, they were always there. They were in the oral stories my grandfather told riddled with rhymes and rhythm (Boutte, 2015; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). They were in the hand jives I played with my cousins under the shade of the oak tree in my backyard. They were in the "people are like fishes" speech my aunt performed to a captivated crowd in church. They were in the lyrical testimonies which incited a crowd to shout, "Hallelujah" and break into praise. My poetic muse was with me the entire time, I was just taught, through a colonized education (DuBois, 1903; King, 1991, 2005; Smith, 2012; Woodson, 1933) to ignore her voice, so she lay dormant inside of me until I was awakened.

Much the same can be said about Ethnopoetics. Coined in the late 1960's by linguistic anthropologist Jerome Rothenberg, ethnopoetics sought to analyze art, folklore, dance, praises and chants of Native American tribes. In essence, anthropologists wanted to analyze the verbal art form and cultural performances (Quick, 1999; Rothenberg, 2000; Samuels, 2013).This was different from traditional research methods, which often tried to ascribe Western poetic styles and structures to the literacy practices of Indigenous populations. This style of analysis privileged Western standards and scholars misjudged and misinterpreted the Indigenous populations' artistic representations as primitive or simplistic (Chilisa, 2011; Denzin & Giardina, 2016; Smith, 2012). Since artforms, such as poetry, communicate beliefs and values; they are an essential part of language and

languages should not exist within a hierarchal structure (Smitherman, 1999; 2000; 2006). To enforce such a restrictive view of languages and the creators of language is to enact White supremacist and Eurocentric views and this stance has dire consequences including emotional and physical causalities (Gay, 2010; King, 2005; Smith, 2012).

For this reason it is important to note the art of ethnopoetics was enacted in the literacy practices of African cultures and African-American culture long before the coining of the term "ethnopoetics" by a White linguistic anthropologist. Thus, invoking this artistic style as an interpretative tool allows me to stand on the shoulders of my literary ancestors and pay tribute to Black Intellectual Thought (Brown, Brown, & Grant, 2015; Collins, 2002). It also allows me to bear witness to the stories of my ancestors and the stories of the girls in this study because I recognize that our stories matter (Adichie, 2010; Blackburn, 2011; Gay, 2010). Stories help situate identities and construct new meanings (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2009; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). They are the foundations of thought and reflect human experience (Benitez, 2007; Mahiri, 1998, 2004; Valdes, 2001), the footprints of our personal journeys (Campano, 2007). As we hear stories we delve into the "messy complexity of human experience" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3) and analyze historic, economic, sociologic and cultural forces that press against our very existence.

I cannot divorce myself from my stories and my literacy/poetic heritage. They are the lens through which I view the world and position myself. As a scholar and researcher, I reveal my stories, not as biases, but as personal truths, and "acknowledge their effects in my research" (Conteh, Gregory, & Mor, 2005, p. 8). As Wood (1996) argues, I believe that "one does research in order to learn more about others, but in so doing, also learns

about oneself" (p. 5). By utilizing this stance, my dissertation in and of itself becomes a counternarrative for traditional research and bears witness to ideal that there are many ways to tell a story and all ways have a place and space in academia. In this case, I chose to tell the Blue Diamond girls' stories and my stories in poetic form because it is powerful tool of expression which can voice anger, curiosity, excitement, thoughtfulness, skepticism and action.

Finding Wisdom within the Words: Creating the Poems

As I approached the task of writing the poetic findings, I was intrepid. How would I bring the chorus of voices – my own and the voices of the young women in my study - together into a seamless but poignant story? It would need a structure to make it cohesive; yet, the structure could not temper the emotional cacophony which imbued every session as adolescents wrestled with dealing with life in the margins and multifaceted intersections. It was in her speech "Learning from the 60s" that Audre Lorde (1984) declared, "There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." Analyzing the perceptions of African-American adolescent females could not be a single issue because it is far more complex. Critically analyzing racism, sexism, and sizism demanded multiple perspectives.

To directly address this challenge, I decided to use the multitude of voices which comprised the data: the voices and stories of the Blue Diamond girls; my thoughts, experiences, and analyses as a researcher; current research; and the voices of writers, poets, photographers, as well as vocal and visual artists which comprise the Black literary ancestry. This action challenges hegemonic academic forces which hooks (1990) argued are often predicated on the notion that there is no need:

> To hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority… and you are now at the center of my talk. (p. 208)

This assumed knowing is the crux of oppression and marginalization. This study counters that supposition, by asking, "Who else?" Who else can tell my story and discuss my pain? Who else can speak to ostracism and alienation? Who else can speak to the physical and symbolic violence occurring on a routine basis? Who else can speak to forced generational silence? By adopting a resilient and transformative stance through poetry, this research adds to work that attempts to redefine what counts as academic writing and does so by paying homage to the Black activists, poets, and pioneers who have paved the way for works of equity and social justice.

Thus, my findings as poetry constitute a purposeful and critical act of resistance because for far too long, the term "academic" has been relegated to White supremacist and colonized forms (Paris & Winn, 2014; Patel, 2015). Smith (2012) pontificates about how research has long been known among the oppressed for its oppressive qualities:

> The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary…it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is

> implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history. (p. 1)

Communicating findings from this study in a way which rejoices in Blackness, Black Intellectual Thought, and Black Feminist Thought audaciously denies the negation of a people and culture. It is a blatant refusal to be ignored, overlooked or silenced.

Verse Novel

The structures of my findings were crafted as a verse novel which is a text which uses poetic form to convey a narrative story. In a speech at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, Rita Dove, a former U.S. poet laureate, declared verse novels offer "the weight of each word, the weight of the sentence, the weight of the line, the weight of White space, heightened attention to sound, and deep allegiance to silence" (Dove, 2013). A well-crafted verse novel, "is pure energy/ horizontally contained/ between the mind of the poet/ and the ear of the reader" (Giovanni, 1974). It is the combination of words, visual space, and attention to silence which create an intimacy between readers and authors while providing a sense of urgency (Schneider, 2012; Winship, 2002). Verse novels mirror a culture's artistic, music and literary heritage while merging rhythm and melody to recreate the research partners' stories (Farrish, 2013). Combining artistry, printed word, and orality, verse novels only serve to build upon the rich Black Oral Tradition which celebrates performance, story-telling, verve, and communion (Boutte, 2015; King, 2005; King & Swartz, 2015; Ladson-Billings,1994). In essence, this hybrid genre is both a demand for space in which to invoke the art of story-telling and an invitation to critically listen with open mind and willing heart (Cadden, 2011).

By its innovative design, verse novels are both solace and controversy and are quite appealing to adolescent readers. Black authors have embraced and excelled in creating verse novels. Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014), Walter Dean Myers' *Street Love* (2006) and Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover (2014)* have won numerous awards including *Newberry Honor Award* and the *American Library Association* (ALA) *Best Fiction for Young Adults Award* for their compelling characters, gripping plots and for innovatively using the heart of the verse novel: an authentic and powerful voice. Alexander (2005) argued through verse novels, the increased awareness of narrative voice:

> Raises the potential for personalized subjective narration and for reading constructed as intimate conversation or even as eavesdropping. The verse-novel is an appropriate vehicle for these covert emphases. . . . Writers who select the genre of the verse-novel rather than plain prose re-conceive their narrative more explicitly as spoken text and oral rhythms assume greater significance. (pp. 270-271)

For critical and humanizing research to be successful, teachers must have a clear understanding of what transpires in their students' hearts and minds (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). The verse novel provides an opportunity to communicate students' feelings and experiences to teachers in accessible, powerful ways. Through the verse novel, the research partners' stories in this study have the potential to dismantle Eurocentric curriculum in ways that can support the development of curriculum centered on their realities through co-generative dialogue, context, and content (Emdin, 2016). In short, because our students' truths must be the heart of the curriculum, verse novels can

play a role in communicating those truths. By utilizing direct quotes from poetic transcription (Glesne, 2011) and combining the creative use of pauses, line breaks, word choice and positioning, the verse novel has the potential to bring what was once hidden to light; producing the hesitation necessary for reflection and action.

The verse novel and its numerous intricacies reveal the on-going tensions between words, voices, and roles; all of which must be manipulated to create a comprehensive story (Sullivan, 2007). The ultimate goal of the verse novel is to provide a more rich understanding of an event. As an added benefit, each component of the verse novel aids in transparency of the research process because as Moravcsik (2014) argues, "Unless other scholars can examine evidence, parse the analysis, and understand the processes by which evidence and theories were chosen, why should they trust the research?" (p. 48).

Organizing the Poems and Analytic Decisions

The cohesion of the poems that constitute Chapter Five of this dissertation is built on a common structure. I did not explain this structure prior to presenting the findings poems because I felt that the poems and their organization must speak for themselves. Knowing that, no matter the format or style of texts, as readers transact with them, every interpretation becomes, in itself the creation a new poem (Rosenblatt, 1978). However, here I offer my thinking as I used analyzed data to construct the interpretations which became Chapter Five.

Within the first few pages, readers are introduced to an anxious researcher and five enthusiastic and energetic adolescent girls. The remainder of the novel is comprised of four distinct yet interconnected trend chapters discussing fat, colorism, intersectionality, and counternarratives. Each trend chapter begins with a poem of

definition which utilizes current research to provide context and interject ideas and transform established beliefs and ideology (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Following the poems of definition, composite poems are employed to speak to the girls' realities and convey my interpretations of their stories Composite poetry builds upon the idea of composite characters in CRT (Bell, 1992; Cook, 2013; Delgado, 1995) and Black Feminism (Anderson, 2008) which capture the breadth and depth of the issue while providing a closer lens to analyze the minute nuances at play. The composite poems were created using the partners' personal experiences, stories, and worldly observations (Cook, 2013) taken from journals, artifacts, and audio-recordings. The result is what Bell (1992) described as modular stories or stories which are "composed as a mosaic, a design made up of component parts: What modular design can do is liberate the writer from linear logic, those chains of cause and effect, strings of dominoes always falling forward" (p. 158).

Composite poems allow the reader to experience a reality versus solely reading it. In essence, the composite poems serve as counternarratives to dominant research practices as they can (a) construct communal bonds for marginalized individuals by putting a human face on a societal issues; (b) challenge majoritarian values and beliefs; (c) open doors to new possibilities by displaying "you are not alone;" and (d) instruct using narrative story elements to reveal current reality (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The poems also celebrate Blackness as they are modeled after great Black writers such as Claude McKay, Nikki Giovanni as well as gospel and visual artists.

Finally, each trend chapter ends with a researcher's note poem using excerpts from my written and audio-recorded journals and observations. These final poems (in

each section) invite readers inside my mind as I pondered my observations, reflections, and lingering questions. Each of these sections of the findings chapter and my analytic decisions made when creating them are discussed in the following sections.

Researcher's note: A preface. Chapter Five begins with my introduction as a researcher. It reveals a novice researcher battling a myriad of emotions. I remember clearly the first day of the study, my feelings becoming the foundation of the first researcher's note in Chapter Five. I arrived at the middle school early to allow time to set up the space. I eagerly parked in a space in the school's parking lot and grabbed my various bags. As my hand grasped the car door latch, I began to panic. I was not physically able to open my door. I stared in the rear-view mirror and realized I was breathing in short, quick, gasps. How could I stop this angst from coming forth? My ten-plus years as a middle school educator urged me that if I was not 100% real, the girls would sense the falsehoods. How could I ask them to be completely vulnerable if I was not willing to do so myself? I had to conquer my fear.

I closed my eyes my eyes and forced myself to decrease my breathing. I forced myself to inhale and count to three. One. Two. Three. I then exhaled slowly repeating the count. I repeated the process until both my breathing and pulse decreased. As I centered myself, a song danced through my mind. I exhaled once more, and began to softly sing, "Confession is good for the soul they say/ well, now it's my turn/" (Robinson, 2000, Track 2). I realized at this moment, I needed to confess my fear. I furiously reached over to grab my researcher's journal and began to scribble words on the page. Before my eyes the same phrase appeared over and over: Can I really do this? My eyes reread the repeated phrase and I realize I still was not calm, but sometimes as Maya Angelou (1970)

wrote, “words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning” (p. 82). In short, I could not just write my confession, I felt that it must be spoken to have power. Deeper meaning could not be achieved by only professing the thoughts on paper; my spoken voice was necessary to add conviction and merit as well as cementing it as a form of knowledge and consciousness. (Bell, 1992; Collins, 2000).

To infuse orality into my written words, I grabbed my cellphone and used its recording feature to confess what was on my soul; what was released was raw truth. I spoke in the language of my heart: poetry. The line ends were determined by the pauses I made as I gathered my thoughts. Although it was unplanned, the repetition of the lines, “Can I really do this?” provided cohesion and conveyed anxiousness and uncertainty. The poem, however, was not yet finalized. When I analyzed the transcriptions and replayed the audio recording, I realized gaps existed in my confession; places where a reader may be confused. Like Toni Morrison (1984), I wanted my writing to “urge the reader into active participation . . . which makes it difficult for the reader to confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of data” (p. 387). To do so, required I clarify initial statements with specific examples derived from data and declarative words.

To revise the poem, I utilized a text annotation strategy (Beers & Probst, 2013) to discern areas which were to be strengthened. Text annotation involves marking a text by highlighting and adding words or notes. Text annotation requires close inspection of the text and allows the author to interact with memory and call to the present sights, sounds, and images which occurred in the moment. This strategy supported me in “bear[ing] witness and identify[ing] that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be

discarded; it . . . ma[de] it possible to prepare for the present and live it out" (Morrison, 1984, p. 389). By annotating the poem, I desired to make the reader feel as if they were alongside me in the writing process. To annotate this poem, I highlighted in yellow the areas which required more detailed. I used other symbols to illustrate where I needed to add more detail (+) or include more precise word choice (*) (Figure 6.1).

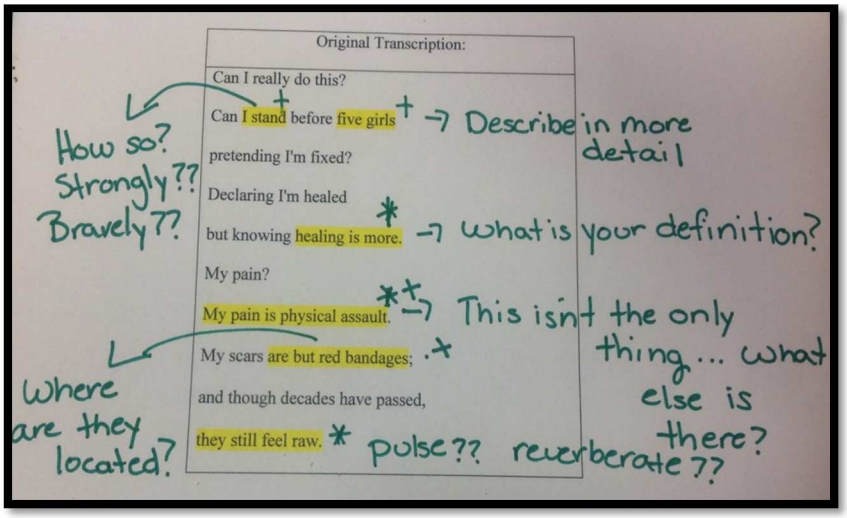


Figure 6.1 Text Annotation Revision Strategy

Introductions. Introducing my research partners, the Blue Diamond Girls, proved equally daunting. I wanted to capture them in their totality: all personality, energy, and life. To do so, I needed to shift their roles from research partners to authors and poets. Introducing the Blue Diamond girls required analyzing journal excerpts, excerpts from transcriptions as well as my field notes to produce descriptions which felt realistic and genuine to me (according to my interpretations) and the girls (as affirmed through member checking).

An important piece of data that supported the development of the introductory poems were the pictures I asked the girls to bring representing their personality. Around each picture the girls wrote about what the image conveyed about their personality. Amir

stood boldly in the image displaying the peace sign. Around her image, Amir wrote the words “Bold and Loud.” Kelsey’s image displayed her in the early morning donning a head-scarf to protect her hair. She wears a confident yet knowing smile and she wrote the words, “Intelligent” beside her image. Melody’s image displayed her shy nature because she utilized the phone to cover half of her face. Jennifer displayed her loquacious nature because her pictures included her surrounded by friends or family. Marie smiled widely in her image and her arms were wrapped around her body as if she were embracing herself. To the side of her picture, Marie wrote the words, “kind and loving.” The descriptive words were interwoven in the introductory poems.

Another data source which supported the creation of introductions were the girl’s journals. Each Blue Diamond girl was given a journal in which to capture their musings and share opinions which they may have wished to express aloud. The journal entries responded to the following prompt: If you really knew me, you would know? The responses could take place in any format which was comfortable: bullets, pictures, sentences or paragraphs. I wanted to ensure the Diamond Girls understood that it was not the medium but their voice and honesty that mattered. In this manner, the girls’ voices, stories, and culture were used as a learning platform; they were a part of the community and the community was essential for survival and growth (Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). By using their journal responses and layering on notes regarding body language and personality traits from my research journal, the poems of introduction were born. Table 6.1 displays how I captured the newly formed characters from a variety of data points.

Table 6.1

Characterization Chart

Blue Diamond Girl	Selected Pseudonym	Journal Notes:	Researcher Notes:
1	Amir	• 14 years old • Favorite Color: Green • Loud • Crazy • Love my Best Friend (Melody) • Love braids and cornrows	Observations: Amir's voice is usually the first you hear. She goes back and forth between confidant and insecure. She admitted she does not like her body because she feels she is too skinny. She often makes comments about hating having dark skin.
2	Melody	• 13 years old • Favorite Color: Pink • Shy • Quiet • 3 Siblings	Observations: Very quiet and introverted. Melody does not liking speaking in groups. She admits she does not talk much in school at all, though she often smiles She admits she has some issues with her body.
3	Kelsey	• 14 years old • Favorite Color: Blue • 3 Siblings • Intelligent • I know everybody. • Love clothes & fashion	Observations: Prides herself on being in advanced classes. Switches from African-American Language to Standard English. She admits to loving her body as it is but wishes she could make her gut a little smaller. Appears quite confidant and boasts about loving her body and how boys find her attractive.
4	Jennifer	• 13 years old • Favorite Colors: Black, Blue • Talkative • Older sister; younger brother • Hobbies: Talking, Phone, Movies	Observations: Jennifer is one of the first persons to join a conversation. She is the middle child and loves to talk, talk, and talk. She often discusses how she cannot wait until she is older. She admits she has a hard time gaining weight despite the fact she is constantly eating.
5	Marie	• 13 years old • Favorite Color: Red • Rude • I tell people about themselves quickly. • I have anger issues. • Funny • Intelligent • Kind (Somewhat)	Observations: Marie is willing to "read" anyone and tell them about themselves. She often comes into the meetings upset but the anger dissolves quickly. Marie gives me a hug before leaving every meeting. The only caveat is that she waits until everyone leaves so no one will know about it.

The composite introduction poems allow for the voices and personalities of the girls to be transparent while allowing the researcher to acknowledge ambiguities which occurred (Cook, 2013). This process of self-reflexivity makes analysis open for public consumption and allows for biases and assumptions to be revealed (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). As this research study is situated within Critical Race and Black Feminist paradigms, the constant reflections afforded me the opportunity to elucidate how my own "experiences, values, and positions…have influenced research interests, the way I choose to do their research and the ways I choose to represent their research findings" (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001, p. 325).

While conception of the poems was fraught with emotion, they were easily born. In describing development of the poems, I use the words "born" and "conception" decisively instead of "written" and "created" because they account for the interplay of emotions, creativity, ideas, sounds, and words. This writing process was time-consuming and painful, traversing euphoria and rage. The ultimate creation, the introduction poem, is carefully crafted, thought-out, planned, result of endless reading and rereading of data. The remaining poems build on the Introductions, serving not only as a method of representing carefully analyzed data but as both anchor and life-raft, helping me share interpretations of the girls' truths and to display how much work still needs to be done for traditional classrooms to become liberative spaces. In the process, as a member as well as the researcher in this study, I began to make peace with my difficult history.

Fat. It is no secret; females in close social circles discuss body dissatisfaction, expound on weight loss strategies, and/or commiserate over an inability to lose weight (Brittain, Martz, Bazzini, Curtain, & Leashomb, 2006). Despite this fact, body image is

difficult to discuss in educational settings as it is often painful and controversial. For example, Nichter (2000) conducted an ethnographic study of middle-school girls engaging in fat talk and found some girls believed maintaining silence in a group of girls expressing body dissatisfaction would imply they considered themselves and their bodies to be above reproach. This is why the findings of this study are so vital to academic pursuit and educational transformation as they center research on the Black female's struggle with obtaining actualization and utilize a social context and lived realities as a critical back- drop to discuss weight, body image, and race (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003).

Fat: A Poem of Definition. This poem opens this this dissertation's data-driven representations of The Blue Diamond Girls' conceptions of *fat* by providing contextualization on how fat is perceived by many different society members. For example, represented in the poem is the American Medical Association and Center for Disease Control views, both describing obesity as a serious public health crisis impacting 35% of adults in the United States (Overweight and Obesity Statistics, 2012). In addition, mass media depicts television shows in which obese individuals are stereotyped or ridiculed as well as centering dialogues on individual level causes of obesity and omitting the societal, economic, and environmental contributors (Fouts & Vaughan, 2002; Kim & Willis, 2007; Lawrence, 2004; Rich & Evans, 2005). Alongside these perspectives, are the belief systems and values we adopt from family and friends. To determine how messages regarding obesity were conveyed in families, interviews were used. The interviews asked each Blue Diamond girl to reflect upon memories and experiences in which they learned values and beliefs around food, body size, and weight. In one story, Melody, recalled waiting for hours with her mother in the gym as she exercised trying to

lose the dreaded baby weight. Marie described her grandmother's sure-fire strategy for losing weight: Closing your mouth. Kelsey described incidents of being teased in the hallway regarding her body size. These are the contextual forces problematizing the issue of obesity and shaping the ideas, assumptions, and beliefs of the research partners in the study.

Fat: A Visual Poem. The poem, *Fat: A Visual Poem* was created through my analysis of the Blue Diamonds' thoughts on obesity. One way I solicited those thoughts was by employing two different book club activities. For the first activity, I wanted the girls to provide responses to three words which are pervasive in obesity discourse: skinny, thick, and fat /obese. The words were placed in their journals and each girl was given time to individually respond to the words. These words serve as powerful descriptors and build upon one another to create a political force which "works[s] to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it" (Foucault, 1978, p. 136). I wanted to better understand the ways in which differences –particularly those which exist on an inherent binary system such as thin/thick, skinny/fat– are constructed and maintained. This enabled me to better discern how the girls construct reality though language and cultural practices (Wright, 2001; Rail, 2002). Table 6.2 captures the individual responses.

Table 6.2

Word Association Responses

Club Member	Skinny	Thick	Fat/Obese
Amir	• Pretty • Don't weigh much • Light-skinned • Don't like to eat	• Dark-Skinned • Big Butt • Gets attention	• Ugly • Fat face • Loves to eat • Loves Little Debbie • Can't walk

Melody	• Perfect • Smaller clothes • 80 – 90 lbs. • Can find anything in their size • More beautiful	• Not as big • Bigger clothes • Little Stomach • Can barely walk • Fat Hands	• Bigger Sizes • Can't do some things because of their size • Some parts of their body may be skinny • Stomach touches the steering wheel when driving • No Neck • Fat Feet • Can't fit into chairs • Stomach hanging out
Kelsey	• Bones • No Butt	• Nice Shape	• Uncomfortable • Embarrassing
Jennifer	• Perfect • In shape • Light-Weight • Never eats • No Booty • Can barely fit clothes • Gets Boys • Always wears make-up	• Booty • Can dress • Gets attention • Eats but not too much • Inner thighs touch together • More Hair	• Don't care about themselves • Double Chin • No clothes • Rolls on neck • Eats • Can fit into clothes • Can't sit up • Tries to be skinny • Tries to fit into skinny people clothes • Never shaves
Marie	• Boney • No meat • Cute but boney	• Identifies herself as this • Pretty • Thick everything includes thighs, butt, etc.	• Needs help to stop eating • Very big • Ugly • Have more than three stomach rolls • Humongous • Does not exercise

The second activity asked the girls to respond to visual representations of the words: skinny, thick, fat, and obese. The images were selected by using a Google Boolean word search. Having responses to both words and visual images reinforces the notion of literacy being a fluid multimodal process including linguistic, visual, audio, and spatial elements each in constant interplay to form the foundation of communication

(Perry, 2012; Mahiri, 2004; Wyman, 2012). By accepting sociocultural literacy learning, educators recognize and legitimize the deep funds of knowledge (Gonzelez, Moll, & Amanti, 2009) that students bring from home. This theory rejects deficit based learning and insists on building on students' inherent strength. By asking them to analyze both linguistic and visual texts, the Blue Diamond Girls "read the world and the word" (Freire & Macedo, 1987) which helped me verify particular data points. Table 6.3 illustrates individual responses.

Table 6.3

Visual Image Responses

	Skinny	Thick	Fat/Obese
Club Member:			
Amir	• Gets lots of boys • Model • Party Girl • Pretty • Works out	• Loves' to eat • Doesn't work out • Doesn't have friends • Fat	• Doesn't work out • Obese • Loves to eat • No friends • NOT a model • Tough Life
Melody	• She doesn't eat • Model • Her life in school is easy • Lots of Friends	• Eats a lot but not that much • Thick girl • Life in school is hard • Gets teased	• Poor • Life is very hard • Gets picked on • Obese • Eats junk food all day
Kelsey	• She likes to show her curves • Boys want her • Fast • Hangs with boys	• Party Girl • Thick • Boys like her • Expresses her culture	• That girl big! • People pick at her and call her names • At home eating her feelings • Eats a lot
Jennifer	• Model • Popular	• Big one • Confident	• Obese • She is too big to sit in

	• Doesn't eat anything	• Eats and likes to do nothing • Doesn't work out	chairs • Gets picked on • Lives in a dirty neighborhood • Eats and sleeps a lot
Marie	• Model • Bold • Will probably end up pregnant • Fast • Exercises	• College girl • Wants to find a man • Spoiled • thick	• Obese • Doesn't work out • Fat • Lives at home with cats

It was quite clear; the girls internalized a mechanistic view of the body which focuses on an assumed relationship between obesity, inactivity, poor dieting, and major health issues (Oliver, 2006; Orbach, 2006). No comment more clearly elucidates this idea than Amir's comments proclaiming the female labeled fat/obese could not be a fashion model and must have experienced a difficult life. Analyzing the data, revealed a reality in which the fat/obese individual's body is perceived as being a lazy body which should be disciplined and submitted to scrutiny and investigation (Groskopf, 2005; Murray, 2007, 2008). The challenge was how to convey the mass of emotional responses in poetic form. The answer came after reviewing a transcription in which the girls discussed the fat/obese image, in which the girls responded in the following manner:

Kelsey: It seems like every ten minutes or so I saw his fat behind eating. I told him he needed to stop that. Fat people is obese.

Amir: What about their big legs? They jiggle. Jiggle. Jiggle.

Jennifer: No clothes. They can't wear clothes like they wear a shower curtain for clothes.

Melody: Overweight. When they sit down, they can't get up. People have to help them.

Marie: They got a double-chin. Rolls upon rolls. What's that show called? "My 600 LB Life" on TLC! I was watching that the other day and I was laughing. It ain't hard to lose weight…all they gotta do is stop shoveling food in their mouths.

As I listened to their voices and reread their descriptions, an image began to appear in my mind: a grainy black and White photograph portraying an obese individual with the prerequisite "rolls upon rolls of fat." This would be a new form: visual poetry. A form which combined multiple modalities and as such modifies the relationship between printed word and image. Changing the text's materiality unavoidably changes the way we read/receive the text" (Kress, 2003). I utilized Tagxedo, a website which allows a user to blend words and visual images; the visual poem needed dual modalities to convey its truth. The image, however, would display the words used to describe fat/obese. This image seemed apropos as it represented the literal weight of the fat and the symbolic traumatic burden of teasing, ridicule, and being a constant spectacle. The individual needed to be isolated to reflect the notion of being lonely but also to symbolize the reoccurring message that obesity's cause and solution reside within the individual. A notion echoed by Marie, stating, "It ain't hard to lose weight . . . stop shoveling food." The pervasiveness of the personal reasonability myth plays a major role in obesity stigma and serves to justify stigmatization as an acceptable societal response (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). I hoped the reader would find the picture halting and difficult to process, therefore causing a pause to take in both its form and content. Since form mediates understanding (Eisner, 1991) using the visual poem as a non-traditional text, brings new and unexpected insights into the world of an often overlooked experience: the fat/obese individual.

FAT: A Biography in Five Short Chapters. This series of poems was modeled after Portia Nelson's (1989) *Autobiography In Five Short Chapters*. The poem cleverly uses the metaphor of a narrator attempting to avoid falling into a hole to discuss overcoming an obstacle, Although poignant, the poem cleverly uses five succinct stanzas each having only 30-40 words. Reproducing the style and power of this poem posed the challenge of minimalism; yet, it was the minimalistic structure which posed a solution. The poem was reminiscent of a genre popularized by youth culture which emphasizes authenticity and brevity in 140 characters or less: the meme. Coined by Richard Dawkins (1976*),* memes are a cultural phenomenon usually involving jokes, quirky wisdom, and pictures which ″which subtly represents the tones of today's social etiquette and culture. . . . The cultural impact of Memes cannot be ignored. In fact, it can even be a tool for self-promotion, branding and marketing" (Hines & Cass, 2011, p. 1). In short, the meme represents a cultural artifact divulging insight into a particular event.

It was the idea of branding which percolated through my mind as I pondered how the Blue Diamond Girls would brand fat. I challenged the girls to think of the day and life of fat and asked: If fat were personified and could speak, what it would say? Figure 6.2 explains the meme activity.

Figure 6.2 Meme Activity Instructions

After, reading the instructions, Jennifer proclaimed, "Chile, that ain't hard," and the girls settled down at computers to compose their creations. As they scrolled through Google searching for images, the room was littered with vocal outbursts and laughter. Screens filled with pictures of scales screaming "help" and obese individuals in depraved acts of indulgence. Each time, the images were never challenged or questioned, just accepted as an unmitigated truth. Within 20 minutes, the creations were unveiled. As co-author, I only had to arrange them in a manner which conveyed a cohesive structure with a beginning middle and end.

Stereotypes. Analyzing the memes proved insightful into the girls' thoughts. As texts, memes examine how "multimodal literacy practices with online popular culture are changing conceptions of texts and of rhetorical concepts such as audience and authorship; the ways in which issues of politics, power, and resistance influence such literacy practices" (Williams & Zenger, 2001, p. x). Interpreting the memes unearthed perceptions not conveyed through traditional communicative discourse. An overarching pattern I constructed was the overwhelming abundance of stereotypical ideals held by The Blue Diamond Girls such as constantly indulging in oversized portions of unhealthy foods or the tendency to remain inert. Table 6.4 displays the meme analysis.

Table 6.4

Meme Analysis

Meme Pattern	Researcher Analysis
Describing Fat	• All of the memes feature someone who would be characterized as being morbidly obese. • All of the memes feature individuals who are sitting or lying down. This means the girls see an obese individual as being someone who is inactive and does not exercise. • The theme of "not fitting" reoccurs throughout the memes. Either the individual does not fit into their clothing (Meme 5); or not being able to fit into a chair (Meme 2). • 3/5memes feature someone eating. The girls could possibly see this as a characteristic of obesity. In the pictures featuring food, the food is also oversized. This could be an indication of excessive eating habits as well. It also reinforces the notion of the obese individual always being hungry as indicated in Meme 3. • Another reoccurring pattern is theme of being out of control and needing assistance. Meme 1 features an individual in need of assistance; as if their weight is so out of control an outside force is needed to intervene. • In all of the memes, the individual is alone; typically with food. • None of the pictures a fashionable individual.

Stereotypes	• Always eating
	  o Insatiable hunger
	  o Over-sized portions
	• Not exercising
	  o Lazy
	  o In need of an outside force to exhibit control
	• Not fashionable
	  o Clothes which do not fit properly
	• No control
	  o (See above)

Stigma	• The girls often laughed and pointed as they designed the memes; as if obesity is a site of humor or an exhibited. • The image of the scale with the words "Help me," once again reinforces the notion of being out of control. Even more so, Amir tried to put this label on Melody, as an insult. • The images reinforce the notion of isolation with food as the only consolation • In one image, the girls were laughing so hard they failed to notice an error in the meme. The individual is eating a hotdog, but it is labeled as a hamburger. When I pointed this out, Kelsey declared, "It's still funny."

Experts argue that since the transition from childhood to adolescence is marked by increased attention to beauty ideals (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004) and there exists longevity in memory for weight- related media messages (Calvert, Strong, Jacobs, & Conger, 2007), there is a relational aggression toward obese peers (Janssen, Craig, & Boyce, 2004). For this reason, the stereotypes needed to be explored in more detail. They were worthy of a poem all their own; a poem which distorted font size and White space to symbolize the distorted perceptions of obesity. The words from the poem were derived as the Blue Diamond girls did a gallery walk of the memes. This allowed time for girls to interrogate the images.

As the girls conducted their meme gallery walk, carefully studying the images created by each other, Melody softly inquired of the group, "You really think all fat people do is eat?" Amir replied, I eat all the time and I can't gain weight." Marie pushed the idea even further, "So, why do they gain weight?" There was something affirming

about our space because words could be left open to the wind, and there they would exist with less judgment. It was not a fundamental mind shift. In fact, only a few questions were uttered; yet, it was still an opportunity of change and as a fat woman with concerns about the field of education and students experiencing size, race, and gender oppression, I felt hopeful. This activity provided credence for the need to incorporate new literacies, such as memes, as they create new opportunities to interpret our world.

Fat: A Confessional Spoken-Word Performance Poem. This poem was built from data that illuminated our book club as a confessional space; a space to ask questions, share stories, and feel free. We were but "strangers learning to worship the strangers around" us (Jordan, 1977). There was no putting on fo' company here. Oftentimes while we worked, braids would be done or undone as needed. Food would be passed around the table and enjoyed by all. The girls would remove their shoes and sit with bare feet or in colorful socks. We spoke our home tongue, African American Language and feared no reprisals. I heard stories of family members in prison and the darkness of depression. I shared my fears and received and administered hugs as medicine. Honesty came in one style: brutal and it was never revoked, always welcomed. We were a safety net and a structure resembling a family in construction and purpose. Townsend and Thomas (2013) discuss the role of this kind of community as embraced and influenced by "othermothers" and sister circles as a critical support system in the socialization process of African-American girls. Othermothers are the equivalent of mothers while sister circles are a space for women to come together as healing partners (Collins, 1998 in Townsend & Thomas, 2013). Othermothers and sister circles can be

important vehicles for sharing critical lessons about confronting oppression with the younger generation. Data led me to believe that this was indeed our confessional.

For example, when I asked the girls to describe life as a fat adolescent, I patiently awaited their honesty. The responses were succinct but raw:

Marie: Very tough!

Kelsey: Hard!

Amir: Yeah….it ain't easy!

Melody: Embarrassing.

Jennifer: It's very hard.

Me: Why?

Melody: Because they get bullied, laughed at, name-calling…They called "fatty," "ugly" and "stank."

Marie: Everything but they name.

As I probed further for details, the memories quickly unfolded. Examples ranged from overweight students being pushed on the stairwells or teased and mocked as they walked down the hallways. The cafeteria became an event in and of itself as they recounted students collecting cookies to eat or bargaining for additional portions. The analysis of these data led to the representation of these stories in the performance poem. It needed to be displayed in such a way to pay homage to the exuberant personalities and the sanctity of the club space. Spoken-word poetry seemed the perfect solution as it affirmed Black culture by using storytelling, call and response, home languages, and oral tradition (Boutte, 2015; King, 2005; Smitherman, 2000). It also has the potential to bond the poet with the audience opening the way for passionate expressions and ethical

insights (Herndon & Weiss, 2001). This poem was testimony, social commentary, and a call to action. It was *literocracy*: the amalgamation of literacy, democracy, and action (Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005; Kinloch, 2005) and seemed a perfect way to conclude the section on fat.

Researcher's Note: The Skinny on Fat. The researcher's note on fat reflects my interpretation of the turmoil of all research partners. As I watched the Blue Diamond girls discuss the complexity of obesity, they shifted between stances: internalized hatred or unapologetic resistance. I did not want to overlook this flux in my representation of findings because it affirms a simple truth: As an American society, we are confounded by obesity. Fat ushers in a realm of emotions including pity, hatred, envy, and at the most compassionate of times, love. The discussions elicited more questions for further study, but it cemented the need for a critical space to discuss issues. This thought permeated my mind because of its dominance not only in society, but in the data and I wanted it to stay with the reader. Therefore, I made it the last lines of the poem. If the reader walked away with nothing else, I wanted this idea to remain.

Colorism. Blue-Black. Red-Bone. Mulatto. High Yella. These are all words and phrases I scarcely thought the Blue Diamond Girls would recognize even less say. Yet, the words were uttered on a daily basis. Colorism or discrimination based on skin tone is a persistent problem for people of Color in the United States and around the world (Hunter, 2007; Russell, Wilson, & Cole, 1992). For African-American girls, colorism may manifest as a preference for physical characteristics they believe will be judged more favorably such as lighter skin and smoother hair. This skin color hierarchy privileges light-skinned people of Color over dark-skinned in areas such as income,

education, housing, beauty and marriage and is "directly related to the larger system of racism in the USA and around the world. The color complex is also exported around the globe, in part through America's media images, and helps to sustain the multibillion-dollar skin bleaching and cosmetic surgery industries" (Hunter, 2007, p. 237). It is the persistent tension with melanin having emotional and psychological ramifications as individuals, in particular adolescent girls, shift between reveling in and rebuking their skin tone (Elmore, 2009). The poem, "*Colorism: A Definition Poem*" built upon this shift.

Colorism: A definition poem. Due to the strong influence of the majority's standard of beauty and African-American's minority status, it is widely believed that adopting and internalizing Western beauty standards is advantageous. A study which examined skin color in the lives of 123 African-American adolescents (aged 11–19 years) found complexion to be related to self-esteem, but the study also brought additional complexity to the issue. Students who self-reported as "lighter" or "darker" had lower levels of satisfaction with their skin color than did students whose skin color was classified as "somewhere in between" (Robinson, & Ward, 1995). As an issue impacting the Black community, colorism has been tackled by both CRT and Black Feminist scholars who have identified colorism as a cause of internal differentiation and inequality (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2009; Burke, 2008; hooks, 1992). Delgado (2000) argued colorism is yet another example of binary thinking which "exceptionalizes and thus obscures other experiences" and "pits minority groups against each other" (p. 75). If left unchecked, this internalized oppression can lead to self-hatred, dangerous behaviors such as higher sexual risk, and increased substance abuse (Lowman-Jackson, 2013; Wallace, Townsend, Glasgow, & Ojie, 2011).

I wanted these ideals to be conveyed in the poem of definition. I carefully scoured research on colorism to determine which phrases and sentences portrayed these ideals the best and include these items in the poem. Although apt descriptions, I felt something was missing. For the final line of the poem, I reflect on my personal experience and thought how best I could describe the turmoil of wanting to bleach my skin. The words "emotional terrorism" appeared in my mind and I quickly scribbled them on the page as they seemed fit to describe the internal warfare which can block self-actualization.

The Color Complex: An Introduction. For me as a researcher, the issue of colorism is more personal than statistics in a journal. Thus, my journal reflections and data from the girls' activities and conversations were analyzed together leading to the creation of *The Color Complex.* The importance of this poem was vivid throughout the data but particularly illuminated one day when, while waiting on the arrival of the girls for a book club, I received a call from Amir's teacher who was deeply concerned. She'd overheard Amir in the hallway confessing her desire for blue eyes and beauty. As I listened, I was immediately struck by the parallels to Morrison's protagonist in *The Bluest Eye* (1994) and I did not want Amir to suffer Pecola's fate. This was an issue that could not be silenced because to do so in the face of such bold assaults would be to aid in complicity (hooks, 1995). To enact change, we had to delve in the complexities of skin color.

Further data reflected in this poem came from our activity analyzing skin tone bias. I introduced the Black Doll/White Doll Test in which Kenneth and Mamie Clarke (1946) utilized dolls to determine Black and White children's racial preference and concluded the children had internalized society's racist messages, often choosing the

White dolls as the as the most desirable and often ascribed positive characteristics to it. The Clarkes concluded segregation produced a feeling of inferiority in African-American children. Since 1946, many researchers have revisited this critical study. Bergen (2009) wrote about how Black children suffered from wounded self-esteem as a result. Instead of dolls, I asked the Blue Diamond girls to analyze a skin tone scale (Figure 6.3) to note which skin tone, if any, they found the most beautiful and which skin tone, if any, they found the least attractive.

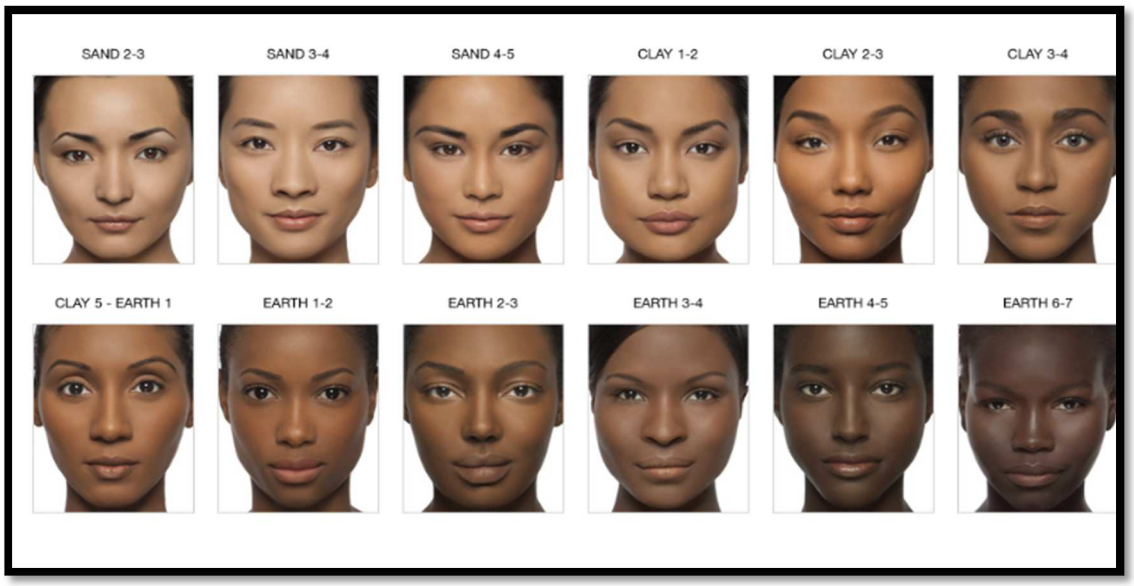


Figure 6.3 Skin Tone Scale

The girls circled their preferences, reflected on the decisions in their journals, and discussed their choices as a whole group. Their discussions were quite revealing as displayed in this transcript excerpt:

> Amir: I picked the dark skin as the least attractive because you know dark skin…the real dark skin people have big lips and they don't look right with big lips. People say I got big lips and I look good with my big lips, but I'm not real dark skin.

Kelsey: (*Describing the least attractive*) The person was too dark with pretty skin tone. The skin tone that was the most attractive was the light skin tone because it was beautiful and I just loved it.

Melody: The pretty one is not too dark and not too light. I chose that one because it is pretty and it is the most attractive.

Marie: The least attractive is the darkest one and I chose that one because it's too dark.

Jennifer: The too Black skin tone is too dark and no one can see you if you are too dark. Someone will call you African or say you are from Haiti. You are perfect if you are light skin because you are light and bright. That skin tone gets more attention and more boys.

As I listened to their explanations, my heart hurt. It was as Bishop (2007) stated:

> Racism by its very nature is so insidious that some Black people have internalized negative attitudes, left over from the days of slavery, toward themselves and their appearance. Thus, lighter skin color and straight hair have often been more highly valued even among Black people than darker skin and kinky hair. (p. 231)

Once again, my poetic muse and I were challenged with how to present this truth. I looked at the Blue Diamond's transcripts and was confused on how to synthesize meaning from their musings. I realized I needed theory to guide me and reached for my copy of *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (Author, 1992). As I sat down and began to read the introduction, I was struck with inspiration. The words on the page seemed to change. Some words appeared more

pronounced while others faded into the background; I was staring into another aspect of visual poetry: The Blackout Poem (Kleon, 2010).

Blackout poetry focuses on rearranging words to create a different meaning. Also known as newspaper blackout poetry, the author uses a permanent marker to remove whatever words or images deemed unnecessary or irrelevant. The principal idea is to formulate a completely new text from previously recognized words and images, which the reader is free to interpret. Blackout Poetry is advantageous because it challenges both authors and readers to confront "a different way of seeing the words on the paper and thus a different way of thinking about what those words communicate and why they matter. Like critical thinking, blackout poetry is a process of revelation, an uncovering of meaning (Ladenheim, 2014). The poem was inside the text and only had to be revealed. Like a word carver, I chipped away at the text. I moved from transcript to opening pages of *The Color Complex* circling the emotions and ideas which coincided with the emotions and ideas located in the opening pages: the guilt, anger, and embarrassment which lay just beneath the skin. I grabbed my pen and blacked out words until the final piece was completed.

Dark Girls: A Poem in Two Voices. In 2011, Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry released the documentary *Dark Girls* which focused on celebrated the beauty of melanin. The directors wanted to counteract the emotional and psychological attacks which Black females face on a daily basis. It was to serve as point of reflection to "counter [our] realities of violence and discrimination by envisioning the Black female community as a collective of unique agents working toward a common goal of liberation" (Blackmon, 2009, p. 3). This liberative stance can only be achieved through critical discussions which

analyze critique and challenge the Eurocentric ideal that "White is the only right." The Blue Diamond's conversations on skin tone afforded instructional conversations on resisting stereotypical images. The conversations did not always take place whole group, sometimes learning occurred between friends. Amir and Kelsey often debated perception of darker skin and beauty ideals.

Amir did not find her skin to be beautiful. This was revealed through comments in the book club, her journal, and through discussion surrounding the skin tone activity when she selected her own her skin tone, the darker one, as the least attractive. In the same data, I understood Kelsey to embrace her dark skin and boldly declare her beauty. Thus, the poem *Dark Girls* is a composite poem created by selecting data excerpts representing analyses of journals entries and discussions. Reflecting Kelsey and Amir, it is a poem for two voices (Fleischman & Beddows, 1988) composed to be read aloud by two readers. Most lines in these poems are spoken by the individual reader separately, and the speakers take turns going back and forth between the voices; however, some lines are composed to be spoken at the same time by both speakers.

This poetic genre has several benefits including its creative way of displaying dueling perspectives, in this case, from the discussion on what defines beauty. The format is reminiscent of being in a conversation and is both familiar and attractive. In the poem, Kelsey's voice was a message of love and healing helping to guide Amir through her negative internalizations.

Heart's Desire: Colorism in Action. This was by far one of the easiest poems to birth; although it involved intense study as I revisited the transcripts several times. The lines were comprised by layering different lines from a skin tone discussion after

carefully analyzing those data juxtaposed with other data in the study. This process was time consuming yet rewarding as it provided opportunities for triangulation. The girls all discussed why many of them found light-skinned guys more desirable. The conversation unfolded as follows:

Kelsey: I really think that a light-skinned boy is the best.

Jasmine: Why?

Amir: They act right. They act better.

Marie: No, don't even say that.

Amir: It is! A light-skinned guy makes pretty babies.

Kelsey: My boo ain't light.

Melody: (Laughing) You have kids with him your kids ain't gonna be right.

Kelsey: I know this boy he mixed with Caucasian. He mixed with Puerto-Rican and Black. He got gray eyes. He is …whoa!

Marie: Light-skinned boys lick their lips and it is just sexy. When a dark-skinned boy does it, it is just like, "What are you doin' son?"

Jennifer: I ain't ever seen a light-skinned boy that didn't look good.

Kelsey: Like Ellison (*pseudonym*) 'Member when he got here? His face was perfect. His hair was slicked down and walked up into the cafeteria liked he owned it.

Amir: I want my baby to have blue eyes. They say if you marry a White man, then your baby's eyes will be blue.

In Amir's mind, for her child to be beautiful, she or he needed to have lighter skin and blue eyes. This is why accepting the Western beauty aesthetic as the ultimate form is

dangerous because it stands in direct opposition to the Black body. As Collins (2000) pointed out, the Black body becomes the "Other" as "[b]lue-eyed, blond, thin women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with classical African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (p. 79). The process of "othering" which Collins beautifully describe could not occur without the Black female body being hijacked and utilized for White supremacy's hateful purposes. In this case, to uphold White beauty ideals while devaluing Black beauty. It was this very conflict, which prompted the discussion in the poem Dark Girls. If also, we consider that property and wealth are things that can be passed from generation to generation, then too we must consider Amir's legacy to her child.

Let me be clear, I fully understand that when CRT was created, the tenet of Whiteness as property referred to ownership and property rights. I argue here, however, that this principle should be expanded to include other aspects of ownership such as laying claim to the Black body. Harris (1993) contends that:

> Whiteness shares the critical characteristics of property even as the meaning of property has changed over time. In particular, Whiteness and property share a common premise - a conceptual nucleus - of a right to exclude. This conceptual nucleus has proven to be a powerful center around which Whiteness as property has taken shape. Following the period of slavery and conquest, White identity became the basis of racialized privilege that was ratified and legitimated in law as a type of status property. After legalized segregation was overturned, Whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law's ratification of the

settled expectations of relative White privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline. (p. 1714)

Amir felt the pull of being an "other" and felt that it could not be redeemed within her lifetime. Instead, she wanted her progeny to achieve an ideal she would never obtain. It was not enough to be light-skinned. For Amir, her child must be deeply saturated with Whiteness; a level which can only be accomplished through marrying a White man and bearing a child with beautiful blue eyes. Amir's desire displays a need to cleanse her Black body and its supposed ugliness with that of Whiteness. This painful self-flagellation is part of the legacy she will extend to her daughter. I wanted the reader to be haunted by Amir's declaration. To achieve this, that confession needed visual distance. I wanted the last 12 words to appear as if they are falling away from the poem as a tear would fall away from the eye.

Researcher's Note: Delving into Skin. Colorism is not a new concept. Its roots extend back to European colonialism (Jordan, 1968) and plantation system of enslaved African-Americans (Stevenson, 1996). Slavery was a brutal form of White domination which rewarded those who emulated Whiteness culturally, ideologically, economically, and aesthetically (Hunter, 2007). In the poem, I wanted to recognize Colorism roots by connecting it to familial roots. I wanted to parallel my issues with Colorism with the tensions and issues of my research partners. Decades may have passed, but the power and allure of color subjugation still permeated both our realities.

Intersectionality. Picture a woman standing before you. She is simultaneously whole and yet fragmented. From a glance, her race, size, and gender may be discerned. She stands a proud Black woman blessed to see 43 years of age. Yet, it is not as easy to

discern her career, sexual orientation, or religious/spiritual beliefs. She is fragmented yet whole. In a court of law, she is seen as either Black or a woman, but rarely ever does the legal system take into account the complementing social identities at the same time. This can be seen when analyzing the racially and gendered biased tensions of Black women wearing braids in the workforce (Ainsworth, 2013; Banks, 2002; Greene, 2013) or the sentencing of Black women in criminal cases (Alexander, 2010; Morris, 2016; Steffensmeier & Demuth, 2006). The fragmenting of identity in the legal realm is the center of the intersectionality critique. This study further builds on this fragmentation by adding the additional layer of body size and how it affects perceptions and treatment.

Coined by legal scholar Kimberle` Crenshaw (1989,) the notion of intersectionality regarding race emerged from CRT and analyzes "the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects' lived experiences" (p. 139) noting identity cannot only be analyzed by examining the identity fragments but must include a close examination of the combined totality of lived experiences. The central principles of the intersectionality of race and gender have long research lineage and have also been embraced by Black Feminists (Beale, 1979; Collins, 1990; King, 1988). This fundamental tenant undergirds the following section of poems.

Intersectionality: A Definition Poem. Intersectionality: A Definition Poem was created to provide the reader background on the complexity and significance of exploring the combination of social identities. One of the most important aspects of this poem was the attention to broad tenets which comprise intersectionality. First, it critiques the race/gender binaries most often used in identity politics; lived realities are dynamic forces and are heavily influenced by difference social factors impacting one another. Second, it

provides a vocabulary to challenge dominant ideology. When analyzing social issues, one cannot predetermine which social identity is the most important; it must be contextualized within the moment. Finally, intersectionality provides a framework for recognizing and acknowledging exclusionary practices used to analyze lived experiences of Black women. Black Feminist Theory argues analyzing oppressive constructs must simultaneously occur over several levels (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992, 2005). This linking allows reveals a stronger connection between individual experiences to broader institutional structures such as health care, education, and finances. Ultimately, intersectionality is geared towards social transformation. By undertaking this multi-level analysis, subtle power structures can be exposed and changed (Hankivsky, 2014; McCall, 2006). Intersectionality is also essential to analyzing the turmoil of the Blue Diamond girls navigating adolescence within an educational power structure and was selected as a key section in the findings.

Bearing Witness: Life as a Black Girl. This poem is Jennifer's. I present it not as a composite of data but as Jennifer's words standing alone. I only added the introduction and conclusion and made choices about how many words to place on each line but the words are hers as spoken during one of our group meetings when I asked the girls to respond to following question in their journals: What is it like being a Black girl at Houston Middle School? The girls journaled over the weekend and we were to discuss their responses the following Tuesday. Their responses were as follows:

Kelsey: I wanna go! (She begins to read her journal topic.) How is it like being a Black girl in Houston? It's bad because we can't wear short stuff. We can't get away with things that White people get

away with. ..Can't even have out our phones like the other kids. I'm thick and pretty and people hate on me and wish they could be me. I feel like we (students) are being segregated like they were back in the day because we are not treated right same as it was back then.

Melody: It's a lot of drama about everybody wanting to fight. It is a lot of drama about everybody wanting to fight. Some of them just don't know how to act. They either just don't like them or they just want to cause something between them.

Amir: It's like slavery because they treat Black people differently from White people. The White people get to wear anything they want but when Black people wear shorts, we have to call our parents to bring us other stuff. But life here is bad for Black people.

Marie: It's just kind of difficult. Most of the White teachers think that you are not that bright about what you say or do. So they think that automatically you are going to make wrong choices or the mistakes.

Jennifer: (Reading from her journal.) I think it is difficult because of how the way White kids they look … (She stops reading and just begins to talk.) They look at Black kids and judge them on how smart they are and some teachers think…If you are the only Black kid in the class then you are the slow person. I think that…um…when most White people see Black students they automatically think they

were raised in the "hood." Which is not sometimes true but most of it is not.

All of the responses depicted being Black as being treated differently in shape or form whether it be with clothing, enforcing rules, or the use of technology. The responses all shed light into the use of a deficit-based perspective (Boutte, 2015; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2005) in classroom instruction where they were aware of a presupposition that Black students do not have the necessary skills to master grade level skills. The girls also indicated observing or receiving harsher punishment for rule enforcement which we know to be a major contributor to the school to prison pipeline (Morris, 2016; Noguera, 2008; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). Sadly, their responses also revealed internalized racism where the girls accepted and believed stereotypes about their racial group including increased fights and prevalence of drama (Kohli, Johnson, & Perez, 2006). Because these were dominant views across data sources and because both CRT and Black Feminist Theory argue that until these topics are named and discussed within schools, we inhibit our move towards racial and social justice, these were important elements to illuminate in this findings poem.

Jennifer was eager to provide an example of the daily discrimination faced by Black girls at Houston Middle. The other Blue Diamond Girls and I sat with rapt attention as she told her story of "The Tale of Two Girls." The tale recounts her experiences in poetic structure. As co-author, I only felt the needed to add the introductory and concluding stanzas for cohesion. These too, however, were based in Jennifer's words because, when I asked her to provide more detail about life as a Black girl, she looked at me and said, "You really want to know this? 'Cause you ain't gonna

like it." This shockingly honest response seemed the perfect introduction and conclusion to her tale and elucidates why "race and class can never be just 'subtracted' because they are in ways inextricable from gender. The attempt to subtract race and class elevates White, middle-class experience into the norm, making it the prototypical experience" (Grillo, 2013, p. 19).

Jennifer's tale also brings to the light hypersexualization of the Black female frame (Wallace-Saunders, 2003) in which the Black female form is perceived as "loose" and "wanton" and therefore can be touched at any time without permission as the boys do within in the tale. Although she does not want this attention and asks for help, the help is denied because this fate has been long accepted. Furthermore, Jennifer reiterates the cry for help again within the classroom setting and once again the request for assistance is denied. This lack of action and silence is a concrete example of the routine violence occurring within school settings. Refusal to acknowledge racist or discriminatory actions sends the resounding message this is acceptable behavior and that one is deserving of such treatment. To do so repeatedly, erases pride and as both CRT and Black Feminist Theory tell us to name our truths, then we must admit that these occurrences are not happenstance. They are the permanent and enduring legacy of racism; racial realism in action. In truth, "these systemic injustices have been designed and perpetrated to keep black people—and any other minority, oppressed, vulnerable —in fear with no sense of human value or dignity" (Missio Alliance, 2015). This is why bearing witness to Jennifer's story is so important because if we do not openly acknowledge and discuss these issues we are essentially pushing our Black girls out of the classrooms and schools across this nation (Morris, 2016).

Incident Revamped: Countee Cullen's Experience in 2015. Amir provided another example of enduring racism as an example of life as a Black girl. Amir's story was told as tears slipped soundlessly down her cheeks. It was the story of being called a nigger. After her story, I declared, "It's like *Incident* all over again." The girls had never heard the poem and I quickly pulled it up on my phone and read it to them:

The Incident by Countee Cullen
Once riding in old Baltimore/
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee; /
I saw a Baltimorean/
Keep looking straight at me. /

Now I was eight and very small,/
And he was no whit bigger,/
And so I smiled, but he poked out/
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."/

I saw the whole of Baltimore/
From May until December; /
Of all the things that happened there/
That's all that I remember/ (Cullen, 1923).

After hearing the poem, Kelsey replied, "Yup. It's just like that. . . . Just remixed for 2015!" This seemed a perfect title and idea for the poem. For the poem's construction, I needed to analyze Cullen's writing to discern its stylistic elements. The setting

transformed from Baltimore to the hallways of Houston. The event still featured children, only instead of being eight; these were knowledgeable eighth grade students. Both poems audaciously use the word, "Nigger." This was done because racial insults are widespread and are channels through which discriminatory actions are learned.

Delgado (1982) argued racial insults are designed to communicate the message that one's race is tied to their merit, dignity, and status and notes how these messages are passed from one generation to the next, color all of our interactions, and are therefore ingrained in our institutions. To illuminate this point, I chose to add another stanza to the poem. This stanza came from data in which Amir confessed that she did not tell any teachers about this painful incident. When I inquired as to why, she looked me in my eyes and said, "Who would believe me?" I knew this line had to be added to the poem. It needed to connect the reader to the idea that this incident impacted Amir's learning not just on the date it occurred, but is a permanent psychological and emotional scar, which may forever cloud the way she views schools.

Enabling the System: A Cry for Help Denied. As we discussed the issues of racism, a reoccurring pattern emerged: the presence and power of silence. Many times the girls would ask teachers; in particular Black teachers, for assistance and their requests were ignored. This fact reached a climax when, after hearing Melody's story about African-American girls being treated differently when it comes to clothing. Melody did as we often instruct students to do and sought a teacher to be her advocate but was denied. Upon the story's conclusion, Marie yelled out, "So how many times we 'posed to act for help? How many times they gonna ignore us?" Marie's frustration was echoed by the other Blue Diamond Girls and I realized this event needed a poem of its own; a poem

which used Marie's words, "how many times?" as a rhetorical device. Thus, the poem is a composite made up of stories from each of the Diamonds. Jennifer declared, "I'm tired of asking for help" and prompted the line, "my voice grows hoarse." Amir's declaration was, "They keep telling us 'life ain't fair," like I don't know that. Like I wasn't born Black and a girl." Kelsey built on the idea of equality by stating, "Yeah. Like we don't get that when they shut the door on us."

The poem lay dormant within the transcriptions. Like a farmer, I harvested their examples until the final poem, was created. The poem speaks to the power of silence which occurs when teachers refuse to acknowledge or challenge discriminatory acts which occur within schools. The silence, which many deem as inaction, is a concrete example of racial violence and racial realism. For students, remaining silent in the face of racist and discriminatory treatment is to condone the action and its perpetrator and reifies an oppressive construct (Delgado, 1982; Missio Alliance, 2015; Morris, 2016). Even more, this practice harms both students and teachers of Color who feel they must remain silent to uphold the practice, protect their professional name, and maintain financial security. This dual infliction requires a sustained action to heal it. Silence is not the answer. Instead, we must courageously confront racism and bigotry in open and ongoing conversations which we explicitly discuss and examine race (Boutte, 2015; King, 2015; Singleton, 2006).

A Pocket Full of Wishes: Attracting the Opposite Sex. Embedded within the experiences of racism and gender bias was yet another intersection: the adolescent battles of desire and attraction which also conflated the intersections with issues of size. Like many girls their age, the Blue Diamonds revealed conflicts with body dissatisfaction.

They believed having an "ideal" body would lead to higher self-esteem and peer status (Nichter, 2000; O'Brien, Latner, Ebneter, & Hunter, 2012). Each girl had a "pocket full of wishes," they would like to change. The confessions prompted a journal topic where girls were asked to identify, if any, the aspects of their body they loved and also identify, if any, the aspects of their body they would like to change. Table 6.5 displays their responses.

Table 6.5

Body Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction Responses

What I Would Keep/Change About My Body									
Kelsey		Jennifer		Amir		Melody		Marie	
Keep	Change	Keep	Change	Keep	Change	Keep	Change	Keep	Change
Butt Face Shape Smile Foot Size	Breast Size Skin tone Nose (too big)	Face Body Shape	Butt Skin tone Hair Hands Feet Lips (Too big)	Butt Skin tone	Arms Legs	Hair Face	Breasts Bigger Booty	Every-thing Else	Hair Nails Skin tone

Their responses revealed once again the perception of the Black female form as an object of desire; whose singular purpose is to attract attention. This is not a new idea as the majority of the representations of Black women in popular culture are firmly grounded in the dominant ideologies surrounding Black womanhood (i.e. jezebel, mammy, or baby momma) which pervades American society (Emerson, 2002). As a cultural and historical artifact, the Black woman's body exemplifies the complexities of race and gender. Collins (1991) argued these controlling images of Black female sexuality pervade American society to legitimize the continued marginalization of Black women. Its effects

can clearly be seen in the girls' responses. They each wanted to alter their body not for themselves but to attract a partner. Although the girls all wanted to make changes, they questioned if these changes would alter their personhood. This thought is reiterated through the last line of the poem, which asks a rhetorical question, "If I'm all of those things, would I still be me?" This question remained unanswered during their discussion, therefore it was purposefully left as the last line so the reader could continue pondering its value just as the Blue Diamond girls and I did.

What is body image? The poem, *What is body image*? was formed from the girls' journal responses to the same question and stands as an important element in findings about intersectionality. Their answers revealed a nuanced understanding of the complexities of body image. The girls quickly noted it was more than just size but an amalgamation of how an individual perceives size, skin tone, weight, height, hair length, hair type, eye color and eye size. They also recognized this definition could change from day to day or in some cases hour to hour. This knowledge of body image, does not dissuade conflicts which occur because of differing perceptions on body image. For this reason, this poem serves a precursor to the *Blessings upon Blessings* poem which reveals that such conflict in action.

Blessings upon Blessings. One topic about which the Blue Diamond girls were particularly passionate was the discrimination they face due to their body shape and size. This is a topic which is currently having much discussion throughout the nation (Chang, 2016; Morris, 2016; Zhou, 2015). Yet, if a Black Feminist lens is not applied, it is easily to overlook how this rule enforcement disproportionately affects young Black girls. The Blue Diamond girls each provided several examples of being sent to In-School

Suspension for refusing to change their clothing. Many times, the girls were told to call home and their parents or guardians refused to bring clothing to school because they felt that the clothing *did* meet school regulations, but it was their daughters' body which did not. Kelsey elucidated this premise by describing an encounter between her and Houston's principal. Although Kelsey and her White classmate Mary Alice were dressed similarly, the principal told Kelsey her clothes were too revealing while complimenting Mary Alice on her outfit.

Scholars offer this discrimination which occurs repeatedly harkens back to the hypersexualization of the Black female form from the time of colonization and enslavement when Black women were stereotyped as "jezebels" and "loose" as a way to justify their rapes (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Wallace-Saunders, 2003). This is one of many example of racial realism in action in 2015. A concept of which the Blue Diamond girls were clearly aware. Because of this long-standing and unchecked bias, many Black girls are sent home for clothing which is deemed too promiscuous (Morris, 2016). Incidents such as this fuel anger and distrust but also add to increased suspensions and expulsion for Black girls throughout the country. According to the African-American Policy Forum (2014), while Black boys are the groups most likely to be suspended from school, Black girls have a higher relative risk—six times higher—of suspension in comparison to their White female counterparts. Even more, if girls, like Kelsey in this case, try to defend themselves, they are further labeled "rude" or "defiant." The girls are placed in a no-win situation, where they must silently accept their fate or be further penalized. Kelsey decided to rebel by selecting to go to in-school suspension. Instead of being praised for her abilities to speak out against injustice, she instead is chastised by

her Black teachers and told to change next time because this is a battle that she would not win. This was illuminated in the poem using the lines, “I know we will battle once more.” For Kelsey, sanctuary did not come within the normal hours of the school day. Instead, sanctuary came from her sister circle after school as we boldly confronted and discussed these issues.

Researcher's Note: Examining Intersectionalities. Identity is a complex thing and the poems within this theme speak to this fact. Yet, there is a power and hope when we examine the junctures of identities. I tried to do that in this poem illuminating my reflections on the data and the literature, reflecting on intersectionalities as foundations for creating liberatory and empowering communities. Collins argued (1991) that within these spaces:

> Black women and men are nurtured in order to confront oppressive social institutions. Power from this perspective is a creative power used for the good of the community, whether that community is conceptualized as one's family, church community, or the next generation of the community's children. By making the community stronger, African-American women become empowered, and that same community can serve as a source of support when Black women encounter race, gender, and class oppression. (p. 221)

The Blue Diamond girls did not need prodding to reveal their stories. They only needed to be invited to share them by a learner who was willing to create a space in which they would critically listen to their truths, and center learning around their realities. I wanted to end the intersectionality section by applauding the honest confessions which came forth in our study. I did not expect the girls to respond, “Thank you for asking,” but their

response reiterated the necessity of our sister circle and I wanted this fact to linger with the reader.

Combating White Supremacy, Gender Bias, and Sizism Using Counternarratives. A methodological approach popularized by Critical Race Theorists, the counternarrative is a powerful pedagogical tool to "challenge majoritarian stories rooted in a dominant Eurocentric perspective that justify social inequities and normalize White superiority and thus, White supremacy (Huber, 2008, p. 187). This section of the Chapter Five was critical to my articulation of findings. hooks (1995) argued the "history of Black liberation movements in the United States could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for rights, for equal access" (p. 57). The counternarrative privileges experiential knowledge and the stories from people of Color which often go untold (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995). In the face of popular media which reifies stereotypical representations of the mammy, jezebel, and the baby mama; the counternarrative serves as a dismantling tool and a symbolic mirror displaying the beauty, strength, courage, and resilience of a people.

I engaged the students in writing counternarratives by first studying picture books that are counternarratives. We studied *Hair Dance!* (Johnson, 2007), *My People* (Hughes & Smith, 2009), and *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2000). These titles were chosen because of their availability in Houston's Media Center. The girls read the titles to each other and discussed the various ways we communicate our stories and how the images which appeared in the book contrasted with many which appear in rap videos and social media. They quickly grasped this was "all about love" and "inspiration." They compiled a list of the ways on the dry erase board and decided which forms would be the best to

convey messages of love. They finally decided on photography, poetry, music and praise dance. Each research partner decided they should be a leader over a particular section. Jennifer took the lead on photography, Marie on poetry, Melody on music and Kelsey and Amir co-chaired leading the praise dance. Time was devoted for the girls to create their counternarratives or as Marie coined them "our celebration stories." Since storytelling has a long historical and literary heritage in the African-American community, it is only makes sense that it is the perfect tool to ensure survival, empowerment, and liberation (Bell, 1992; Boutte, 2015; Delgado, 1989; Grant, Brown, & Brown, 2015; King, 2015).

Counternarratives: A Definition Poem. I developed this poem from my review of the literature surrounding counternarratives drawing from work in Critical Race Theory. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) introduced counterstorytelling or counternarratives as valuable tools for educational research and classroom practice. They defined them as ways of telling the stories of people who are traditionally silenced or marginalized as a way to examine, challenge, and critique master or dominant narratives. They identified three main types of counternarratives: personal stories, other people's stories, and composite stories. Counternarratives serve several distinct purposes, they: (a) build and sustain community for people often marginalized and overlooked; (b) critique/challenge commonly held ideas or notions; (c) create a new perspective into reality; (d) open possibilities; and (e) combine current reality with open possibilities to create a new rich world (Delgado, 2014). As such, this poem embodies my challenge to the Blue Diamond girls to create counternarratives for Black girls who are struggling with the unbearable burden of weight, race, and gender.

Naming Myself: A Body Visual Poem. This visual poem came into being in one afternoon after Marie was chastised by a teacher for being rude. When she came into the group, she was visibly angry. As a group we hugged her and asked her to explain her anger. She stated during the snack and homework time, a boy had "called her out her name," meaning that he had used a derogatory term. Marie boldly countered his remark by saying, "If you want to call me som'thing…call me Black and beautiful 'cause besides my name, that's the only thing I'm answering to." The girls agreed with her and began to yell out other things people could call them such as "intelligent," or "bold" or "courageous." After creating the list, Kelsey looked pointedly at me and said, "You know what…Forget all those posters they got hanging all over the school. You know what Black girls need…They need this poster 'cause ain't nobody got time for some ignant person callin' people out they name." As a group, they decided to design a poster which takes pride in self-love and affirmation. Jennifer served as graphic design artist and masterfully negotiated the myriad of ideas which arose, ideas which ultimately became this poem. In the end, they decided to feature themselves, the symbolic mirror, and the words by which they have every right to be called: Black, beautiful, intelligent, courageous and bold.

No Apologies: A Counternarrative. Marie penned the poem *No Apologies* as a continued reflection on being chastised for defending her name and honor. One of the most powerful lines in the poem states, "I have scars because I have a history." Marie does not run away from her past, instead she embraces it as a learning and transformation point. She is unapologetically proud of her shape, her curves, and her Blackness and despite the pressure to assimilate she boldly declared, "I will not change!" This is a

radicalness that speaks out against injustice and inequities recognizing personal sacrifices are necessary. hooks asserts (1991) asserts that "language is a place of struggle [and that] the oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are action, a resistance" (p. 154). In this way, Marie used her words as catharsis, affirmation, and activism.

Fat: A Counternarrative in Visual Form. This poem stands in contrast to the poem in the introductory section, *Fat: A Visual Poem*. Contrast occurs in both the stance of visual and the words which comprise it. This visual does not display a person who is embarrassed by size; instead, this individual proudly loves her shape and takes a defiant and fashionable pose. Melody decided that girls needed a "Power Playlist" a list of songs which inspire and motivate. She challenged each girl to find an artist, song and featured stanza. The visual includes lines from each of the featured stanzas. Table 6.6 displays the artists, songs, and featured stanzas. The lines in bold are the lines the girls decided should be repeated in the visual poem.

Table 6.6

Power Playlist

Artist	Song:	Featured Stanza:
Beyoncé	"Move Your Body"	I ain't worried doing me tonight A little sweat ain't never hurt nobody While you all standin' on the wall I'm the one tonight Getting bodied, getting bodied, getting bodied, getting bodied
Christina Aguilera	"Beautiful"	I am beautiful No matter what they say Words can't bring me down I am beautiful In every single way Yes words can't bring me down Oh no So don't you bring me down today All eyes on me when I walk in No question that this girl's a ten

Keri Hilson	"Pretty Girl Rock"	Don't hate me cause I'm beautiful Don't hate me cause I'm beautiful My walk, my talk, the way I dress It's not my fault so please don't trip Don't hate me cause I'm beautiful
Britt Nicole	"Gold"	This, this is for all the girls, boys all over the world Whatever you've been told, you're worth more than gold So hold your head up high, it's your time to shine From the inside out it shows, you're worth more than gold (Gold gold, you're gold) You're worth more than gold (Gold gold, you're gold)
Chila Lynn	"Real Woman"	She ain't made for those magazines full of photoshop queens telling her how she should be. Oh there's no doubt about it she's as real as a woman can be.

The playlist and words of love were designed as a way to deconstruct the language of war surrounding fat and obesity. Immersing students in creating this type of text helped to nurture and represent the elements of our experience that were liberating and humanizing.

Greater is Coming: Praise in Lyrics and Movement. Amir and Kelsey decided that praise dance was an effective counternarrative because "because sometimes there are no words. Sometimes you gotta just move." In truth, praise dances have been incorporated as a part of the Black Christian ministry as a way to "praise the Lord; for his mercy endureth forever" (2 Chr. 20:21, KJV). Yet, even this act serves as a site of resistance because praise can occur in many different forms, in particular, dance. Dance is more than mere movement; it is a political act to speak out against injustice (Valadez, 2012). The girls choose to dance to "Greater is Coming" by Jekalyn Carr. When asked why this song was selected, Kelsey replied, "Right now being fat or overweight means you are teased or laughed at, but it want always be this way. You have to love yourself and believe that one day all bodies will be respected." Kelsey's response demonstrates a

radically simple idea: We are all worthy of love and self-respect. If every culture has capital, then surely every body has worth (Yosso, 2005).

Body Love: An Autobiography in Five Short Chapters. The final counternarrative is a collection of five photographs with inspirational thoughts. This poem challenges *Fat: Autobiography in Five Chapters* because it discusses what is needed to accept and love the body. When I asked Melody why she selected photographs she stated, "Pictures are important." Her reply is quite profound. Images, especially affirming images, are necessary for survival and liberation. As hooks (1995) argued:

> Though rarely articulated as such, the camera became [and is] a political instrument, a way to resist misrepresentation as well as a means by which Alternative images could be produced. Photography…offered the possibility of immediate intervention, useful in the production of counterhegemonic representations even as it was also an instrument of pleasure. The camera allowed Black folks to coming image-making, resistance struggle, and pleasure. (p. 60)

Each research partner created an affirmation. As a group, they scouted locations and backdrops for the pictures and shifted roles as photographers. Observing them as they completed this process was affirming for me as a researcher because it speaks to the power of research as activism - creating responsible activists who desire to change the word. The girls used their images to offer words of strength needed to dismantle a language of hate surrounding race, size, and gender. Their closing thoughts are powerful and poignant: Respect all bodies, know your worth, live without negative thoughts, be at peace, and most importantly, love yourself.

Conclusion to Chapter Six

Compiling this chapter was a war with words and emotion. I felt myself bleeding onto the page. It took me back to the passion and emotion of the experience that was this study. Collectively, the Blue Diamond girls and I cried an ocean of tears; much needed as there was healing and catharsis in the pain. We found solace and sanctuary in our community, in our knowledge, in our common experiences. That is perhaps the most significant finding of all: That spaces such as this can provide support and sanctuary that no other space in the school provides. The research is clear. Middle school can often be filled with restrictive classroom environments (Greene & Anyon, 2010; Noguera, 2008) with teachers who exhibit low expectations, present irrelevant curriculum and refuse to provide support (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2016). Like Woodson (1933) stated, this is not education but indoctrination not only for students of Color but for White students who leave schooling convinced of their superiority. The ultimate goal of education should be to foster critically and culturally conscious citizens who actively seek to transform the world (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2001; Kincheloe, 2008). In this case, the sister circle provided a sanctuary for the Blue Diamond girls to challenge hegemonic beauty ideals which endured for centuries. Being a member in this community afforded solidarity to live and love our Blackness.

As I wrote the poems and this chapter explaining that process, I also realized this was yet another layer of analysis – the act of reflecting on and articulating what we had done. It illuminated the kindredness between the Blue Diamond Girls, me, and our ancestors; our poetry was a co-construction building upon a rich literary and activist heritage. We are but the fruits from a rich soil of wisdom. By standing on their shoulders,

we were able to see a better future. For this reason, I must pay homage to the words which were our roots and anchors (Figure 6.4). To our literary and activist past which redeemed us in our present and secures promise in our future…we say Ashe!

Figure 6.4 Literary Heritage

CHAPTER SEVEN

"QUIET AS IT'S KEPT": IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH

When I began this foray into writing my dissertation, I knew I needed to surround myself with wisdom and inspiration. To do so, I created a vision board; a place which would radiate positivity and to center my focus and thoughts. My vision board (Figure 7.1) was a collage of words and images which had comforted me through the decades. When I stared at it, I saw faces and stories like mine because I'd centered my vision on insight from Black female authors who had nourished my spirit through depression, trauma and grief. I repeated their words until I was able to formulate my own. They were, and are, my core; they are my wisdom warriors. As the words of wisdom, also embody the struggle of the Blue Diamond girls, it seems only fitting that these words ground my concluding thoughts and implications for practice and further research.

Consulting my Black literary heritage was again critical as I titled this chapter. I chose the opening words from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1994) - "quiet as it's kept." Morrison uses these words to draw readers into the cloud of secrecy surrounding the horrific realities within the Breedlove family. Pecola's life was either discussed in whispers or never discussed at all. The words struck me as both powerful and prophetic as they can be used to describe the realities of Black Adolescent females. Black female lives which are so often "quiet as it's kept," are rarely discussed or acknowledged. But if transformation is to occur, these truths cannot be hidden. Instead, they should serve as

testimony and scaffolding to securing academic, social, and cultural equity. Therefore, I will not keep their words quiet.

Figure 7.1 Vision Board: Words of Wisdom from My Village

Contextualizing the Implications

"If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it."

~ Zora Neale Hurston

Throughout our nation, Black girls are being brutalized (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). The Spring Valley Incident, which occurred after the Blue

Diamond Sister Group, was a vivid and very local example of the routine dehumanization which occurs against Black girls and clearly demonstrated the need for humanizing, critical, and creative spaces for young Black girls to be heard, validated, understood and supported. The story of this "incident" is an important preface to this discussion of why and how this research matters in the lives of the Blue Diamonds and of young Black women everyone.

For me, October 26, 2015 began as a normal day. I sat in my office diligently working at my desk. My colleagues and I anxiously prepared for impending professional development sessions or curriculum development. The room was a cacophony of voices brainstorming ideas, the soft clicks and clacks of the keyboard, and quiet squeaks of a dry erase marker as it treads across the surface of chart paper. I was lost in the thoughts of planning when my phone rang, jarring me from my thoughts.

I picked up the phone and swiped at its screen to see a close friend's number. I paused because she was not one for calls, preferring to communicate by text. Still, I was in the zone and did not want to be disturbed. So, I gently pressed the "Remind Me Later" function and resumed working. There was a brief moment of silence before my phone buzzed again, this time with a text message. Although I appreciated the tenacity, I was determined to get work done; but my phone would not be dissuaded. It continued to buzz, vibrate, and ring as alerts from text messages, instant messages, and social media were updated. Immediately, my spirit became unsettled as these sounds were an orchestra of foreboding. I could only utter a quick prayer as I picked up my phone to discover what was wrong. A quick swipe revealed three to four text messages all with the same theme: Have you seen the news? What is going on? How could this happen? The final message

did not have a question; instead, it gave a firm command: Check our local news station NOW!

I quickly logged onto the news station and watched the disturbing video of a young Black girl being flung from her seat by a school resource officer. Her crime? Refusing to put her cell phone away. I watched the video with the cold shock of confusion, white hot anger, and a deep, deep, sadness. I called to my colleagues and asked if they had seen the video. As a collective group, we watched the video and after it ended we sat in a heavy silence. My heart began to pound in my chest because experience had taught me what would come next. When mouths could once again form words, my colleagues began to voice rationalizations: "Could it have been this was a student who is known for behavioral disruptions? Could she have been defiant? Could she have threatened the teacher?" My answer to each one of these questions forcefully remained the same, "This is a child! This is someone's BABY. Why was she treated like this? NO ONE DESERVES THIS!"

Had we all stared at that video with a humanizing and critical compassion, my colleagues would have been equally outraged. Instead, I was met with confusion, doubt, and insipid rationalizations and justifications – for the school resource officer, not for the student. There was no cry of outrage, no concern expressed for the child, no exclamation of the many more effective ways the situation could have been handled. I was not surprised by their reactions because as an American society, we have become so inundated with images of Black and Brown bodies being violated, attacked, maligned, and brutalized, that many believe these bodies and their corresponding peoples, are exempt from humanity, equality, critical compassion and love (Alexander, 2010; Beal,

1979; Benitez, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991; DuBois, 1903; Emdin, 2016; Emerson, 2002; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; hooks, 1990, 1992,1995; Matsuda, 1993; Morris, 2016; Paris & Winn, 2014; Patel, 2015; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012; U.S. Department of Justice, 2007; Woodson, 1933). White supremacy, so ingrained into the fabrics of our society, was clear to me in the brutal force used with this young woman, even in the reaction of the Black teacher who approved the action – internalized acquiescence to the supremacy of Whiteness and the assumed guilt of the victim.

I do not recall the remainder of the conversation with my colleagues. I needed to make a quick escape. I quickly walked to the restroom, locked the door, and cried. For five minutes, tears softly rolled down my cheeks. It was not the cry of screams and red eyes. This was a silent cry, tears of a pain that had not yet fully been internalized. My emotional waves would not breach their dam. I whispered a prayer, wiped my cheeks, and with a grim determination, walked backed to my office. The office which was once filled with many sounds was now grimly silent. It was this eerie silence which reminded me of Zora Neale Hurston's (2013) famous words, "If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it" (p. 178). If I was this emotionally stilted, I wondered about the emotional state of my research partners. I walked to my desk, picked up my phone and began to text the Blue Diamond girls: "Are you okay? Are you willing to talk about what happened? What can I do to help?" I knew they were somewhere viewing these images and like I, they would realize that this could happen at any school in America and that this event could have easily occurred with them.

The Spring Valley Incident was repeatedly shown on news broadcasts throughout the country. We witnessed this young Black woman' dehumanization, but as a nation we

were not allowed to speak her name. Her name and her version of the story was silenced and erased. Just like the brutalities offered in this dissertation, this was the claiming of a body by those who should have no claim to it; once again a body was inflicted with symbolic and physical violence, but the identity, the humanity of that body was not publicly affirmed. This one incident illustrates the complexities and intersectionalities of being a Black female adolescent in America, fraught with violence, erasure and life in the margins. It is my hope this dissertation will lead to the development of spaces of radical hope and possibility (hooks, 1992) for young Black girls in schools everywhere.

As I frantically texted my Blue Diamond Girls, I waited for a reply. I desperately wanted to know their responses to this traumatic event. The first reply I received only contained three short words, "Why? Why? Why?" Although simplistic, this message only affirmed there were questions and feelings that needed to be acknowledged, heard, and discussed. I knew the Blue Diamond girls would once again need a place to heal. I know there are young Black women across the country experiencing the same need day after day, year after year for a variety of reasons. It is for this reason the Blue Diamond literacy group, the sister circle provides a model - an important pedagogical tool - for liberation, catharsis, and healing.

Implications for Classroom Teachers and Teacher Educators

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you". ~ Maya Angelou

When reflecting on her life and writing her autobiography, Maya Angelou declared, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." Ironically, the same words can be used to describe young Black girls who face erasure within the classroom walls, who are overlooked within the school's curriculum, and are physically

attacked on the streets (Crenshaw, Ocen, &Nanda, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2016; Winn, 2011). In 2007, a six-year-old Black child was arrested for having a tantrum in her classroom. In 2013, an eight-year-old Black girl was arrested for reportedly "acting out" (Webb, 2013). In 2014, a Black female sixth grade student was almost expelled for writing the word "hi" on her locker at school (Logan, 2014). In 2015, we were deeply disturbed by a young black girl in Texas being manhandled by police officer in Texas (Soichet, Fantz, & Yan, 2015). The stories from around the country provoke anger, sadness, and a firm resolve that change must happen now.

If we are to affect such change, then learning from the Black female is critical. Haddix and Muhammad (2016) postulated, “If we focus on excellent educational pedagogies for Black women and girls, given their distinct oppressive histories, then Black women lay the foundation for advancing education for all” (p. 300). Like Haddix and Muhummad, I believe the Black female educator should lead the charge of transformation by establishing and maintaining humanizing, critical and creative literacy groups such as the Blue Diamonds. By focusing on the intersectionalities of race, gender, and size the Blue Diamond girls were able to discuss and analyze experiences of racism: the suspensions, double-standards and erasures all apparent within their middle school contexts. By standing on the shoulders of literary ancestors, they were able to discover this fight is not new and learned to cope and communicate as their ancestors did through the healing power of the arts, be it writing, music, or photography. This study affirmed there is healing in the act of creation. Marie discovered this herself as she penned her counternarrative, “No Apologies.” She needed to write herself out and release the anger and hurt she experienced. Whether it was through hugs, discourse, critically listening, or

the act of creation, the sister-circle provided a nurturing and restorative community; a cathartic and liberative place to learn. In sisterhood, we found our sanctuary. I learned much alongside my research partners and, as a result, offer wisdom and insight from the study as stepping stones to institutional change.

Incorporate Black Oral and Literary Traditions

I found the Blue Diamonds were particularly responsive when I utilized Black oral and literary traditions to support them in recognizing, interrogating and challenging misrepresentations of the Black female form. We used storytelling, music and movement to make literacy an interactive process -which stands in marked contrast to the sedentary literacy instruction occurring in most classrooms (Boutte, 2015; Brown, Brown, & Grant, 2015; Fisher, 2005; Gay, 2010; Jocson, 2005; King, 2005; Kinloch, 2005). For example, having the girls examine *Hair Dance*! (Johnson, 2007), *My People* (Hughes & Smith, 2009), and *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2000) as a testament to the commonalities and possibilities which exist within the Black experience

Furthermore, Black literary texts can serve as mentors for building critical content skills but also for navigating the gauntlet of issues and challenges that come with being Black and female in a space which was never designed for them (Anyon, 2005; Boutte, 2015; King & Swartz, 2015). In addition, such spaces allow students to bring their digital lives and literacy footprints into the classroom. Finally, spaces such as that which evolved from the Blue Diamonds, can reaffirm the power of owning and loving our Blackness by affording Black girls opportunities to speak their truths in a creative manner, be it art, poetry, photography, or music; emphasizing and affirming the notion there is no one way to tell a story and that art and writing can be used to communicate,

advocate, as well as heal. Opportunities for thoughtful analysis of texts through multiple critical readings, can allow students to create a re-envisioning of the Black female form while promoting sisterhood, community, agency and creativity. As was found in this study, embodying such spaces, there is potential for Black Girls to be transformed from passive, compliant students to active, responsible, knowledgeable activists whose lives serve as testimony to the resilience of the Black spirit.

Engage in Critical Study That Names and Confronts Injustice

This task cannot be taken lightly nor can it be assumed that being a Black woman is the sole qualifier to create a humanizing, critical and creative group. To create such a space involves an introspective criticality where internalized racisms are openly named and confronted (Kohli, 2013; Kohli, Johnson, & Perez, 2006). This space for resistance is imperative as it nurtures the idea of multi-faceted and varied perceptions of beauty. Jackson-Lowman (2013) asserted:

> As one African American proverb suggests: 'Beauty is as beauty does'. . . . a single monolithic standard of beauty is untenable; it makes no sense. Nature, with its phenomenal diversity, provides a model of the range and variety that beauty may assume. Thus, a lily is no more beautiful than a rose; an oak tree no more beautiful than a palm tree; and an opal no more beautiful than a pearl. Each is beautiful in its own right and each has unique value and plays a special role in nature. (p. 169)

This message of love, openness, and acceptance is needed to counteract the hegemonic beauty standard.

Build a Trusting Environment

Whether working with adolescents, preservice teachers or colleagues, spaces must be constructed where group members are willing to be openly transparent and share their stories of healing and experiences of trauma. Furthermore, educators must model and exemplify activism by denouncing racist, sexist, sizist acts occurring within the school walls. This action is a cornerstone of building trust as one cannot trust an individual who ignores or overlooks suffering.

When I began to craft this Implications chapter, I contacted the Blue Diamond girls to seek their assistance. I asked them, "What would you like teachers to do in order to better Support Black adolescent girls?" Their responses came quickly and all revolved around the same theme: "Speaking the truth." For the girls, this meant teachers acknowledging their current realities which includes speaking out against unjust and dehumanizing acts. Throughout the study, the girls repeatedly asked teachers for assistance and were repeatedly denied. Oftentimes, this denial came with the advice that they should pick their battles carefully. This advice, however, teaches impressionable minds that there are some acts of injustice which are deemed tolerable. This myth only reifies an oppressive construct. Instead of ignoring or underplaying these experiences, educator activists must acknowledge and disavow these acts.

If educators are truly committed to educational equity, they must ensure they receive continuous professional development focused on courageous conversations about race, power, and privilege, implementing a culturally relevant curriculum, and analyzing programs and policies to ensure they are inclusionary and anti-bias (Boutte, 2015; Brown, Brown, & Grant, 2015; Gay, 2010; King, 2005). It is important to note the word

"continuous" as often these professional developments are conducted in a "one and done" manner. Yet, the commitment for educational equity is a long-term fight and cannot be achieved with such mindset. Educators must commit to ongoing and continuous professional development.

Commit to Being an Educator Activist

As I reflect back on the study experience, I realized I was more than a mere educator. By providing the opportunity for the Blue Diamond girls to critically analyze the world and the word (Freire & Macedo, 1987), share their stories of racist and sexist experiences, and providing advice to future sisters, I was an educator activist. This role moves beyond teaching content to teaching skills and strategies necessary to critique and challenge hegemonic principles. Although Black female educators are leading the charges, White female educators, the predominant presence in the teaching workforce, are not absolved from the work. The members of the Blue Diamond group clearly display how ignoring unjust acts and eliminating crucial conversations about race, gender, size, privilege and power created pain, mistrust, and trauma. As such educator activists must also pledge to, "first do no harm" (Diekelmann, 2002) by vowing to take on the mantle of humanizing and critical social justice work (Freire, 2000; Paris & Winn, 2000) as educator activists. In this role, we cannot randomly select the social issues which please us, but must wholeheartedly commit to recognizing, seeing, and loving all children.

To be an educator activist, teachers and teacher educators must first decenter Whiteness for themselves and for their students. In this study, the Blue Diamond girls and I deconstructed hegemonic beauty ideals. Whenever texts were read, we did not simply consume them; we completed a thorough examination of content and asked the question:

Whose voice was silenced, maligned, or marginalized? For example, when analyzing a Sports *Illustrated Cover* which featured Barbie, Amir asked the "Why does Barbie the only ideal for perfection? My doll Kenya was just as beautiful. Where her cover at?" Such discussions vocalized the need for affirming cultural texts. This statement reaffirms the need for positive and inspiring culturally relevant texts.

In addition, a modification of these questions was used as a lens to analyze their experiences guide by asking, how did it feel to be ignored? How did it feel to be silenced? Why must we stop these actions? Through their stories, we courageously faced what many deemed taboo and engaged in critical conversations about race, gender, size, and power (Kinloch, 2009; Matias, 2013).

I know that as readers review the implications chapters they might inquire: How do I engage in a critical study? What should I begin to read? Such a reader would look to the implications to be a how-to document detailing step-by-step instructions. Yet, such a practice goes against the intent of criticality because being intentional and purposeful critically is an individualized journey which begins with the introspection of naming privileges, biases, and long-standing power structures (Bell, 1992; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1995; Lorde, 1984; Yosso, Delgado-Bernal, & Solorzano, 1998). This is the criticality which undergirds my theoretical frameworks: Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. Both frameworks believe that critical thinking, critical learning, and critical transformation cannot be plotted on a map. Instead, they must be based in hearing, understanding, learning, and knowing the stories and wisdom of people of Color (Bell, 1992; Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lorde, 1984). It is this experiential knowledge which serves as a powerful counterstory to dominant and

oppressive narratives which imbue classrooms and curriculums (Boutte, 2015; Howard, 2010; King, 2015; Kinloch, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As mentioned earlier, this dissertation serves as a counternarrative to traditional academic research and I grounded it in the works and knowledge of Critical Theorists who have come before. I would ask readers to look to their wisdom as I did.

In addition, I came to this inquiry because I was hurting and I observed my students in pain. I came to theory because I was angry at the realities which stood before me. Black adolescent females hold a precarious position in America: their stories silenced, their bodies objectified, brutalized, and murdered (Chang, 2016; Crenshaw & Nanda, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2016; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Building on the works of Lorde (1984) and hooks (1995) who postulate anger and rage as a legitimate response to racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, such as sizism…I would ask: Where is the anger? Where is the rage?

Further Research

"If you deny people a voice…Their own voice, there is no way you will ever know who they were." ~Alice Walker

The creation of this critical, humanizing, and creative literacy study group revealed insights into ways five Black female adolescents negotiated the intricacies of their lives comprised on intersections of race, gender, and size. Through their honest revelations and poignant counter-narratives, I learned more about the educational contested spaces and environments needed to promote educational equity and excellence. This study was firmly cemented in a resolve to listen and learn from the stories that were shared grounded in a commitment to Alice Walker's warning that "if you deny people a

voice. . . . Their own voice, there is no way you will ever know who they were" (Powers & Gates, 2013, p. 445). Since to truly know our students we must listen to their voices, more research that engages student voices is critical.

For example, because literacies are multidimensional concepts which include digital technologies, I engaged the Blue Diamond girls in utilizing social media to communicate, create and explore their identity. Further study is needed to determine the impact of such technology and media influence on how they interpret the interplay of race, gender, and size to conclude whether users are critically analyzing or just merely internalizing the messages received from this platform. Furthermore, more research is necessary to determine how these avenues can be utilized to create and communicate counter-narratives in and out of classrooms.

The second avenue of research I recommend is that more work needs to be done to understand the role of teachers in this process. While the study of White teachers and the impact of their teaching has on the perpetuation or interruption of negative self-image of Black girls is certainly important, it is also essential to understand more about the Black female teachers within middle school environments. Research has shown that internalized racism also negatively impacts instruction (Kohli, 2014) The experiences of Black teachers working within a Eurocentric education institution may mirror that of their Black students. They too may be walking in their wounds, suppressing them in a racist, gender-biased, sizist society. On the other hand, while all Black women are potential victims of racist, sizist, and gender-biased ideologies, they may not have experiences that parallel those of young Black women from backgrounds different from their own (Dyce & Williams, 2015). More study is needed to delve into the stories of these individuals and

their intersectionalities of being a Black Women in a profession dominated by White female teachers (Dyce & Williams, 2015; Minier, 2016; Muhs, 2012) Thoughtful analyses of their stories could provide more insight into liberative pedagogies. If their stories are shared, we might all become more powerful advocates for the Black female adolescent students. Working together, Black Female Educator Activist and Critically Conscious Black female adolescent can transform the educational landscape.

Concluding Thoughts

No black woman writer in this culture can write "too much". Indeed, no woman writer can write "too much"...No woman has ever written enough. ~bell hooks

I began this inquiry because I was wounded and saw that students around me were wounded as well. I knew that schooling could be a better place in support of young Black women who were negotiating intersections of race, gender, and size. So, I sought insight from the experts: Black female adolescents. I not only found wisdom; I, like they, found sanctuary. We were all hesitant in sharing our stories, but collectively we realized, we were not alone; and speaking our stories, gave them power. The Blue Diamond sisterhood was empirically important in many ways, not the least of which was its therapeutic nature. As I think about the experiences of Black girls throughout this nation, I realized this therapy, this sanctuary is vital for resilience, rejuvenation, and revitalizing education.

Writing this dissertation was a rite of passage for me. I opened my soul and my stories to the Blue Diamond girls, my research committee and other readers. Throughout the process, I repeatedly asked myself: Am I revealing too much? Am I writing too much truth? When these doubts arose, I took comfort in bell hooks' words, "No black woman

writer in this culture can write too much. Indeed, no woman writer can write too much. . . No woman has ever written enough" (Powers & Gates, 2013, p. 488). These words, like the words of my other wisdom warriors, grounded me because I realized, it is our stories that will lead to understanding; it is our stories that will lead to healing; it is our stories that will restore and rebuild; it is our stories that will lead to transformation. Our stories are and will forever remain, love, hope, and possibility.

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APPENDIX A: PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Dear Parents,

I hope this letter finds you in good health, spirits, and strength. Literacy is an essential component that allows us to read and write our world. As teachers and parents, we need to promote the importance of literacy in school and at home, which will move our children forward to becoming independent readers and writers. The South Carolina College and Career Ready Standards emphasize how anything can be a text including songs, videos, and even the human body. This study will explore how adolescent girls think and feel about various parts of the human body including race, body size in particular obesity, and gender.

This semester, I have created an adolescent book club as a way to build reading and writing skills. While doing so, members will discuss how their race, body size, and gender impact the meaning of a text. **The book club will meet on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 4:40-5:40 during afterschool.** Throughout the sessions, students will learn to analyze a text and how to write to inform, explain, or persuade an audience. These skills are essential to achieving college readiness on our state assessment. While learning these skills, members will provide insight on dealing with obesity, gender, and race in middle school.

At the end of this study, I will be writing a dissertation and presentation about the insights I have learned from your child. I would like your permission to (a) work with your child on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays afterschool (b) have students write responses to readings and (c) audio and or video record our discussions (d) take photographs so that I can remember the things I learned.

Taking part in the study is your decision. Your child does not have to be in this study if you do not want to. They may also quit the study at any time or decide not to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering. Participation, non-participation or withdrawal will not affect your child's grade or afterschool placement in any way.

If you give permission for this work, please sign and return this form to the Media Center by _____. If you have any questions about any aspect of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me for further information or clarification at

803-446-XXXX. I would be happy to talk with you!

Thank you very much for helping me learn more about the students and families in our South Carolina schools.

Sincerely,

Dywanna Smith

Assent Form

Study Title: Analyzing Body Image in Texts

Researcher: Dywanna Smith

I have read the information contained in the letter about the above titled study, which describes what my child will be asked to do if I decide to participate. I have been told that the decision is up to me, that my child does not have to participate, and that he/she can stop participating at any time I choose.

Yes – I want to participate in the study.

-OR-

No – I do not want to participate in the study.

Child's Signature _____ Date _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature _____ Date _____