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Girlfriends: The (In)visibility of Black Women on Television

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Girlfriends: The (In)visibility of Black Women on Television

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis in loving memory of my grandfather Cecil A. Williams.

(March 6, 1933 – July 21, 2009)

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To God Be the Glory!

Thank you to my thesis committee: Jennifer Fuller and Karin Wilkins and my graduate advisor Joe Straubhaar. Your support is valued and appreciated. I would especially like to thank my family and friends for all of their prayers, emotional and financial support, and for believing in me when I no longer believed in myself.

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Abstract

Girlfriends: The (In)visibility of Black Women on Television

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While Black women are more visible in media and popular culture today, the range of their visibility remains narrow and in continuation within the dominant ideology concerning Black women in the U.S. The images that are presented discourage a full understanding of the conditions of the Black female experience and the ways these women are socially constituted within it (Newton & Rosenfelt, 1985). This paper examines how the images of Black women are contradictory to the depressed socioeconomic status of Black women, how the show *Girlfriends* works to move beyond these images by expressing moments of the lived experience of Black women, and how Black women recognize their position within the oppressive institutional forces of the U.S. by negotiating their representations.

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Table 1: Survey Question

Chapter 1: Introduction

The representations of Black females throughout mass media today rarely capture the multitude of stories and voices that might represent a realistic view of the experiences of Black women. Analyses of the media have consistently found that women are both underrepresented and misrepresented across various media. However, there has been far less research examining images of Black women in the media and their effects on Black communities. The goal of this research project is to gain insights on how Black women perceive themselves through television and where they look to find social and political images of their reality through network television. My particular concern is with the position of Black women within society and the portrayal of Black women on television. The contradiction of television visibility and actual disempowerment through societal resources and institutions remains unresolved and virtually unexamined with regard to Black women (Smith, 2002). As Gray (1995) noted, “..given the level of saturation of the media with representations of blackness, the mediascape can no longer be characterized accurately using terms such as invisibility” (p. 148). However, a complex, diverse, and range of experiences and subjectivities representing Black women do not exist and therefore, Black women remain invisible on television.

All subjectivities are layered, shifting and a complex reality. However, Black female subjectivity is rarely depicted. I posit that the television show *Girlfriends* (UPN/CW, 2000-2008), which centers on four different Black women, effectively demonstrates that Black culture is not monolithic and presents the subjectivity of many Black women. According to a 2006 article, *Girlfriends* is “one of the longest-running

series featuring a predominantly black cast since *The Cosby Show*,” and “the longest-running live-action comedy on TV,” however no one has studied it (Braxton, 2006). As a result, I am interested in *Girlfriends* because I have not found published scholarship on this show.

This project includes a textual analysis of the television show *Girlfriends*, and findings from survey and focus group interviews.

Specific research questions that will be addressed in this study include the following:

1. How do Black women feel about the dominant messages disseminated through television programming about the Black female experience?
2. Where do black women look to find images of themselves within television?
3. Are there considerable similarities between the mediated identity of Black women and the shifting and complex reality of Black women, as perceived by Black women?
4. Have these messages made a significant impression on Black female subjectivity?

This research was conducted to determine the impact of contemporary television programming featuring Black women (ages 18-34), and to investigate the messages on television that are disseminated about the Black female experience against the social and political reality of Black women in the United States today.

IMAGE & IDEOLOGY

A number of stereotypes about Black women have permeated in popular culture throughout American history. These images are not mere "innocent" depictions rather, they transmit powerful ideology about race and gender, which affects the day-to-day lived experiences of black women in America and the racial climate of society more broadly (Collins, 1990). "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mammas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression" (Collins, 1990, p. 67). These images are a part of an intentional set of successful narrative constructions, activations, and deployments used by the state to maintain fixed ideological and cultural beliefs about gender and race. As part of a generalized ideology of domination, representations become symbols of power.

The study of semiotics would suggest that these messages "convey meaning...of the way they relate to the people who use them...developing in order to meet the needs of a society or culture...for its own existence and form" (Fiske, 1990, p. 43). Signs are especially important in stabilizing myths and values, enabling society to facilitate the meaning of these messages. "[They employ] a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism" (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 93-94). Images should be highlighted as a fulcrum in the identification of others, which becomes effective in symbolizing reality; a reality that is more real than the person itself. Mass media and popular culture serve as spaces in which these ideas and images are made real.

It is important to recognize the significance of popular culture as an elaboration of a political vision of reality that stabilizes a system of signs to maintain institutional structures of power, especially since these prevailing attitudes and stereotypes have existed and are reinforced through popular culture. Black women, in particular, are essential figures in the structure of American society and are the focus of highly contested ideologies concerning race, class and gender that are depicted in popular culture. Their placement within specific cultural texts, such that as television are the result of complex meanings and associations related to the distribution of power.

There is considerable scholarship on the long history of Black female stereotypes. Scholarship in this field recognized these caricatures as tools of interlocking systems of domination. There is mammy, the most recognized and lasting racial caricature of Black women. Then, there is tragic mulatto, sapphire, and the jezebel. The mammy archetype is defined as an asexual, obese, older woman with fierce independence, and the tragic mulatto is an archetypical mixed race person who endures tragedy though her ability to “pass” as White and despises her blackness. The sapphire image was popularized in the 1957 *Amos ‘n Andy* television series, named after a shrewish Black female character. Lastly, the jezebel is defined as the seductive and attractive younger woman who lures men with her sexual charms. All of these images are recognized in contemporary depictions of Black women in mass media and remain controlling images with powerful ideological justifications (Collins, 1990).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) states that controlling images of Black womanhood “are disseminated and legitimized through social institutions rooted in the maintenance of

hegemonic power to justify the continued marginalization of Black women” (p. 73). These images serve as the backdrop against the social, economical, and political mandates of the state towards Black women: The Moynihan Report (1965) reported that 'deterioration' of the Black family was in large part due to the dominance of Black women – the matriarch. The 1990s specifically, ignited an explosive mix of race, gender, and class relations that set the tone for the political climate and serves as an historical example that has valorized and vilified Black women in the media. The Reagan era is posited as one of the most critical moments that have shaped the image of Black women in popular imagination. The Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Congressional hearings and Vanessa Williams' crowning and consequent dethroning as the first Black Miss America illustrates how real-lived experiences of Black women have shaped on screen images. Moreover, these historical moments further highlight how the cultural gets interwoven within the political producing lived consequences. Television has been instrumental in projecting these moments and encapsulating Black women into images of oppression and objectification. These images continue to tout Black women as sexually provocative, mummies, matriarchs, and castrators. “In order for television to achieve its work – that is, to make meaning and produce pleasure – it has to draw upon and operate on the basis of a kind of generalized societal common sense about the terms of the society and people’s location in it” (Gray, 1995, p.9). Thus, the images we see of Black women in commercial television, sitcoms, music videos, network news and talk shows confine them to particular modes of representation. These discourses appear within a historical continuum that relegate the representation of Black women to depravity and display.

Depictions of Black women in television have changed since the successes of the civil rights movement, however the images that we see in popular culture have remained the same. Music videos, television programming, films, and network news all label Black women as sapphire or mammy, profiting at the expense of Black women's imagery. Throughout history Black people have been awarded for playing the stereotypical roles – images that are made all the more real though Black actors in destitute situations. Hattie McDaniel, a Black woman, was the first Black person to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). In 2001, Halle Berry, a bi-racial women, won an Academy Award for Best Actress in *Monster's Ball* (2001) for playing a Black woman who is lascivious by nature – jezebel. The movie included a graphic sex scene between Berry and a White male. More recently, 'Mo'Nique' Imes won Best Supporting Actress for her role as an abusive welfare mother in *Precious* (2009). Such texts as Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (2001) proposes that the essence of Black film history is not found in the stereotypical role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype. While I do agree with Bogle, I think there is something to be said about the roles in which Black women have played and have been recognized for. These recognitions only substantiate the treatment and feelings towards Black women that are present in popular ideology and confirm those stereotypes as real. It is within these ideologies that Black women are located in particular spaces on and off television.

More often, in recent television representations, we see Black women who “play material-driven individualists who possess the education, ability, and means to achieve goals, all through their own efforts” (Smith, 2002, p. 22). These roles substantiate the fact that Black women have shown success in institutional structures of society. The idea here is that these particular Black women are the exception and have achieved though independent achievements free of discriminatory experiences and practices. In this regard, institutional oppressive forces are not examined as the basis for many of their obstacles, and Black women appear to be doing well amidst racism, sexism, and classism. “These representation of black exceptionalism leave little room for complex collective (and individual) expression of black subjectivity and imagination” (Gray, 1995, p.157). As these singular moments become replicated in commercial and cable television they stand as periods of conservatism. In the realm of images that exist for Black people there are not several dimensions that are presented that show the triumphs and success of the Black experience. Relying on limited representations leaves very concentrated, bias, and false notions of Black people.

THE STATUS OF BLACK WOMEN

Although Black people have made significant progress in different sectors of society since the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960's, the reality is that there still are remnants of discrimination in employment, housing, and education. For example, data from U.S. government agencies highlight the continuing racial inequality with regards to Black females and males in the categories of health, the economy, housing, criminal justice, and education (Cutler, 2009). The point is not to focus solely on the

negative and not give accreditation to the amazing things Black women have accomplished. My purpose is to demonstrate that while a small number of Black women are being recognized for their achievements, many Black women face dire issues in education, health, the economy, and the criminal justice system. I think it is important to get an idea on the status of Black women to gain an understanding of the issues and concerns that they face. Popular thought suggests that Black women have succeeded far beyond Black men and continue to triumph over the “isms” of society on their own merits. And while this may in fact be true, even more Black women in the United States continue to face deleterious circumstances due to race, class and gender.

Black women are still suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer, AIDS and many other diseases and illnesses at higher rates than other women, many of which can be prevented. Currently, 37% of all abortions are obtained by black women¹ and HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death for African American women aged 25 to 34². These disproportionate numbers are the result of a combination factors and injustices that Black women face. Black women's wages—both observed and expected—continue to lag well behind the wages of white women.³ According to Cohen’s study (2009):

Despite decades of educational expansion, employed black women continue to lag behind employed whites in the educational qualifications that are increasingly relevant in the contemporary workplace. Pre-market educational inequalities are magnified by a labor market that increasingly rewards education. Widening racial gaps in marriage--combined with growing returns to marriage--also disadvantage

¹ Black Women’s Health Imperative: <http://www.blackwomenshealth.org/index.php?src=news&submenu=news&srctype=detail&category=Women%20Health%20News&refno=2>

² The Federal Government Source for Women: <http://www.womenshealth.gov/HIV/>

³ Employment Gains and Wage Declines: The Erosion of Black Women's Relative Wages Since 1980: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/demography/v046/46.3.pettit.html>

African American women. These factors, combined with a retreat from affirmative action programs and weak enforcement of employment discrimination law, may have uniquely disadvantaged the economic fortunes of black women.

Black women were more than twice as likely as Hispanic women and nearly five times more likely than white women to be in prison in 2003,⁴ and the numbers are steadily increasing. Black women represent 30 percent of all females incarcerated under state or federal jurisdiction.⁵ These series of challenges continue to effect Black women navigating education and career. Indeed, although a handful of Black women have gained access to higher education, women experience higher unemployment rates and face discrimination in the workplace. While African-American women represent two-thirds of all African-American undergraduates, and the majority of graduate students, African-American women are less likely than African-American men to reach the pinnacle of their occupations, especially in corporate America.⁶ These critical realities shape the status of Black women in the U.S. today.

Most, if not all of these issues are never dealt with on television, especially in regard to the larger forces that systematically keep these oppressive structures in place. In fact, this is no easy task to create and maintain successful narrative television programming that exposes the “inconsistencies and contradictions in the institutional treatment of African American women” (Jewell, 1993, p. 12). However, through multi-dimensional depictions of the Black experience through serious, ironic, and humorous

⁴ National Advocates For Pregnant Women:
http://advocatesforpregnantwomen.org/main/publications/articles_and_reports/most_female_prisoners_are_black.php

⁵ The Sentencing Project: http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/womenincj_total.pdf

explorations of issues facing Black people, this is possible. Such shows as *Frank's Place* (CBS, 1987), *Roc* (FOX, 1991), and *Soul Food* (SHO, 2000) all featured the triumphs and struggles of the Black experience in entertaining and enlightening ways while still tackling the concerns facing Black people (Zook, 1999; Gray, 1995). Just as White characters are shown dealing with day-to-day struggles on television, Black people should be given the same space.

The issue here is that when audiences view White people on television they are able to find a range of images. White people are shown as victims, perpetrators, sources, and experts. When we consider the bulk of films, television sitcoms, network news and advertising that we encounter every day, the statistics show that people of color are still proportionally under-represented in the mass media and even lower for Black women. When it comes to Black women, it is essential that not only are they represented in a variety of ways within the media, but that there needs to be more complex and dynamic representations that give insight to the lived experiences of many Black women.

More stories that address these concerns is where television should be heading. Yes, Black women have shown many successes over the past 60 years, however, Black women are increasingly facing real issues in other sectors of society that is made ambivalent within popular culture. Smith (2002) makes this point clear:

African American women compose an underrepresented population in visual popular culture; simultaneously, they command a substantial amount of coverage regarding their literary achievements, political activism, and perceived public welfare participation...the plethora of progress representation of Black women, or

⁶ Black Women Still Face Race/Gender Disparities:
http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=780631f074f8517de77ef07325ec61f3

their “cultural images,” belies actual Black women's limited access to societal resources and institutions. (p. 1).

In this respect, Black women as audience must be able to see the struggles, ambivalences, the success, and subjectivities of themselves represented just as White audiences, as a way to be critical of their lives, while having moments of shared experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theory

The following works provide an overview of “Blackness” and media institutions. Many of the books include several essays written by scholars in the field of media, cultural, and feminist studies. These authors cover a plethora of themes including but not limited to Black audiences as cultural consumers, the manifestation of power through popular culture, politics of representation, and Black subjectivity. Their works provides validity and guidance towards the research of Black women on television and attest to the lack of scholarship on the conditions of the Black female experience. Additionally, some of the books are set within the framework of particular theories that are applicable to the issues and events in which this study examines.

There is a range of scholarship about focus groups, Blackness and television, and overviews of Black people within television, however there are limited investigations concerning Black femininity and television. The texts I have chosen to reference are key texts that exist within these topics and give direction for this project. They together, provide a platform from which to examine Black women and television, and how to gather information about Black women’s experiences with television. Moreover, their critical points of current knowledge and methodological approaches are employed as means to contribute additional literature on Black women and television.

Herman Gray’s (1995) book *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* provides a comprehensive overview of Blackness and television. Gray’s research contributes to the background literature on Black women in television, and

details subjectivity. Gray examines “black expressive culture and black cultural productions” within television during the 1980s, which sets the historical and social ground for his examination. His analysis supplies a background from which to understand commercial television and the meanings and struggles over blackness. Gray seeks to analyze the ways in which central institutions of representations produce, perform, reject, and claim the presence of blackness within American social arenas.

Gray’s situates his arguments about the representation of and the struggle for blackness within the critical studies paradigm “especially as they concern the issues of race, gender, class power, and inequality” (p. 2). Gray’s arguments are framed around the notion that representations of race are continuously shaped by moments in history that began in early American popular culture. While this project will not be examining representations of Black women within a historical context, Gray’s critical attention to the moments that shaped earlier images of Black women, is important to recognize in the current study.

Since Gray’s book is rooted within a cultural studies paradigm – combining social history, institutional analysis, textual readings and social locations of audiences, he contributes to the project of locating Black women on television and in larger society. While particular attention is not given to Black women, Gray does stress the importance of the individual and collective Black experience, providing adequate textual analyses of Black programming from which to analyze the television show *Girlfriends*.

Black women as Cultural Readers by Jacqueline Bobo (1995) provides ground for studying Black female viewers. Similar to this study, Bobo conducts a historical and

theoretical context, a textual analysis, and an audience observation and analysis. First, Bobo examines the historic portrayal of Black women in film. Secondly, she provides an historic overview of *The Color Purple* (1985), *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), from books to films. Lastly, Bobo explores the reception of the film, while citing the general public response to *The Color Purple*, highlighting the responses of Black women.

Through extensive interviews, Bobo records the reactions of black women to films. She conducted two focus group interviews with Black women age thirty to late fifties. The women were assembled to discuss *The Color Purple* and other issues related to the status of Black women in society. Some women read the books before viewing the films however, both groups viewed the film while discussing it. In Bobo's analysis of her interviews, she argues that Black women must undergo a series of complex negotiations with popular texts constructed by white authors, in order to derive some pleasure from their consumption of the text. Bobo posits that through creative production and media reception, Black women can resist acceptance of dominant ideological notions of themselves, as well as construct representations that are grounded in lived experience as a counteraction to archetypal images of Black women.

Bobo's particular attention in juxtaposing images of Black women in cultural texts and their ideological meanings against their sociopolitical positioning in society supports the purpose of this project. I extract the framework of these discussions to add further review of Black women and television. Her discussion of these themes allows for a more comprehensive take on Black women and their reception of television as a

cultural text. Her work provides a template for the examination of Black female subjectivities and Black women as audience.

In *Color By Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*, Kristal Brent Zook investigates both production and reception among Black viewers and writers during the 1990s – when blacks were given unprecedented creative freedom. Zook’s work provides a brief industry overview of networks that feature Black programming. The author examines the revolution in which Black television underwent, generated by the Fox network’s desire to be completely different from traditional networks. Zook argues that the proliferation of Black programming on Fox provided an opportunity for Black authorship to display a critical self-reflexivity. Thus, *Color By Fox* chronicles the production of such shows as *In Living Color* (1990-1994), *Martin* (1992-1997), *Living Single* (1993-1998), *Roc*, and *New York Undercover* (1994-1998), all television programming produced by Fox.

Zook’s access to Black producers and writers of these shows provides “behind the screen” insight into the process and practices of their development. In her examination, Zook dissects Black authorship in television and the possibility of racial authenticity. Zook posits that Black produced television is marked by four defining characteristics: Autobiography – concerning the narration of Black lived experience; Improvisation – relying on unscripted material; Aesthetics – displaying visual signs of Blackness; and Drama – complex characterizations and emotionally challenging subject matter. The common theme presented in her analysis is the underestimation of Black viewership and the silencing of Black voices on television.

While Zook's analysis was very insightful, she fails to give a thorough critical engagement of historical and cultural practices in which these shows emerged and a critique of the reception of the shows examined by viewers. Such investigation would have accentuated her analyses of the Fox network and their Black programming. Nevertheless, Zook provides insight on the industrial premise in which many Black programming surfaced in the 1990s while also giving an historical account of UPN and WB, both networks that produced *Girlfriends*. Moreover, Zook's in-depth examination of Black production, similar to that done by Grey, illustrates the meanings and struggles over blackness that Black programming must grapple with.

Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television by Beretta E. Smith-Smith is the most essential piece of literature to this study. It is the only book that focuses on Black women and television. Besides Bobo's book, it is the only book that connects television visibility with societal disempowerment. *Shaded Lives* dissects representations of Black women in television from the 1980s, providing both a cultural and historical account of its emergence. Smith looks at the representation of Black women in commercial television, sitcoms, music videos, network news and talk shows since 1980. Her analysis of these images set within specific historical, political, and cultural contexts provides a better understanding of the media portrayals of Black women that proliferated on television. Each show is dissected and analyzed for the way in which Black women were represented through class and sexuality.

It is Smith's critical examination of Black women in visual and real-lived culture that stimulates this research. Both Bobo and Smith grapple with these ideas in order to

highlight the ways in which Black women have been able to control their bodies and images in opposition to ideological domination. Smith's ability to connect off and on screen circumstances provides the phenomenon from which this study has developed: How is that Black women seem to be succeeding within society, face class, gender and racial discrimination, yet remain salient on television programming? Smith's work is an important contribution to this study that provides the context to do research on representations of Black women, reception and lived-experience. This study will serve as an extended view of her analysis while weaving Bobo and Smith's discussion and analysis together. Both of their analyses are instrumental in the construction of the focus group interviews, as they provide insights to approaching the topic of Black women and television.

Richard A. Krueger & Mary Ann Casey's third edition *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* provides a framework to understand how to conduct focus groups. This book in combination with Bobo's text supplied the fundamentals of acquiring qualitative information from focus group interviews. The book incorporates research from both the social sciences and marketing field, while giving examples of actual studies. Many suggestions for applications are given to provide a comprehensive understanding of the technical features. Krueger and Casey reviews the concepts of planning, questioning, moderating and analyzing focus group interviews while including examples of letters of invitation, focus group questions, screening questionnaires and tips for the analysis of focus groups.

Every aspect of this book was instrumental in conducting the focus group and editing the interview questions and questionnaire. Little background information was known about conducting a focus group, thus this book provided vital insight on how to conduct and analyze a successful focus group. The examples and outlined processes made it easier to interpret qualitative data that could be extrapolated from the interview and questionnaire. Specific steps and methodological information formulated the basis of the method section of this paper. Moreover, because the focus group was the most essential part in conducting this study, it was important to be grounded in the background knowledge of this approach. Using Bobo's notion of "interpretive community" in combination with a focus-group approach to collecting qualitative data, offered insightful theoretical connections about Black women as cultural reader and audience.

The purpose of this project is to expand the discourse surrounding Black women, television, and reception. Published work that investigates these issues provides groundwork for examining these ideas and urges a synthesis of this scholarship. There is a lack of research on Black women's subjectivities, lived-experience, and representations on commercial television as combined social phenomenon. My critique acknowledges these happenings as moments of struggle and activism, against white hegemonic patriarchal institutional structures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

"Interpretive Community" Overview

The term "interpretive community," was initially developed by Stanley Fish in his essay, "Interpreting the Variorum", published in 1976. The notion of an "interpretive

community" comes from the reader-response theories – “a form of criticism that gave priority to the reader in the critical process and focused on reading as a temporal activity” (Newton 2006). Jacqueline Bobo (1995) applies the term in her book to account for *Black Women as Cultural Readers* – “how the cultural is intrinsically interwoven with other aspects in the lives of [Black women]” (Bobo, 2006, p. 22). In her work, Bobo applies the term in relation to Black women and cultural works produced by Black women or works that feature them in a significant way, and how they utilize these representations. Through extensive interviews, Bobo records the reactions that black women (as “interpretive communities”) had to several films. Having watched these films and discussing them with each other, the women Bobo interviews negotiate new interpretations of the texts, which in many cases is in opposition to dominant or conventional readings. “Black women as interpretive communities (cultural producers, critics and scholars, and cultural consumers) use what they deem valuable and politically useful” to make sense of their lives (Bobo, 1995, p. 22). Cultural texts are interwoven with the lived experiences of many Black women and provide them a space where they can make sense of their lived experience, which is essential in the battle against oppressive ideologies.

Black Female Subjectivity

According to Gray (1995), “[i]n the televisual world of the early 1950s [and arguably today], the social and cultural rules of race relations between blacks and whites were explicit: black otherness was required for white subjectivity...[and] black humor was necessary for the amusement of whites” (p. 75). Even in representations of

blackness, these perspectives were told from a White subject position, where White ideology remained. This discourse of whiteness permeates much of televisual representations of blackness in Black programming. Representations of Black women in the media rarely exist beyond the supporting role of white characters. White needs and perspectives entirely define Black characters – their subjectivity marked by their degree to serve the desires of white individuals (McPherson, 2003). The televisual and occupational roles assigned to Black women within television confine them to work that cleans, cooks, suffers or entertains (Smith, 2002). It is important for Black women to see themselves represented on television in a multitude of images that captures their social and political subjectivity – their identity and relationships within society: “Subjectivity enables Black women to ‘define their own reality, establish their own identities, [and] *sic* name their history” (Smith, 2002, p.23). Such shows as *Girlfriends* provide a variety of images of Black women that recognize many subjectivities and claims these perspectives.

Chapter 3: *Girlfriends*

Very little attention has been given to the television show *Girlfriends* by the media industry. Much of what has been written in the media about the show has surrounded its success, its cancellation, and creative pieces that center around the creator Mara Brock Akil. Print media is a trusted source of information for many television shows, both introducing the show and keeping up with its weekly plots. However, many trade presses and popular culture magazines do not showcase Black shows as equally important television programming that should be highlighted.

INDUSTRIAL DISCUSSION

While investigating the industrial discussion surrounding the television show *Girlfriends*, it would later be clear why the show did not garner a greater amount of support from the media. The television networks that programmed the show, UPN (2000-2005) and then The CW (2006-2007) – the merger of the WB and UPN network – did not invest in advertising the show to viewers as much as they did for White-cast shows. Its own networks underpromoted *Girlfriends*, along with many other Black sitcoms, and left these shows to market themselves through word-of-mouth. According to Greg Braxton, Times Staff Writer, “*Girlfriends* was not included in the CW’s ‘Free to Be...’ billboard and bus-placard campaign hyping its programming” and *Girlfriends* has never had a Billboard (Braxton, 2006). During this campaign, the push focused on shows featuring predominately white casts, all which have not been on the air as long as *Girlfriends*. Both Mara Brock Akil and co-star of *Girlfriends*, Persia White, agree that race and gender have played a part in the media not fully embracing the show (Kinson, 2008). Even

though *Girlfriends* is a very successful show, it has not gotten the admiration it should have.

The UPN network first approached the creator, writer, and producer, Mara Brock Akil, in 1999 for a companion show to *The Parkers* (UPN 1999-2004), when Brock Akil first pitched *Girlfriends* (Richardson, 2007). Having admired the show *Sex in the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), Akil conjured up the idea for *Girlfriends*: “I told UPN that I would deliver the dirty little secrets of Black women, and the biggest secret is that we’re just human beings trying to make it like everyone else,” says Brock Akil (Richardson, 2007, p.102).

Girlfriends aired on UPN (2000-2005) September 11, 2000 - February 11, 2008, then on its successor network, The CW (2006-2008), before it was cancelled in 2008. The series was produced by Kelsey Grammer and CBS Paramount Network Television.

Girlfriends is a popular American sitcom centered on the lives of four successful Black women, who are best friends living in Los Angeles, California. The premise of the show was to showcase the lives, loves, and losses of four different Black women. The characters are smart, articulate, attractive, and entertaining. More importantly, these women are vulnerable, multifaceted, and layered.

“Akil has taken full charge of ‘*Girlfriends*’ and the direction and tone of the series are hers” (Braxton, 2002). Braxton, noted Akil for being the youngest female creator-executive producer in television and the youngest Black person to run a show. Brock Akil became the only Black person to have two primetime shows on network

television – *Girlfriends* and *The Game* (UPN, 2006-2009), a spin – off series.⁷ She first began her career in 1994 writing for Fox series *South Central* (April 5, 1994 to June 7, 1994). Additionally, Akil served as supervising producer and writer on *The Jamie Foxx Show* (WB, 1996-2001) after writing for *Moesha* (UPN, 1996-2001) for four seasons.

Girlfriends seasonal rankings based on average total viewers per episode, was successful when it aired through the UPN network on Monday evenings, versus Sundays when it aired on its successor, The CW. After airing several years on the UPN network at 9/8c on Mondays, The CW moved *Girlfriends* to Sundays at 8/7c. On October 9, 2006, *Girlfriends*, along with The CW's other African American programs, moved back to Mondays. It aired in its original time slot (Braxton 2006). When *Girlfriends* aired on Monday's on the UPN network, the schedule included: *Moesha*, *The Parkers*, *The Hughleys* (UPN, 1998-2002), and *Girlfriends*. When *Girlfriends* switched to the CW, the Sunday line-up included: *Everybody Hates Chris* (CW, 2005-2009), new episodes of *Everybody Hates Chris*, *Aliens in America* (2007-2008), *Girlfriends*, and *The Game*. All of these shows rated high in Black viewership. Furthermore, the shows within these line-ups helped sustain the success of both the UPN and the CW network.

According to *The Futon Critic Website*, in its first season on the UPN network *Girlfriends* ranked at 136 out of 157 shows, with 4.0 million viewers.⁸ After its sixth season, the show began to decline in ranking and viewership. In its last season on the CW

⁷ BET struck a deal with *The Games'* parent company Paramount to develop new episodes of series. Murray, Jawn. "The Game Sitcom's Return On BET". aolblackvoices.com. Retrieved 2009-03-15.

⁸ *The Futon Critic Website* (www.thefutoncritic.com) – "TV Ratings 2000-2001"

network it ranked 150 with 2.1 million viewers.⁹ Critics say the ratings suffered a decline because of the departure of one of the show's main characters, Antoinette "Toni" Marie Childs Garrett, played by Jill Marie Jones (2000–2006), which seemed to upset viewers. While *Girlfriends* did lose some of its viewers due to its line-up and loss of one of its main characters, it continued to have success amongst its devoted viewers. Nevertheless, *Girlfriends* was cancelled in 2008 due to economics just after the 2007-2008 Writer's Guild Strike, with no season finale. According to an article on TV Series Finale.com, the CW network offered the actors half of their usual episodic salary to take part in a series finale however, the actors collectively declined.

The success of *Girlfriends* was due to their loyal Black audience. There was at least one accusation that Nielsen did not accurately account for the Black female viewership that supported the show. Nielsen was responsible for "undercount[ing] black women, a large segment of UPN's audience," says a UPN spokesperson (Stack, 2005). *Girlfriends* was "one of the highest-rated scripted shows on television among African American adults and women 18-34" (Braxton, 2006). While many of the mainstream articles written on the show have highlighted the popularity of *Girlfriends* within Black households, less attention has been given to Black women and their support for the show, as primary viewers.

The Kansas City Star did an article on the television series that interviewed an avid viewer of the show, who was disappointed in its cancellation. Jenee Osterheldt, of KCS, interviewed Schanina Winfield, a Black woman and native of Brock Akil's

⁹ "2007-2008 TV season". ABC Medianet. February 10, 2008.

hometown, Kansas City, Missouri. Winfield said that *Girlfriends* “showed that the black experience is not that different from everybody else’s, but at the same time it showed our point of view and struggles. She said that cancelling the show made “it seem like we aren’t important enough to be seen or heard in the mainstream. But we are,” (Osterheldt, 2008). Winfield's investment in the show as a Black woman, along with industry discourse reveal the lack of promotion and attention from the media attributed to the cancelation of *Girlfriends* and exhibits the lack of support for Black television programming and viewership.

Black Media Ownership

It is important to address the dynamics of Black media ownership because content is a result of ownership. I agree with those who argue that the only way Black audiences will be able to see more images of themselves in an array of representations, is through Black production and ownership. Cultural images under the control of Black owned media industries seek to express Black cultural traditions that represent different sectors of the Black community. It is within these media entities that Black audiences can escape the assumed mediated representations. Unfortunately, the number of Black owned media industries are un-proportionally low. K. Sue Jewell’s observation about the state of Black media ownership in 1993 still holds true today:

The availability of Black media, such as the Black press and African American owned television and radio stations, and the extent to which they are able to counter the effects of mainstream media, are related to economic factors. Most African American owned media are limited in their effectiveness because of their dependence on advertising dollars from outside the African American communities. To the extent that African American media are able to retain their independence from major corporate advertisers they are in a better position to

offer venues for challenging institutions and distorted cultural images. Still, those who have a monopoly on wealth and power will not concede to challenges to the institutions and resources over which they exercise tremendous control. (p. 13).

There are several factors at play in regards to ownership and production. One must acquire the knowledge, skills, and financial backing to support a career in the realm of media industries. While there are many talented people of color whom have these capabilities, there still remains limited access and participation by Black people in radio, television, and print publications. A 2007 study of minority and female ownership of media industries using data provided by the Census Bureau and the FCC showed that female and minority ownership are underrepresented in the media industries (Beresteanu & Ellickson). Women and minorities, in accordance to the population, will nonetheless numerically have less ownership in media enterprises than White men. Even so, the fact remains that Black people own a disproportionate share of media entities, in comparison to their percentage of the population, which is noteworthy. While Black people make up approximately 13% percent of the population, they own 4.35% of radio stations, 4.89% of television stations, and 2.44% of newspaper publishers (Beresteanu & Ellickson, 2007). Media ownership is considerably concentrated among non-minorities (Whites) (Beresteanu & Ellickson, 2007). These results are an indication of lack of support and access for Black entrepreneurs who strive to be a part of the media industries. It is a task the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) needs to undertake.

The FCC needs to play an active role in ensuring equal access in ownership to such outlets as radio, magazines, and television. Beresteanu & Ellickson state that “a key determinant of media ownership is simply being able to afford it [and] [t]his ability varies

sharply by race” (p. 9). In the late 1970s, President Nixon along with the FCC sought to address the underrepresentation of minorities in broadcasting and to promote minority ownership by helping minority entrepreneurs to purchase broadcast and cable properties (Kransnow & Fowlkes, 1999 & Zook, 1999). They initiated the “Minority Tax Certificate” program, a tax certificate to “facilitate capitalization of broadcasting and cable acquisitions by minority-owned firms” (MEPFCC Executive Summary). The tax certificate policy advanced minority broadcast ownership than any other policy in the history of the FCC. “As a result of the initiative, more than three hundred broadcast properties were sold to minorities over the next seventeen years, raising the percentage of minority ownership from 0.5 percent to a far grander 3 percent” (Zook 1999, p. 101). However, in 1995, the program was repealed. Since then, minority media ownership has stagnated. The FCC has failed in recent years to address the enormous disparity in minority and female ownership. However, the irony is how white-owned networks such as UPN, WB, and FOX have been able to capitalize on the cultural production and consumption practices of Black people (Zook, 1999).

Fox, UPN, and WB

NBC started what would be considered an “urban” market for television programming by producing such shows as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *A Different World* (1987-1993), and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996). Realizing the profit to be made off programming featuring Black casts, Rupert Murdoch launched Fox network in 1986. Fox would later replicate NBC’s move by creating “ethnic” shows for the “urban” market. According to Zook (1999):

By "narrowcasting" or targeting a specific black ... and "counter-programming" against other shows to suit that audience's taste, Fox was able to capture large numbers of young, urban viewers. By 1993, the fourth network was airing the largest single crop of black produced shows in television history. And by 1995, black Americans (some 12 percent of the total U.S. population) were a striking 25 percent of Fox's market. The Fox network was unique, then, in that, it inadvertently fostered a space for black authorship in television. It did this to capitalize on an underrepresented market, of course (p. 587).

The surge of Black television shows in the 1980s and 90s emerged successfully within a specific set of political, economical, and institutional conditions. Leading into the millennium, the absence of Black shows was a result of niche markets that could garner more profits – White male audiences – than the urban market. Smith (2002) notes that “[b]y 2000 no Black cast comedy existed on the Fox network. They migrated, or were otherwise exiled, to the UPN and WB upstarts that were busy trying to emulate Fox’s success via Black programming” (p. 37). UPN and WB, and later the CW, capitalized on the essential strategy of racial narrowcasting, as well. In 2006, UPN was the only home for Black-oriented comedies on network television (Kersey, 2006). All of the shows that ranked high in Black households were featured on that network. While the network continued to air Black-themed series, many of these shows were created for crossover appeal. Such shows on UPN as *Half & Half* (2002-2006), *One on One* (2001-2006) and *All of Us* (2003-2007) were not invested in presenting Black characters as multilayered subjects of blackness. All of these programming featured an all Black cast however, they were not Black produced or authored. Contemporary television has given space to Black people to tell their stories yet, these networks fail to give these particular programming the resources they need to survive.

My argument is that these networks have no real interest in producing Black programming. Racial narrowcasting is an essential strategy for broadcasting outlets that serve an industrial (economic) purpose (Zook, 1999). While Black programs are given space on such networks as the CW, they are not given the same financial allocations as their White counterparts, whom in some cases do not do as well. Furthermore, the networks provide little promotional campaigning, place these shows at bad time slots, and when these shows are cancelled they are not given a proper closing episode. These networks have used Black programming as a way to sustain themselves (Zook, 1999). Such networks as UPN have struggled in ratings and market share since they were first started in 1995. Thus, once they garnered higher ratings or television award nominations for their more successful whiter shows, the less successful “Black” shows that did not appeal to White audiences become cancelled. As a result, Black audiences receive little to no Black programming and shows such as *Girlfriends* are given no accreditation.

This study is particularly interested in obtaining discussions from Black women because they represent a group of women who are not cater to as an audience, yet watch the most television. Black households view more television than any other household in the United States... and African-American women average a higher viewing percentage than adults, men and children on both weekdays and weekends (Steadman, 2005, pp.13-14). However, Black women make up 5.6 percent of characters on prime – time television (Smith 2004). If this is the case, with Black women watching the most television, then there should be more media content that serves the demand of this particular audience.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: *GIRLFRIENDS*

Girlfriends was a great Black television show that featured Black women in a multifaceted way. In watching the show, I found myself represented in each character. I am an avid viewer of the show and am building my DVD collection of the series. I am interested in the show because of its portrayals of Black women and the success in which it garnered as a Black television series. In *Shaded Lives*, Smith makes reference to *Girlfriends* as a “watered down version” of *Sex in the City* and dismisses it as “exhibit[ing] ...limited signs of advancing Black women in humor” (p. 68). Moreover, in a paper presentation, entitled “We've Come a Long Way, or Have We?: Representations of African American Women in *Girlfriends*” Leslie Campbell (2009) posits that:

[I]mages of professional African American women in *Girlfriends* are inscribed with mainstream values and beliefs, which fail to emphasize African American perspectives, and perpetuate gender inequities. By depicting African American professional women, the series is “relevant;” however, by de-emphasizing the disparity between actual and depicted gains in the U.S. professional workplace for African American women, the show is glamorously “escapist”.

While there are some truths in Campbell’s observation, I believe there is more at play in terms of the politics of representation in which this television show provides. I posit that the television show *Girlfriends* effectively demonstrates that Black culture is not monolithic and presents the subjectivity of many Black women. The representations on *Girlfriends* are expressions of Black women as layered, shifting, and complex subjects and it is for this reason that it has remained successful among Black women.

The show featured Tracee Ellis Ross as Joan Clayton, Golden Brooks as Maya Wilkes, Persia White as Lynn Searcy, Jill Marie Jones as Antoinette "Toni" Marie Childs (Garrett –after marrying Todd Garret), and Reggie Hayes as William Jerrowme Dent. Although the show has an ensemble cast, Joan was the main character. Characters included: Joan Carol Clayton a successful attorney, later turned restaurant owner with close friend William. Maya is Joan's assistant, later turned housewife/author; Lynn is a perennial student whom holds five post-graduate degrees, later turned aspiring singer; Toni is a real estate agent who eventually opens her own brokerage. She left the show at the end of Season 6; and William is the closest male friend to all of the girls. He is senior partner at the same law firm as Joan.

The structure of the plot is standard: stasis, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and stasis. However, its diversity and engagement with Black cultural politics is what makes the show unlike other situation comedies featuring Black casts. The shows' plots present Black life and issues in a poignant and entertaining way representing different sides of various issues. Just as *A Different World*, *Girlfriends* “[i]ndividually and collectively, the characters, quite predictably, negotiat[e] the challenges, ambivalences discoveries, disappointments, and triumphs of [Black] life and [female womanhood]” (Gray 1995, p. 95). As to not succumb to television's conventions of structuring and authorizing codes of whiteness, Akil and her staff of writers and producers challenge this aesthetic temptation and structural pressures presenting Black female life in a fresh light.

Most of the show either takes place within Joan's home or the women's favorite restaurant/hangout spot, such as 847, which is owned by their friend Davis, who is Black. His restaurant is often filled with a racially mixed cast of patrons. When the girlfriends are not hanging out at the restaurant, they are always within Joan's home. Joan's home is filled with books and African art pieces, many of which serve as her fertility pieces. They also symbolize her worldliness and affluence. The pieces seem more contrived in the setting than as a natural flow of the interior design, as they are the only visual signs of Blackness used as props. The setting frequently takes place in Joan's office at the law firm as well, however we never see Joan in court. These settings guarantee the familiarity of middle-class interiors that influences much of commercial television. The conventional use of close-ups, medium shots, and long shots takes place on a sound stage conventionally resembling that of other weekly situation comedies. Close-ups are used for distinguishing main characters amongst the milieu of other characters. In the first season close-ups were used frequently to put Joan in conversation with the viewers. The scene stops, we get a close-up of Joan's face and audiences are able to visually witness Joan's inner thoughts for a moment. This strategy helps connect viewers to Joan, who becomes the lead character of the series. These kinds of aesthetic and structural strategies that are employed on *Girlfriends* discursively recognize and present signs of Blackness.

Representing Blackness

Black sensibility is explicitly marked in *Girlfriends*, mediated in theme and character. Black subjectivity is central to the show's content, narrative, and characters. These subjectivities are complex collective (and individual) expressions of Blackness –

stories told from the collective and individual experiences of Black people. I refer to *Girlfriends* as a Black show because it showcases the lives, experiences, and memories of Black people, and because it employed Black writers, actors, directors, and crew as significant positions to its creative force; as well as an eclectic mix of individuals whom make the show more dynamic. Akil describes her diverse staff of writers and crewmembers as the following:

‘There are a lot of women in top positions, black, white, Asian, Polynesian, Latino, gay and Jewish,’ says Akil, who is Muslim. ‘It’s a beautiful, “We Are the World” thing, and it’s one key to the success of the show’ (Hontz, 2007).

Akil’s emphasis on gender and racial diversity in all aspects of the production of *Girlfriends* contributes to the distinct characters and identity of the show and structurally informed the show.

“African American culture is central to the construction of [the shows’] black subjects as well as program content, aesthetic organization, setting and narrative” (Gray, 1995, p. 91). The cultural alliances, political positions, and social issues in *Girlfriends* are organized as to reflect to Black women. *Girlfriends* offers a more representations of Black life that explores Black cultural traditions, perspectives and experiences that effect Black women. “In [this] show, differences that originate from within [Black] social and cultural experiences are not just acknowledged, but interrogated, even parodied as subjects of television” (Gray, 1995, p. 91). By exploring various topics that effect Black women Akil uses *Girlfriends* as a political and social platform that enlightens communities.

Topics such as: relationships, career changes, colorism, “The Man”, racism/discrimination in the workplace, STDs, AIDS, fibroids domestic violence, homosexuality, families in the war, interracial dating, and birthmothers are all issues in which Black women can relate to and find within *Girlfriends*. Such topics as these are specific to and especially pertinent to Black women because these are the some of the many challenges that Black women face within their lives. Akil has commend on how she has deliberately brought issues to bear that affect Black women (Hontz, 2007). This includes issues that deal with health. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Black women are more likely to develop fibroids than white women.¹⁰ In “Old Dog” (season 1, episode 15), Akil explores this issue in several episodes after Maya and Darnell have difficulty conceiving a second child – a symptom of fibroids. “Another episode depicted... [Toni] who failed to use a condom because she thought her date, a nice doctor, must be clean. The episode, titled ‘The Burning Vagina Monologues,’ — won a [2001 (SHINE)] Sexual Health in Entertainment Award” (Hontz, 2007). All while making people laugh, Akil uses her show to explore relationships and issues of sexual health. The health issues of Black women are often ignored and *Girlfriends* provides a space that recognizes these concerns. These crucial themes and topics provide the ability for self-reflexivity – the ability to find ones-self– which has allowed the success of the show for Black women. Within this context, such shows as *Girlfriends* have employed Blackness as a strategy to narrate Black subjectivity and presence in contemporary U.S. society.

¹⁰ “Uterine Fibroids”: <http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/uterine-fibroids.cfm>

Even the subject of hair, the different styles that these women wear, are an expression of the differing modes of Black identity. “Continually negotiating the standards of beauty as articulated within Anglo mainstream culture, Black women struggle to find their political and cultural voice within chemically relaxed, braided, and natural hair care/wear” (Smith, 2002, pp, 61-62). From Joan’s natural curls and blow-outs, Lynn’s braids and coiled locks, to Maya’s and Toni’s perms, up do’s, weaves, and bobs, these Black women express their identity and reinvent signs of Blackness. Maya’s trips to the beauty salon and the women’s reference to their hair are a part of contemporary and historical elements of Black cultural experiences. Akil recognizes the relationship between the politics of Black hair and Black femininity by exposing aspects of the Black female body. It’s no coincidence that these women wear the styles they do. The hairstyles of the characters speak to the various Black cultural experiences that are symbolically inscribed (Gray, 1995). In the first and second season, we often saw Lynn with hair that seemed to resemble locks, and in season 7 and 8, her hair is braided – a symbol of hair political and social views. In the beginning, Maya wore her hair in cornrows and weaves, and throughout the whole series is seen taking off from work for her hair appointments. Joan’s hair is often styled in many ways, but is worn naturally – no relaxer. Toni always has a relaxer and wears weaves. Her option to have a relaxer and a weave are a symbolic reference to a sociological and cultural phenomenon imposed by White standards of beauty. These identifying characteristics tied to the style and preference for Black women and their hair attribute to the tensions Black women must

grapple with through Blackness, class, and sexuality. They are apart of specific cultural experiences that are relevant to Black women.

Not only are cultural experiences acknowledged within *Girlfriends*, but they are interrogated within the complex view of the different characters and parodied as subjects of the show. As mentioned before, Akil chose to represent the diversity of Black women in her cast, through experiences and skin tones. In an interview with Ross, she comments on how each of the characters were specifically written with a certain skin tone in mind to represent a spectrum of Black women. It is important to note that Joan was originally supposed to be dark skinned. Akil wanted to put a Black women whom was dark skinned at the center of the show however, the network turned down all the prospective actresses. Joan is light skinned and played by a biracial actress. Lynn was originally imagined as a Black woman who was to phenotypically appear White. However, her character eventually was written as a biracial woman adopted by white parents.

Issues of differences became the theme of various episodes in the series. In “Hip-Ocracy” (season 1, episode 4), the show confronted colorism. Colorism is the preferential treatment accorded to people based on skin tone. It is a very crucial issue within the Black community. This issue is especially pressing within the social, economical, and political positioning of Black people. Many Black women whom are dark skinned have had very specific and shared experiences on the issue of beauty as a result of colorism within the Black community.

In the episode, Toni’s preference for dating lighter skinned Black men, due to memories from her childhood and her experience of being dark skinned is exposed. Toni

is considered to be self-centered, narcissistic, and materialistic and has self-proclaimed herself as the “cute one” of the group. Toni is also one of the most troubled women out of the group as she rarely considers the feeling of others. However, Toni is the most confident woman in the show. Toni’s contradiction between being the ‘most troubled’ and the ‘most confident’ acknowledges the ambivalences of race and sexuality that Black women experience. Thus, when the episode aired exposing Toni’s vulnerable side within the context of beauty and skin complexion, viewers witness the acknowledgement of the different experiences that Black women go through.

In “Hip-Ocracy,” Joan, Toni and Lynn set up dates with men they met online, despite Maya’s warning. While Joan, Lynn, and William venture out in an attempt to find love, Toni ends up rejecting the man she found online because his skin is too dark. Here is an example of the shows attempt to tackle an important subject. Joan, Lynn, and Toni meet up at 847 to meet their dates. Maya and William tag along to make sure the girl's dates do not turn out to be serial killers. Toni is especially confident that her date will be perfect, as she has met him on ebonymillionaires.com. Toni’s date arrives and greets her at the bar. He is a Black dark-skinned man with a British accent. His name is Del Toussaint, played by Rodney Charles. As Toni turns around in the midst of exposing her cleavage, her facial expression reveals her disappointment with Del. As he apologizes for being late, Toni claims that she is in a hurry and can only stay for a drink, while now covering her cleavage. Later on that night, the girls gather at Joan’s, while Joan prepares for another date with Stan, the guy she met online. Joan asks Toni how her date with Del was and Toni states how Del and her did not work out, despite that he has everything she

wants – money. She further explains, “He just didn’t do it for me. He’s too Black. You know blue Black, coal, midnight.” Maya confronts Toni explaining that she “aint exactly light-bright [her] damn self.” Lynn makes a comment and Toni brushes her off because she is half white. As the episode continues the girls confront Toni for her self-hatred. Toni and Joan meet up and Toni explains that Joan does not have to do what she has to in order to “compete.” She remarks that her body is from working–out and her hair is from the “Koreans on Crenshaw.” She then goes on to say that the only reason that she is not darker is because she dodges the sun. Toni tells Joan that she does not want her daughter to have to go through the pains of being dark skinned and the comment that “she is cute for a dark-skinned girl.” Such phrasing is culturally specific and acknowledges the injuries of Black women. The show ends, and it is clear that Toni has a number of issues. Toni’s perspective speaks to a specific Black cultural experience that many Black women have gone through and recognizes the suffering of blackness being marked on the body. These moments illustrate Black subjectivity by inserting contemporary and historic discourses that reveals deep injuries and successfully challenges narrow notions of Blackness (Gray, 1995).

Girlfriends’ “explicit attention to African American themes, the use of original popular music from the African American musical tradition, [well known Black artists, and actor and actresses appearing as themselves], the blurring of genres (comedy/drama), the lack of closure and resolution,” are all visual and narrative strategies that explicitly engage Black viewers (Gray 1995, p. 90). Central to the construction of Black culture is Black music and *Girlfriends* employs this tradition by incorporating Black musicians and

entertainers within the show. Guest appearances include: Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, Common, Big Boi, and Isaac Hayes. Notable R&B musician Angie Stone sings the theme song to *Girlfriends*. Most of these artists have a core Black audience. These familiar faces are explicit measures to align Black audiences and exist as another way in which Black culture is recognized while also giving Black entertainers spaces to connect with their viewers. The cultural force of these contemporary representational strategies within network television, continue to locate such shows as *Girlfriends* as Black programming.

Such shows as *Girlfriends* exhibits Gray's typology of multiculturalist/diversity by displaying an array of perspectives and representations of Black female life in America. Operating within this discursive space within the sign of Blackness, this television show positions viewers to participate in Black experiences from different view points. This discourse offers a view of what it means to be an American from the point of view of a Black female living in America. This is especially true for the *Girlfriends* show, in that we see what it means to be a young lower-middle class mother, a successful attorney and real estate agent, and an adopted biracial woman. All three distinct experiences invite Black women to acknowledge and embrace their differences. It is this kind of diversity within the sign of Blackness where subjectivity is made contradictory, troubling and pleasurable. Despite the fact that "black middle-class cultural perspectives and view points...shape and define [this] show," just as Campbell suggested, "they are driven less by the hegemonic gaze of whiteness" and from the fulcrum of Blackness (Gray 91). In this regard, Black perspectives are privileged and in accordance to the many lived situations that many Black women experience, especially with regard to class.

“Classist & Egregious”: Class Concerns

The running joke since “Never a Bridesmaid” (season 1, episode 10), is how Joan is ‘classist and egregious’. The episode is partly about Maya renewing her wedding vows and Joan offering to host the ceremony at her place and help with all the preparations. However, when Joan dismisses all of Maya's ideas in favor of her own expensively stylish ideas, Maya quickly dismisses Joan from the wedding ceremony stating that Joan is ‘classist and egregious’ and is constantly looking down at her. In the end, they make up and Joan apologizes for her actions. Through the next 7 seasons, characters make reference to the statement.

Perhaps, this is what Campbell was alluding to, the idea that “the show is glamorously ‘escapist’ ” and is in fact ‘classist and egregious’. I will agree that by season four with Maya’s book deal and short romance with a professional baseball player, the show did deemphasize actual Black perspectives from a working class view, via character Maya however, Maya’s belief and values remained the same. I point to these plots in the episodes not because they could not happen to Black women in reality, but because there is a small chance of these occurrences happening in the lives of Black women as a totality. Moreover, the show is not “glamorously escapist’ as it does cover topics that affect Black women and reflect their perspectives from a working class view. *Girlfriends* is a legitimate expression of one aspect of the diversity of Black women. Coleman (1995) states that, “through television, race has frequently been linked to the underclass, more specifically the working class” (p. 79). The roles within *Girlfriends* moves beyond these confines and exhibits the gains made by Black women. In this respect, Black women can

bee seen in multiple subject positions that interrogate issues of class. While the characters might not all be of the working-class, like many past and current images of Black women on television, each characters socio-economic status provides crucial insight from the lived experiences of a variety of Black women within the U.S.

In line with many television programs, the media often denies that the working class exists. Representations of Black individuals however, overwhelming center on the Black working-class individual. While these are important images that need to be presented as a variety of lived-experiences, shows featuring Black middle-class individuals must be portrayed as well to balance those subjectivities. Most shows continue to center their programming on middle-class White individuals. Wealth has been misconstrued as Whiteness, as seen within the contention over representations in *The Cosby Show* and *Julia* (NBC, 1968). In 1980s situation comedy, Black women emerged with the status of upper and middle class. The Huxtables assisted in these portrayals. The legacy of *The Cosby Show*, within 21st century representations of Black women, is shown in terms of work roles, class, and identity. Current depictions of Black “women play material-driven individualists who possess the education, ability, and means to achieve goals, all through their own efforts” (Smith 2002, p. 22). These images are similar to those seen in *Living Single* (FOX, 1993) as well – a show that centered on four Black women. In *Living Single* middle-class success was solidified (Smith, 2002). However, while the show did explore class-consciousness it did account for class disparities in regard to race. What makes *Girlfriends* different is the attention to White hegemonic patriarchal forces that are explored and given explicit recognition of its

existence. Race and class-consciousness is addressed in the exploitation and privilege that these women receive by being a Black woman. By recognizing the insults and privileges experienced by Black women within specific economic social positionings, *Girlfriends* addresses class sensibility from a different perspective.

Girlfriends discursive relationship to televisions historical images of Black people and contemporary social and cultural debates centering on Black people, presents itself from a trope of Black middle-classness. In the show, blackness coexists within the same discursive degree of working and middle-class experiences. As the series develops unlimited consumerism and upward mobility begin to dominate the shows presence. The class sensibility within *Girlfriends* is obvious. Surrounded by markers of capitalistic desires such as attire, cars, and houses represent the American dream; most of what these women have achieved. Nevertheless, particularities of Black social, political, cultural, and economic realities construct the complexities of Black life. The women of the show hangout at lounges, cafés, are up-to-date with cultural occurrences and fashion trends. I think it is significant that their original favorite restaurant was Black owned and they later moved to a spot that is Asian owned, unknown, and finally Joan's lounge. In all likelihood, the changes in restaurants attributed to the shows class sensibility. As mentioned earlier, the characters all lived within modern homes. Such elements as speech, attire, and setting attribute to the shows capability to present the women's socioeconomic status, which are all predictors of class and political position.

Golden Brooks character, Maya, is very integral to the theme of class. Maya would be considered the most "working class," particularly in earlier seasons of the

series. Maya is "from the hood" her speech, beliefs, and mannerisms project that image. Speech in particular within the *Girlfriends* show is in correlation with class positioning. In "Toe Sucking" (season 1, episode 1) Joan points out Maya's double negative usage – "ain't got no." In another scene, not only does Toni refer to Maya as 'Mrs. Ghetto Superstar,' she too points to Maya's verb usage. Maya asks Toni "Why you lookin' at me" and Toni replies "it's why are you looking at me? You dropped verbs." Maya wittingly replies, "I did learn that kiss is both a verb and a noun. So how bout you give my ass a kiss or kiss my ass!" While many of the women on the show are presented using Black euphemisms on many occasions, such characters as Maya authenticate the socioeconomic positioning of those characters. During the current historical moment, representations within *Girlfriends* exist to show some of those Black women whom have "made it" and those who are in transition (Maya and Tony).

As the season develops, Maya becomes more successful and begins to exhibit similar values and beliefs of the other girlfriends. However, Maya always "keeps it real." Her characters background is very real in the context of the lived experiences of many Black women in the U.S. She came from a single parent household in Compton, a working-class Los Angeles neighborhood, and she had a child when she was 16 years old. Maya married her high school sweetheart and the father of her son Jabari. The fascinating part is that all of the girlfriends seem to envy Maya because she has what they all want, a husband and child. Maya is the one who usually speaks the most sense out of all the women, despite her character being the youngest. She "keeps it real."

The notion of “keepin’ it real” is very much associated with one’s authenticity in the realm of Blackness in that they are both about remaining true to one’s self and community. Class is another dimension where one’s authenticity is made real. This discussion is integral to the notion of class because it again speaks to the varying lives of Black women. In one particular episode, we see how the varying lifestyle of the women can create animosity in the struggle for a better life.

In “Inherit the Lynn” (season 4, episode 75), Maya allows Lynn to move in with her and pay rent in order to afford to go back to school. However, after several days of Lynn’s lethargic attitude toward working on her next documentary, Maya becomes annoyed. At this point in the series, Maya and her husband are separated and she has just moved into her own one bedroom apartment with her son Jabari.¹¹

The “Inherit the Lynn” episode is important for several reasons. It showcases the struggle of a single working-class mother; it interrogates the determination of Black women wanting a better life for themselves and family; and examines the perseverance for Black women whom must start over from the beginning. When the episode begins, Maya is at the financial aid office of a university, when she learns that tuition has increased substantially, and she doesn’t have enough money to cover it. William learns of Maya’s inability to pay for tuition and makes up a lie so that Maya thinks she has earned a scholarship in the firm’s “continuing education program.” However, Maya finds out that William has given her the money out of his own pocket and she refuses to take the money because she has missed the deadline for the program. We later learn that Lynn needs a

place to stay, again, so that she can work on a grant proposal for another documentary. Maya agrees to let Lynn move in for a month if she pays rent. Her rent will offset the costs for Maya's tuition. After several scenes in the episode, Lynn is seen lying around and doing absolutely nothing, while Maya goes through the daily routine of being a working mother. Maya pays her tuition, but learns that her credits from unaccredited institutions do not transfer and she must start over again as a freshman. Maya remarks, "...girl you know how hard it is out there for a Black women tryna make it on her own, scratchin' and survivin'. I've been trying to finish school now for the last nine years." Maya becomes discouraged and breaks down in tears because she must start again. The pivotal moment is when Maya comes home to Lynn complaining that she has depression and has had a "hard day:"

Maya: Let me tell you about hard. Hard is for people out there who haul themselves out of bed every damn morning, all right, to go to a job they hate. Just so they can come home go to bed and get up and do it all over again the next day, 'kay. It's finding the energy to spend time with your kids after you've worked all day, made dinner, then have to clean-up after some raggedy-ass moochin' squatter you had to take-in because the job you hate, doesn't pay enough!

Lynn: Raggedy-ass yes. Mooching maybe, but squatter? I paid you rent! And don't bring all that drama up in here, because I am depressed.

Maya: You are not depressed. You're lazy. You sit up here with your five degrees and you do nothing. You are lazy Lynn and I don't respect you.

This exchange is significant because it points to the struggles of being a single working mother. Their argument symbolizes class disparity.

¹¹ Maya's relationship ended in ways that also point to the series' attention to class and education issues.

Lynn later meets William at a bar where he explains what Maya is experiencing and convinces Lynn to be proactive in her own life. The episode concludes when Lynn decides to make a documentary about single mothers, and asks Maya to appear in it and Maya goes back to school. “So while the surface narrative of this episode appears to be showcasing the mission to go back to school, its ideological premise actually involves a far more complex attack” on race, gender, and class, and the Black women’s response to it (Zook, 1999, p. 34). This episode clearly illustrates the lived experiences of many Black women, while highlighting a specific moment in the lives of single working-class woman. Smith (2002) states, that “single minority women...remain culturally unfamiliar entities” (p. 31). Unveiling these images in such programming encourages the margins to speak and reveals the daily lives of Black women. Additionally, the tension between Maya and Lynn in this episode calls attention to class conflict amongst Black women particularly.

Maya and her relationship with the other women, especially Toni, is an expression of class conflict and socioeconomic positioning. Their relationship make explicit the “widening gap between the classes of African Americans” (Zook, 1999, p. 24). Toni grew up in a poor farm family with an alcoholic mother in Fresno, California. She attended UCLA and became a successful real-estate agent, who later opens her own agency. In the initial episodes, Toni despised Maya for being a lower-class intruder. Throughout the series, Toni reminds viewers that she cannot go back to being poor. We learn that her greatest fear is being poor again. Tony and Maya’s relationship set the stage for socioeconomic differences amongst Black women. Appearances by Toni’s mother

and ex-boyfriend/love of her life, remind viewers of the ambivalence and social struggles that come with social mobility for Blacks. Toni is ashamed of her family, especially of her mother, and she cannot seem to find happiness in her then boyfriend because his lack of money; he is an independent, then, unsuccessful artist.

Toni's relationship with her ex-boyfriend is especially poignant for current discussions on "successful" Black women and finding love. The contemporary debate is that marriage chances for highly educated Black women have declined and the chances for a "reliable partner" – coded word for class and race – are slim. These topics are very important in the Black community as they attest to the struggle contemporary U.S. Black women face. Despite the advances made by Black women through socioeconomic upward mobility, they still face challenges in other arenas of society. Representing the struggles that surround Black women and their relationships through a class-based examination highlight the problematic middle class life in a predominantly white cultural milieu. These images can function on the basis of negating cultural identity and ideological containment with regard to Blackness and class. *Girlfriends* offers a platform to interrogate these issues while giving claim to topics that center on the diversity and multiplicity of experience and identity among Black women.

"Sometimes Sister's Have To Do It For Themselves:" Gender & Sexuality

During an interview on creating the television show *Girlfriends*, creator Mara Brock Akil comments that she wanted to make a show that showcased "women owning their sexuality and enjoying it." Akil says, she "wanted to normalize sex, showing women who have strong opinions about sex." Representations of all of the characters within the

television show perform interwoven functions within the text that “represent[s] dynamic struggles over how ‘we’ define black womanhood” (Zook, 1999, p. 57). In addition, *Girlfriends* refuses the monolithic definition of a woman’s experience and desire for sex. These conversations in the context of interactions among the women open the discussion about Black women and their sexuality as an expression of power and authority.

The sexuality of women of color is marked on their bodies as dominant narratives of race. The identity of Black women lends itself to a particular economy of American culture that stabilizes gender, class, and racial boundaries. With regard to Black sexuality, many Black women have not been given spaces to acknowledge any sexual/erotic urges, feelings or desires, without being confined to stereotypes that label them as the jezebel. Historical images of Black women within popular culture has regulated Black women’s sexuality, while suppressing different dimension of their inner being. In this way, Black women have become silenced. Collins (1990) points out, “Black women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are all colonized” (p. 123). Themes of ideal beauty, fertility and sexuality, maternity and motherhood, have all been informed by White ideology, and have shaped the identities Black women have marked themselves against.

All of the women on the show are heterosexual. However, many of the episodes have had homosexual and bisexual themes. For example, in "And Baby Makes Four" (season 4, episode 7), focuses on William's sister Linda and her pregnant girlfriend Kira. William’s lesbian sister has asked him to donate his sperm to her partner and he feels

pressured to sign papers to lose all of his parental rights. This episode is one of the few times the show outwardly handled gay issues. The show handles the discussion of sexuality quite effectively by challenging stereotypes, especially when William insists his sister's lesbianism is a phase. This episode gave *Girlfriends* its one and only Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Award nomination in 2004 for Outstanding Individual Episode.

Many episodes play with the idea of Lynn being bisexual however, she is not. This speaks to her power and authority over her sexuality. Lynn expresses moments of sexual freedom, independence, and power. She often comments on her sexual adventures and urges the other girlfriends to do so as well. In "Fits & Starts" (season 1, episode 6), Lynn gets engaged to a woman who is a lesbian after stopping her from committing suicide. She soon discovers that her fiancée is extremely dysfunctional and demanding, and in a later episode, Lynn admits to not being a lesbian. The show's ability to explore these topics, especially through Lynn's character adds to the range of experiences that Black women go through sexually. Her character embodies notions of feminist articulations and refuses containment by men consequently disrupting patriarchy. There are many episodes that these women unequivocally talk about their displeasure and pleasure with their sexual partners, infidelity, Kama Sutra, and masturbation. It is within these moments on television that Black women are able to have private conversations out in the open. The voices of Black women become privileged in the articulation of these discourses that surround such television programming as *Girlfriends*.

In “Old Dog” (season 1, episode 15), Joan breaks her three-month rule with her then boyfriend Sean, and Maya seeks help in conceiving another child with Darnell. Joan’s three-month rule is that she will only have sex with a man if she is in a committed relationship for three months. Joan’s authority over her body is another example of how these women embrace their spirituality and power over their sexuality. The episode begins with Joan telling the other girlfriends that she has decided to wave her three-month rule and have sex with Sean. Initially, Joan is worrying about being good in bed because Sean was a sex addict, whom had slept with over 300 women. Lynn and Toni try to give Joan confidence by going over a Kama Sutra book – owned by Lynn. However, as the show goes on and Joan has had sex with Sean, she sits down with the girls to tell them about the experience:

Joan: He was terrible!

Toni: What was the problem? No foreplay?

Joan: No fore, no after, and no during. There was no play! He just had one speed. Bam, bam, bam!

May: Wait a minute and it was over just like that?

Joann: Oh no no, he could bam all night long. You know, I mean, sometimes a girl wants a little less bam and a little more...

Lynn: Wam.

All together: Yea!

Joan: OK, ladies, I was gonna say a little more finesse.

The women then go on to suggest that because Sean has not been with a woman in over two years – rehabilitation – that maybe he is “rusty.” Joan thinks that they were both nervous and tells the girlfriends that he will probably be better next time, however:

Joan: He was worse!

Mya: Wait, how can that be? I thought he was supposed to be the king of sex.

Joan: Well obviously he doesn’t care very much about his subjects.

The dialogue continues:

Toni: Joan, didn't Sean tell you this was the first time he had sexual feelings tied to his emotions?

Joan: Yea, so.

Toni: Soo, he's really never made love before.

Joan: Oh my God. I'm dating a sex addict slash make love virgin. So how do I deflower him?

Lynn: O well, that's the fun part. You get to teach him.

Toni: Oh oh. Men love to be taught, especially if you reward them after every little trick.

Lynn: And if he doesn't get it right the first time. Just rub his nose in it.

The dialogue continues:

Toni: Oh, for me good sex is all about the kissing. And I mean kissing the whole time. Start to finish. Top to bottom.

Mya: Well, I like to hear my name whispered softly. Maya...Maya.

In the end, the girlfriends convince Joan that she needs to tell and show Sean what she likes in order to have good sex, and they both succeed. This exchange is significant because explores sexuality – a topic rarely explored by Black women on television.

Within these personal and private conversations, Black women are given the dialogue to talk about these concerns within their lives and are given a space upon which to reflect their inner thoughts. Many episodes within the series deal with these kinds of issues and give Black women the capacity to have sexual liberation. We have seen these themes explored by White men and women, such as in *Sex in the City*. However, by positioning Black women within the subject position acknowledges their personal feelings and opinions.

A number of the first episodes portray the women as hopelessly obsessed with men. While such characters as Joan may “evoke stereotypes of Black women (and

women in general) who need a man, any man, to complete themselves,” I think it says something that these women are able to talk about sex explicitly without having to feel ashamed (Smith, 2002, p. 52). It is also within each character that audiences are given the ability to explore the nuances of sexuality and freedom. And it is within these spaces that Black women are privileged as an audience.

Losses

There have been a few drawbacks in *Girlfriends*. As mentioned earlier, as the series did go on it became framed within the institutional hierarchies of White, middle class, heterosexual entities of privilege and power. The women began to become wealthier and the themes of the show moved away from the more critical topics affecting Black women in general. Maya becomes a housewife after publishing her book “Oh, Hell Yes!,” Lynn becomes a musician, Joan quits her job at the firm to open a restaurant, and Toni opens her own real estate agency. Moreover, the women begin to purchase expensive items, such as \$1,200 purses, and Joan buys another home. Their actions mark the capitalist culture that we live in and urges consumer consumption based off the identity of being a rich woman who should and can do so. And it is not that these opportunities are not possible for Black women in the U.S. It is that these possibilities are rare for many Black women, and for these images to be made accurate there needs to be more dialogue that frames these success in regard to experiences of discrimination and hardships these women had to face as they became more successful.

When the show first began, I believe it was given the space to explore explicit issues. However, as the audience began to diversify, something the network probably

picked up on, the show became more tamed and the women became more universal. Even within these confines, *Girlfriends* continued to explore issues that all women, particularly Black women faced. Additionally, I think the show had the space to deal with other pressing issues that homosexual couples must face yet, these themes did appear in the show.

I am not arguing that the television show *Girlfriends* was the best show for Black women. I posit that *Girlfriends* effectively represented a variety of images that reflected the lived experiences of many Black women, and that made it a great show. Moreover, in the context of the limited roles and images featuring Black women on television, *Girlfriends* goes beyond the confines of contemporary representations of Blackness, offering multilayered and intertextual discursive interrogations of Black womanhood. Furthermore, *Girlfriends* is not a “watered-down white version of *Sex in the City*,” or “glamorously escapist,” nor was it meant to be an “issue” show. Nevertheless, it provided a space that Black women could explore their issues and concerns. *Girlfriends* was a constructive space that many Black women had the opportunity to reflect within. The show became a medium in which Black women could negotiate the terms of their lives and view Black expressions.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The purpose of this project, as explained, is to gain insights on how Black women perceive themselves through television in relation to their subjectivity, and where they look to find social and political images of their reality through television programming. Using both an exploratory and qualitative approach, this study was conducted to provide a comprehensive understanding of representations of Black women and their use and reception of television. The exploratory nature of this study is to elicit and analyze in-depth interview data – through focus groups¹² – and survey responses from Black women who regularly view television. Due to logistical and budgetary restrictions a truly “representative” sample could not be developed. However, the process of using focus groups and surveys did yield useable data.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW DATA

“Focus groups...provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about particular issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspectives between groups of individuals” (Raibee, 2007, p. 656). Focus groups are generally composed of five features: (1) people who (2) possess certain characteristics and (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest (Krueger & Casey 2000). These features form to create focus group interviews that provide a range of opinions across groups of people. Bobo’s notion of interpretive communities was used to here to elicit a relationship amongst the cultural and lived

¹² IRB PROTOCOL #: 2010-02-0025

experiences of Black women. She argues that while there is “still a need for close readings of [cultural] texts...the responses of those who are present in the audience also need to be taken into consideration...[for] a more coherent blend of theoretical supposition with actual audience reactions” (Bobo, 1995, p. 23). The focus group questions and questionnaire acknowledged the perspectives of Black women and their relationship to cultural texts. The data acquired from these focus groups intertwines with the content analysis by highlighting the relationship between text and audience.

The Sampling Process

Informants were young, Black women, who were available and who were willing to be interviewed. The focus group provided for homogeneity with sufficient variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions. Since *Girlfriends* was “one of the highest-rated scripted shows on television among African American adults and women 18-34” and Black women 18-34 average a higher viewing percentage, it was important to capture the opinions of local Black women who represented that category. (Braxton, Los Angeles Times). This sample is in no way “representative” of all such persons who live in the United States. Nevertheless, these small groups of participants afforded the opportunities to share ideas amongst a diversity of perceptions, and the data yielded from the interviews conducted can be regarded as a starting point for probing the issues under this study. The conclusions offer initial exploratory findings that can be studied more fully as research on the issues develops further in the future.

Informant Group

The research group was not a randomly chosen sample of Black women. Black women within a graduate organization on a predominantly white campus participated in the study, however a more concentrated group of Black women was initially chosen for its ability to provide a range of informants. A local bible study group consisting of approximately 35 Black women was identified as a source for securing informants for this study. The small-specialized group, located in Texas, exists as a women's ministry of an all Black church. Moreover, because this group regularly meets every week for ministry, at a specific location, that site was chosen to perform the focus group interviews, before the women met for their meeting in the evening. The nature of this specialized group aligned with the purpose of this study – Black women between 18-34. This homogeneity was broadly and narrowly defined to include a range of young Black women with differing occupations and with varying interests. As the moderator, the commonality supported group sharing and participation. The investigator has been a member of the group for two years. Participation within the bible study group secured access to group members and encouraged the willingness of their participation. Building upon existing social and organizational relationships provided for easier recruitment.

The process of recruitment in identifying potential candidates included sending out emails to the existing group directory of the Black graduate organization and the women's ministry. The email invitation included a request for members to volunteer as study participants. Several days after the request was made, 15 women expressed interest, however, 11 informants agreed to serve as informants for the project. Focus groups

typically have five to ten people but can have as few as four. “Small groups of four or five participants afford more opportunity to share ideas...[and] have a distinct advantage of logistics” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 10). Thus, the small nature of this group provided intimacy and a space in which these women could feel safe about expressing their ideas with people like themselves. Going in to this project the aim was to have two focus groups with four to six people. The first group consisted of three women and the second group had six women. This small size allowed the opportunity for everyone to share their ideas, yet large enough to provide a diversity of opinions. Ultimately, nine women actually participated in the study. The focus groups were conducted in one day and the length of each interview varied between 35 to 80 minutes.

The group interviews were audio-recorded. Notes were taken during the interviews and a volunteer transcribed the audio recordings from the group interviews. Data from the group interviews offered answers to open-ended questions using informant’s own words.

Demographics

Each respondent who participated in the study identified themselves as a Black woman. The informants were asked to identify their nationality. Seven respondents reported that they were Black; one respondent reported to be Brazilian; and one informant reported to be Nigerian. The ages of the women in both groups ranged from early twenties to late forties. Seven respondents were between the ages of 18-34, while two were between 35-51. All of the respondents received a bachelors degree or higher. Sixty-seven (67%) percent of the respondents were students. All of the women were employed, including the students whom worked on campus. One respondent was an

educator; one was an administrator; and one was a data manager. For my analysis none of the women are identified by their given names.

Focus Group Questions

Open-ended questions allowed the informant to determine the direction of the responses within the focus group. These questions prompted discussions of mass media, television use and reception, society, and subjectivity. Informants were given the opportunity to share thoughts and observations about their receptions, potential influences and utility of television messages and representations. The questions started with a narrow focus and then broadened out to include a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between Black women and television. Additionally, the study began with four essential questions. Essential questions aim to stimulate thought, provoke inquiry, and to spark dialogue through open discussion and ideological connections. These questions guided the study and led to the construction of the seventeen open-ended questions asked within the focus group (See Appendix A). Close-ended questions were also used to obtain focused helpful information pertaining to the specific interests and demographics of the participants. Reported answers to open-ended questions were extrapolated from the focus group using informant's own words.

Responses to open-ended questions provide distinctive insight as qualitative data. This methodology assures the capture of unique perspectives on the topic at hand. Dominate themes, key words and thought patterns materialized to create a more enlightened understanding of Black women's reception of media depictions and portrayals on network television. Appropriately selected comments in informants own

words are presented with the findings of each focus group open-ended question. The following 17 questions were asked in the focus group under five. The purpose of these themes was to elicit focused responses. Moreover, it became important to understand how these responses accounted for their beliefs about mass media, television, the television show *Girlfriends*, subjectivity and society:

Mass Media

- 1.) Which forms of media do you prefer (print, TV, film, radio, Internet)?
- 2.) Which forms of media do you look to find images of yourself?
- 3.) What kinds of messages does popular media say about the Black female experience in the United States today?

Television

- 4.) What do you like about television?
- 5.) What were/are some of your favorite television shows?
 - a) What did you particularly like about that show?
- 6.) How do you think images of Black women on television has changed, if at all?
- 7.) Do you think television accurately represents different types of Black women?

Girlfriends

- 8.) Do/Did you watch the television show *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000)?
- 9.) What did and didn't you like about the show?
- 10.) Does the television show *Girlfriends* deal with the issues and concerns of Black women in the U.S.? If so, how?
- 11.) Since *Girlfriends* has been cancelled, what other shows have represented Black women in that way?

Subjectivity

12.) What does it mean to be a Black woman in the U.S.?

Society

14.) What does society say about Black women?

15.) What are some the issues and concerns facing Black women today in the US?

16.) How does contemporary television programming address those issues?

17.) What kinds of political or social issues would you like to see about Black women addressed through television programming?

TV Reception and Utility Questionnaire

The questionnaire was taken from a previous study done by Bettye Grable (2005) in which she conducted an exploratory qualitative analysis of African-American women's reception, influence and utility of television content. Preceding the focus group interviews, informants were asked to complete this exploratory questionnaire about their television viewing habits and utilization beliefs. The questions ensured the introduction of what the focus group was going to be about without revealing too much information. This allowed the informants to get comfortable with the topic and set the tone of the discussion. The questionnaire was handed out as informants entered the site. Respondents were asked to fill out the form as they settled in – light snacks were provided. The questionnaire instrument (See Appendix A) consisted of two sections that secured information about: 1) demographics of informants; 2) beliefs about television's utility; and 3) personal values associated with television. The first section of the questionnaire asked for demographic data information (See Appendix B) about the respondents that

included: 1) age; 2) racial identification; 3) occupation; and 4) level of education.

Section two of the questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions (See Appendix B) about the use of television and personal beliefs about the influence of television.

For section two, a Likert-type answer scale was provided for participants to respond to each belief statement on the questionnaire. The response choices were: 1) strongly agree; 2) agree; 3) slightly agree; 4) neither agree nor disagree; 5) disagree; 6) slightly disagree; and 7) strongly disagree.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The transcribed data contained rich and insightful information. A transcript-based analysis was used as the foundation for the study's examination, supplemented with field notes taken by the moderator. This kind of analysis combines an investigation of ideological constructions of cultural texts and the people who view these texts. The responses of those who represent the audience of these texts are taken into consideration to present a coherent blend of theoretical concepts with actual audience reactions. The process of linking the statements of the respondents to a broader framework of assessing Black women in the totality of their lives with regard to media, takes the form of in-depth qualitative analysis. "Qualitative analyses of individual receptions of TV depictions have the potential to create understanding about television's influence and utility. Human values and goals, pertaining to television viewing, must be assessed in determining the value of media messages" (Grable, 2005, p. 40). This qualitative method gives consideration to Black women by recognizing the perspectives through a sociocritical and sociopragmatic approach.

When reviewing the transcripts and notes from the focus group, various themes and patterns were made obvious. Highlighting major issues and identifying emerging themes was essential in gathering qualitative data from the transcripts. The first step in organizing the data for this analysis was to assemble the responses. Secondly, these responses had to be categorized for each research question according to the topic; and lastly, the data had to be coded. These codes were then used to label and categorize quotes, themes, and key points so that conclusions could be drawn from the data. Only the most highly associated responses from the focus groups were reported.

Chapter 5: Findings

The results obtained from the focus group interviews and the exploratory questionnaire provide a basis for an inductive analysis of the three types of data collected in the study: 1) demographics; 2) questionnaire responses; and 3) focus group interviews; These results reported here offer insights and findings for future studies about Black women and television, as an audience and television reception and utility.

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Discussions of the responses to these questions are organized under themes:

Mass Media

Outside of television, most of the women preferred radio and the Internet. The Internet provided a convenient source for a plethora of information, while listening to the radio provided a relaxing experience for the women. As for television, the respondents found the medium to be a medium for enjoyment, yet a troubling space for the depictions it presented of Black women.

Many of the women did not look to television to find representation of themselves:

“I don’t think that I do look to find images of myself because I would be sad if I did.”

“I mean I think that I’ve given up on TV. I think the images I’ve seen so far haven’t really been accurate.”

“I’ve learned not to look towards television as a reflection of my identity or to find images and representations that I feel could be representative. I think that I have been sorely disappointed even when those attempts

have been made to represent me.”

The responses revealed that many informants felt that television in particular did not depict an accurate portrayal of Black women. Thus, some of these women looked to other mediums for images that represented them. Responses revealed that for an accurate representation these sources had to be Black owned:

“Essence, Ebony, those magazines. They primarily have images of people who look like me.”

“I can use anytime type of medium like Internet or print but I think it’s more of the source like if I know if it’s Essence or Ebony or if it’s an African American... so I think the source is more important for me than whether or not it’s print or Internet.”

“...but it again still has to be a black show...marketed through a black media outlet.”

However, one informant expressed that images made by Black sources of the media can still regulate Black representations as stereotypical:

“The one thing that sticks out to me, always, when I have this conversation about the media is BET and I think from that perspective I can see where representation has become more negative.”

Overall, the women expressed anguish with the kind of messages mass media had to say about the Black female experience. An informant said that the messages that are disseminated about Black women say:

“That we’re stupid, that we’re hoes, just the exact opposite of what a lot of or what most of them are. It’s real negative.”

Moreover, the images that did appear were one-dimensional and not accurate. Some women even articulated that the images that are disseminated about Black women do not represent or signify blackness:

“I feel like the images or the experiences portrayed seems very monolithic in that this is the experience of all black women and if your experience is different depending on how you were raised, like if you were middle class, if you’re upper middle class, if you’re from a poor family - all of that stuff affects how you see yourself and the way that you carry yourself and the way you interact with people and I just think it’s all kind of one track and whatever’s popular than that’s what it is.”

“Beyonce is celebrated as a mainstream black woman, of beauty, all of these things, Halle Berry...you have these what have become icons but there’s always exceptionalism it seems like. So typical images, I think, are probably – I can’t think of any typical images really – I can just think of the celebrity culture images.”

“Claire Huxtable – now that I look back on it, I knew she was black but no where in the show really did it explicitly say she was because she was proud of being this black woman and attributing her success as a mother, as a lawyer, wife, community member.... it was more of the fact that she was just a mother, lawyer, everyday homemaker type of character as opposed to really making that connection that black women can do these or be positive role models.”

For these informants, the mass media appeared to be an un-trusted source for representations of Black women. Television stood out as the most powerful and harmful form of media that disseminates negative messages about Black women. Yet, despite that fact, many of the informants watched television for varying reasons.

Television

Most of the women liked to watch reality television and were big fans of *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC, 2005). The fact that the creator, head writer, and executive producer of the show was a Black woman seemed to encourage the women to watch:

“I watch Grey’s Anatomy because – not because –but I feel good about watching that because the writer is black.”

A significant level of awareness of televised content in depictions of Black women exists among these informants. “Statements by the women reflect a just under-the-surface belief that a conspiracy exists involving the white power structure to limit blacks’ upward mobility or acquisition of jobs and life goals” by presenting particular images of Black women on television (Grable, 2005, p. 70):

“To me, whatever makes white America feel comfortable with the way they see black women then that’s the images that’s continually saturated throughout the media.”

“I thought I heard something pretty interesting about Mo’Nique winning the Academy Award. When she won it, they were saying how it seems like black people... mentioned that the only time blacks are really being recognized for their acting is when they’re playing these certain type of roles like Denzel was acknowledged for Training Day and when they’re playing grimy people they’re not getting the awards when they’re just regular people.”

And even when they are “just regular people,” as stated in the case of this informant, another informant expressed how these images work within the confines of white ideology. An informant points to the character of Claire Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*:

“White media felt comfortable seeing her in that role and not expressing her blackness so that’s why the show itself as a whole was able to be so successful in the mainstream.”

Such images as those found on *The Cosby Show*, as expressed by some of the informants worked as depictions they could look up to. Television operated as a space in which these women could look to find encouraging reasons to make changes in their lives:

“Some things I watch it’s purely motivation. Motivation in the sense that I see something that somebody else has accomplished and I know I can accomplish it.”

“My mom said that my dad used to watch *The Cosby Show* for parenting advice.”

All of the informants have memories of *The Cosby Show* and shows during the 1990s that showcased Black talent. These images were highlighted as favorite television shows they could remember and enjoyed:

“But my ultimate show will always, always, always be *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*. Always. I watch marathons of both of them and I love them to this day. I still love those two shows.”

“I love to watch *The Cosby Show*.”

“I used to really love *Fresh Prince* and *Family Matters*.”

“And my guilty pleasure was *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.”

A Different World in particular, was a show that everyone agreed successfully showed the diversity of Black people:

“There were so many different varieties: you had Whitley who was this very Southern Belle kind of girl and then you had Kim who was about her business and was from the hood but she was like ‘I’m going to be a doctor and I work’ and then you had Jada Pinkett’s character, you had Freddie who was just kind of bohemian-esque type of girl and you had Denise who was kind of like ‘And I’m here’...there were just so many people there. There wasn’t just this one kind of and then here’s the character.”

“*A Different World* – the first time I saw that I was like...by far to me one of the most successful attempts at portraying blackness in America. It is so diverse, like you said it’s not one-sided, because *The Cosby Show* is very one-sided...so it was the first time I was able to see diversity and like OK this is exactly how it is – we come in all of these different types of packages.”

However, even with images found in these shows and the progression television representations, there was a consensus that the images of Black people had not changed.

Informant's commented on how audiences are still not able to find a range of images that captures the diversity of Black women:

“I think that from the time...first of all, we were maids and mammies for a long time and that's what we did and it was kind of the Amos and Andy schuck and jive and then we moved into the slick talk 'Watch yo back sucka woman and then we did move into the Claire Huxtable...But I think we've gone back to that again to that shuckin' and jivin' type of thing”

“You don't get to see all of the great dimensions that black women can be and that black women is.”

Many concerns were considered within the limited amount of images of Black women that are on television and how certain images become representations of all Black women. In the context of television shows, *Girlfriends* was referenced for its attempt to showcase a range of Black women.

Girlfriends

All of the informants watched or had heard of the show *Girlfriends*. They enjoyed viewing the show because they could find a variety of Black women within the show:

“I enjoyed *Girlfriends*. I thought it was hilarious. I could relate to a little piece of each character. It was just really entertaining.”

“I think that it attempted to showcase the different aspects of being a black woman and coming up... I think they attempted to show different sides.”

“With *Girlfriends*, I used to like watching the show and I watched it back in the day because I enjoyed it.”

While many of the respondents enjoyed the show and its representation of Black women, there seemed to be three prominent issues that came up with the show (1) class, (2) body

image, and (3) caricatures. Some of the respondents felt that the representations within the show became narrow. Being middle class became a prominent theme, the body images of the characters were unrealistic in terms of most Black women, and the characters could be seen as age-old stereotypes:

“Everybody was overly beautiful, it was just too much emphasis for me on material things, aesthetics...it was kind of too much of that for me.”

“If I don’t see anybody in the show or in the movies that don’t got some meat on them, then it’s not real to me.”

“You don’t have to be the loud, plus-size ‘I’m large and in charge and y’all better like me.’ But they were all literally no bigger than a size four. Every single one of them.”

“I think it dealt with middle class black women issues... I just felt if we are talking about black middle-class women in America then it’s more appealing but not true of a whole lot of other folks.”

“I would argue that there’s some slicing (depictions) of jezebel, mammy, welfare queen, sapphire...”

Referring to the character Lynn: “She was such the typical, tragic mulatto.”

Even though there seemed to be a consensus among the women, *Girlfriends* was still recognized for showcasing the issues of Black women, and there were no shows that the women considered that represented Black women within that light since *Girlfriends* had been cancelled. In this regard, the concerns that were mentioned spoke to what it meant to be a Black woman in the U.S.

Subjectivity

Gaining an understanding of the way these women understood their presence to mean within society was vital to discussing Black women and television. Most of the

informants felt as though there was no way to define being a Black women within the U.S., but the perceptions of Black women relegated them to those who were unwanted.

These notions made it hard to be a Black woman:

“I think it’s a very, very unique experience... I feel like it’s a very unique experience and I feel like other people, other races just don’t get it and they never will.”

“I don’t think it’s one that really has an answer just because everyone is going to have different experiences and I don’t think there’s any one way to define what it means to be black or to be a black woman or to be a black woman in America. So for me, I’m not to really answer that question.”

“The first thing that really came to mind was in our sorority how we talk about is the double handicap.”

“I think the issue that black women face is that we have to deal with our sexuality and our race all at the same time.”

“Well it seems like they’re not a lot expected of you still even though we have people who’ve accomplished great things...and if you do do something then it’s like a big surprise like you’re not supposed to be able to do that. It’s just not a lot expected.”

“I’m so disappointed in so many things in being a black woman right now. It’s almost like who wants us right now? So many of our top athletes, performers, the black men with money, besides my president, they’re not choosing us as their wives. It hurts me.”

The informant’s reflections were directly related to how they felt society saw themselves.

In this regard, the women could not come up with a way to describe Black women in general. Their responses and feelings overlapped with societal definitions of Black womanhood.

Society

The Informants expressed the need for diversity in the representations of Black women on television. Moreover, these representations must be reflective of the concerns and issues that Black women face within the context of a critical view of U.S. society:

“It would require a diversity of formats and a diversity of experiences actually being on television and easily accessible for social issues to be addressed, for the unique experience, for the unique experiences, the specific experiences of black women to be represented instead of a show trying to represent a chunk or trying to do so much that they’re not meeting anybody’s complexity wholly. Enough diversity, enough representation, more representation...such that black women could be seen as complex as we are.”

Black women have occupied many positions in and outside of their own home that presents a particular experience. One informant expressed how these roles come to define

Black women:

“I think we never get the credit for what we deserve...Please give me some recognition.”

“We have to think about the community to the point where we don’t think about ourselves. We have to be the mothers and the lawyers and the doctors and the sister and the one taking care of the grandparents and etcetera, etcetera. There’s either this need or dependency for us to be all these things to the point that we don’t get to define who we are. Our identity is defined by the roles that we play in other people’s lives.”

In order for the representations of Black women to be more accurate it seemed critical to these informants that these images be more diverse in their depictions of the lives of

Black women:

“It would require a diversity of formats and a diversity of experiences actually being on television and easily accessible for social issues to be addressed, for the unique experience, for the unique experiences, the specific experiences of black women to be represented instead of a show

trying to represent a chunk or trying to do so much that they're not meeting anybody's complexity wholly. Enough diversity, enough representation, more representation...such that black women could be seen as complex as we are."

"I would like to see more documentaries...so maybe not so much of a sitcom whereas the issues would be down-played by the comedy but as in something that presents an unbiased view and lets the viewer take everything in and form their own opinion."

"In a way, it's like 'Oh I wish, yeah that'd be awesome', if they just showed a show that showed what it's really like... I guess it'd just be nice to see them."

"I would just want to see more shows that had more black people so it's not that that's the black character, it would just be more normal or more accepted, not just such a surprise to see."

By and large, all the women agreed the positioning of Black women within society reflected the images that were reflected on television. The need for Black shows by these women seemed to be imperative in the concern for more television content that featured the lived experiences of Black women. Mass mediated depictions continuously fail in their quest to realistically represent Black people in typical life situations and Black women occupy an essential space within society that should be given that position to showcase.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The focus group interviews revealed several concerns with the depictions of Black women on television. Moreover, the insights of these women highlighted larger issues that affect Black woman within U.S. society. The informant's responses revealed a complex relationship amongst Black women and television. Most of the women preferred radio to television and when they did watch television, they watched it more for

relaxation purposes. The women revealed that the messages disseminated on television about Black women is negative and very similar to the images and representations that we have seen before. Such television shows as *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* and reality television shows were highlighted for their likability, yet the woman agreed that television did not accurately represent Black women. The informants recognized *Girlfriends* for making an effort in trying to depict a diversity of images about Black women, but it fell short on the issues of class, themes of materialism, and the issue of always wanting a man. The women revealed that there are issues that Black women face amongst themselves and that the things Black women go through are very specific and it is about being strong. However, society says very negative things about Black women. Even within a positive light, mass media seems to revert back to negativity. The women voiced how they would like to see shows that portray Black women and all of the issues that they face but also reveals a larger context of their position within society and the world in which they live in – all of which television rarely depicts.

Their discussion offered evidence of complex issues in the television programming and reception in the lives of Black female viewers in hope of seeing people like themselves

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

As stated previously, this study sought to examine Black female perspectives on television content receptions and use. An exploratory questionnaire about television viewing habits and utilization beliefs was administered to gather informant's attitudes. Informants responded to the statements based on a 7-point Likert-type response scale:

strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The results were closely related to a similar study: Grable, Bettye A. (2005). African-American women's reception, influence and utility of television content: An exploratory qualitative analysis. Table 1 represents insights on the informants' utility of television.

Twenty-two (22%) percent of informants agreed that they compared themselves to people on television, while one-third (33%) disagreed. Over half (56%) of the informants slightly agreed that television slightly improves their lives. Thirty-three (33%) percent of the respondents slightly agreed and disagreed that the people they saw on television have lives they would like to have. Thirty-three (33%) percent of the respondents slightly agreed that they would like to live the life like the people they saw on television, while twenty-two (22%) percent disagreed. However, one-third (33%) of the respondents disagreed that they watched television to get advice about how to live their life. Thirty-three (33%) percent of informants agreed and slightly agreed that they felt happy when they watched television. Forty-four (44%) percent of the respondents slightly agreed that watching television makes them feel satisfied about their lives. Twenty-two (22%) percent agreed and slightly agreed that they watched people on television because they were bored. The majority (60%) of the respondents agreed that they watched television to be entertained. Thirty-three (33%) percent of informants agreed that they watched television in hope of seeing people like themselves.

Summary of Findings

Findings from the questionnaire combined with previous results of the focus group interviews suggest significant relationships of belief statements pertaining to the utilization of television. The relationships revealed that these women use television beyond entertainment purposes. They are using television to: 1) improve their current lives; 2) feel satisfied about their lives; and 3) to be entertained. These findings are significant in that they indicate the importance of the images and messages disseminated on television for Black women. Grable (2005) notes that “[t]he viewing unwittingly serves as a way to improve, mimic or alter their lives based on the transcripts offered by television” (p. 82). In this regard, respondents whom indicated they watch television in hope of seeing people like themselves gives credence to this study’s argument in the importance of Black women seeing themselves on television in myriad of experiences. The indications are that television plays many roles in the lives of these Black women.

The results offered further evidence of complex relationships with television programming and reception in the lives of Black female viewers.

Table 1: Survey Questions

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I compare my life to people I see on television	0%	22%	11%	22%	11%	33%	0%
2. I feel television helps me improve my life	0%	0%	56%	22%	0%	11%	0%
3. People I see on television portray lifestyles I would like to have	0%	22%	33%	0%	0%	33%	0%
4. I want to live my life like people I see on television	0%	11%	33%	11%	11%	22%	11%
5. I watch television to get advice about how to live my life	0%	0%	0%	22%	22%	33%	22%
6. I feel happy when I watch television	0%	33%	33%	33%	0%	0%	0%
7. Watching television makes me feel satisfied about my life	0%	0%	44%	44%	0%	0%	11%
8. I watch people on television because I am bored	11%	22%	22%	11%	11%	22%	11%
9. I watch television to be entertained	11%	60%	22%	0%	0%	0%	0%
10. I watch television in hope of seeing people like myself.	0%	33%	11%	11%	22%	22%	0%

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1. How do Black women feel about the dominant messages disseminated through television programming about the Black female experience?

As the aforementioned comments reveal, Black women feel as though the messages disseminated about the Black female experience is inaccurate and negative. The informants recognized the intersection of white ideology with images of Black women as a means to keep particular power structures in place that allowed White society to feel more comfortable. These messages played a role in how Black women perceived themselves and the experiences they acquired within the U.S. Other mediums such as

print and radio that are owned and operated by Black people were revealed as outlets that Black women could look to beyond television to find more accurate portrayals.

RQ2. Where do black women look to find images of themselves within television?

Black women did not look to find images of themselves within television. The informants were concerned with finding a variety of women that they could each find within themselves. However, current television programming did not serve as an outlet in which this occurred. Black women relied on other (White) programming as a means for enjoyment and satisfaction that they could relate to outside of the identity of race.

Although Black characters within the television shows they viewed might have had limited roles or were not present, these specific television shows served the interests of these Black women.

RQ3. Are there considerable similarities between the mediated identity of Black women and the shifting and complex reality of Black women, as perceived by Black women?

Since there is a lack of representations of Black women in television and many shows featuring Black women are no longer featured, there are very few depictions that reflect the shifting and complex reality of Black women. Moreover, the historical review of representations of Black women has revealed that there have been very few images that reflect the reality of Black women because there are not a lot of images that show a variety of experiences. In order for Black women to perceive their reality on television, there needs to be more complex dimensions of the lived experiences of Black women to get a holistic view.

RQ4. Have these messages made a significant impression on Black female subjectivity?

The representations of Black women in mass media have had a significant impression on the subjectivity of Black women. It has shaped the way they think about their position in society and the ways in which they feel about themselves. Concerns with the younger generation of Black females was recognized for being the most impressionable by these images that continue to dominate popular culture and define Black womanhood and identity. Informants revealed a need for more images that represent the different experiences and subjectivities of Black women.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

There are several factors that contribute to the disenfranchisement of Black women in social, political, economic, legal and educational institutions globally. Less attention has been given to the cultural imagery, and more specifically images on television, that continues to propagate popular culture and contributes to the disenfranchisement of Black women (Jewell, 1993). Mass media have been used as a tool to espouse particular messages that ensure White privilege and power through the perpetuation of various systems of “isms.” “The mass media play an important role in maintaining a social hierarchy of discrimination as theory that are the chief vehicles by which ideology is transmitted through information and imagery” (Jewell, 1993, p. ix). Moreover, these representations help to perpetuate policies, prejudices, and perceptions that continue White hegemony based on racist ideologies; all the while Black women continue to remain on the periphery of mainstream society and struggle against race, sex, and class inequality in their daily struggles.

Investigating this phenomenon and the responses of Black women against it became the focus of this research. Examining how Black women make meaning of their representations is vital in the efforts against oppression. The study was especially important because I examined how the images of Black women are contradictory to the depressed socioeconomic status of Black women, how *Girlfriends* moves beyond these images by expressing moments of the lived experience of Black women for reflection,

and how Black women recognize their position within the oppressive institutional forces of the U.S. by negotiating their representations.

Jewell (1993) states, “[i]n order to challenge the myths and stereotypes inherent in traditional cultural images of African American women, the inconsistencies and contradictions in the institutional treatment of African American women must be exposed” (p. 12). This study took that charge by suggesting that (Black) media interests must employ the same tool that is used to disseminate these messages – television – to construct images that speak to the perspectives and experiences of Black women. Television constitutes a “real” view of the world for many Americans. The images that are seen of Black women then, represent a reality that is viewed and believed as “true to life” depictions that may be contradictory in nature to the lived experiences of the people it depicts. As a result, public knowledge and awareness of the issues and concerns facing particular communities remain inaccurate and ignorant. This is especially troublesome for Black communities. With our 2008 first Black President, Barack Obama, these particular moments become important in considering the cultural imagery that becomes popular discourse versus the status of Black communities. As a country and community, we often get blinded by the excitement of momentous achievements while failing to look back on the work we still have to achieve. These moments become important in recognizing the depressed situations for many communities despite the successes. Allowing these communities to speak recognizes their social positioning.

One of the most rewarding and fulfilling moments of this study was being able to give the women whom were interviewed a moment to speak. Black women are often

silenced to speak about the hard and painful experiences that they have had to endure. Having had this study, I was able to give Black women a safe space to talk within other Black women about their feelings and perspectives. Toni Morrison expresses similar thoughts for this abiding concern. In the opening line of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison begins her book by stating, “[q]uiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941” (p. 5). This line is meant to convey the demise, Pecola, the main character has had to endure – why the marigolds did not bloom that fall. Morrison explains, “quiet as it’s kept,” to mean:

[T]o black women conversing with one another; telling a story, an anecdote, gossip about some one or event within the circle, the family, the neighborhood. The words are conspiratorial...It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. The conspiracy is both held and withheld, exposed and sustained (Morrison, 1970, p.5).

Morrison’s use of this literary device recognizes the stories and secrets Black women are able to converse about within their personal circles. While this study may not have been centered on a more critical topic pertinent to specific painful experiences for Black women, providing the women with a space to release and reflect on their identity and television was illuminating. The group interviews served as a way to connect the reader and the text, individuals and ideology and the women found that fulfilling. After asking the women if there was anything they wanted to add to the discussion, one woman said:

“if I can see...an hourly...kind of like how they had Meet the Press, an hourly once a week thing for you to just [talk to] random sisters...and come in and talk about things.”

The informant’s responses indicate the desire for women to be able to share their thoughts and perspectives on their everyday experiences. Reflecting and reclaiming

experiences helps to negate strategies that work to oppress these women. These moments are especially useful in television. The women's responses to the use of television are evidence of this notion.

Based on analyses of the responses to the interviews and surveys, along with the industrial overview, two extensive issues emerged throughout this study: 1) the lack of programs featuring Black women through a variety of expressions; and 2) the utilization of television in the everyday lives of Black women. Privileging Black women as interpretive communities grants these informants the ability to make meaning out of the cultural, which recognizes the ideological. These kinds of connections are a part of the negotiated reception of Black women. This study sought to provide further insight on this phenomenon and its impact on Black female communities. In regard to the limited subjectivities that audiences can view on television, this study suggests that there is not one Black experience or one positive Black female identity that should be depicted, but that the only universal positive Black female experience is one that encompasses the range of human and the complexity of Black women. Further research that investigates Black women as the cultural readers of mainstream popular discourse can offer more insightful information on the space in which Black women occupy amongst social and political societal structures that are portrayed on television.

Gray posits that scholars must theorize and understand the representations of Blackness beyond the screen and against other images to make sense of contemporary representations. If we take heed to what Gray has suggested, then we are forced to understand why the images on screen, popular belief – ideology, versus the lived

experiences of Black women, are critical to systematic and institutional forces placed against Black women. These kinds of research will be essential to the image and ideology that continues to depict and deprave Black women.

Appendices

Appendix A

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

(Black Female Subjectivity, Reception, Media and Society)

READ TO INTERVIEWEES:

My name is Dominique Harrison and I am Masters student within the Radio, Television, and Film program at the University of Texas – Austin. You're here today because I am conducting a study on Black women and their relationship with mass media. By responding to the questions in this study, you are consenting to your participation for my master's thesis project. All information I obtain will be kept confidential. Your name or any other identifying information will NOT be used in any documents, reports or books that may result from this collection of responses. You may refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. At any time during this interview, you may feel free to end your participation.

Survey – 5 min

Mass Media – 10 min

- 1.) Which forms of media do you prefer (print, TV, film, radio, Internet)?
- 2.) Which forms of media do you look to find images of yourself?
- 3.) What kinds of messages does popular media say about the Black female experience in the United States today?

Television – 15 min

- 4.) What do you like about television?
- 5.) What were/are some of your favorite television shows?
 - a) What did you particularly like about that show?
- 6.) How do you think images of Black women on television has changed, if at all?
- 7.) Do you think television accurately represents different types of Black women?

***Girlfriends* – 10 min**

- 8.) Do/Did you watch the television show *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000)?
- 9.) What did and didn't you like about the show?
- 10.) Does the television show *Girlfriends* deal with the issues and concerns of Black women in the U.S.? If so, how?
- 11.) Since *Girlfriends* has been cancelled, what other shows have represented Black women in that way?

Subjectivity – 5 min

- 12.) What does it mean to be a Black women in the U.S.?

Society – 20 min

- 14.) What does society say about Black women?
- 15.) What are some the issues and concerns facing Black women today in the US?
- 16.) How does contemporary television programming address those issues?
- 17.) What kinds of political or social issues would you like to see about Black women addressed through television programming?

Appendix B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Beliefs About the Utilization of Television¹³

For the following statements, please feel free to be open and honest. You may select one of the seven potential answers I have given you to respond to the statements. Please tell me the answer that best describes your feelings about each statement.

1. How old are you?

2. What is your nationality?

3. What is your occupation?

4. What is the highest degree you have earned?

¹³ Survey questions taken from:

Grable, Bettye A. (2005). African-American women's reception, influence and utility of television content: An exploratory qualitative analysis. Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, United States -- Louisiana. Retrieved February 2, 2010, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text. (Publication No. AAT 3184066).

5. I compare my life to people I see on television.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

5. I feel television helps me improve my life.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

6. People I see on television portray lifestyles I would like to have.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

7. I want to live my life like people I see on television.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

8. I watch television to get advice about how to live my life.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

9. I feel happy when I watch television.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

10. Watching television makes me feel satisfied about my life.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

11. I watch people on television because I am bored.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

12. I watch television to be entertained.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

13. I watch television in hope of seeing people like myself.

- Strongly Agree**
- Agree**
- Slightly Agree**
- Neither Agree nor Disagree**
- Slightly Disagree**
- Disagree**
- Strongly Disagree**

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Vita

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