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From the academy to the streets: Documenting the healing power of black feminist creative expression

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From the Academy to the Streets:
Documenting the Healing Power of Black Feminist Creative Expression

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

I explore through feminist content analysis how poetry, blogging, political narrative, and music are employed by Black women as a means of personal and political empowerment, healing, activism and feminist practice. I theorize the emergence of a new manifestation Black feminism represented in poetry, blogs, political narrative, and popular music—exploring its ties to the history of Black feminism. I seek to demonstrate how gender conscious Black women create poetry, blogs, political narratives, and music as the catalyst to spark anti-sexist activism in contemporary Black women who may or may not call themselves feminists.

Introduction

When we question the power structures that dictate our racial and gender identities, we are theorizing. When we seek to empower ourselves, heal ourselves and others in spite of our circumstances, we are activists and advocates. When we describe our struggles as Black women within the rhyme of poetry, upon a painter's canvas, through a photographer's lens and in the melody of song, we are artists and clever revolutionaries using our creative expression to subvert the power of our oppression. In this research, I examine how creative expression of poetry, political narrative, music, and most recently blogs, are used as a means of healing, empowerment, activism, and feminist practice in the lives of Black women. I define a new manifestation of Black feminism which uses music to bring Black feminist theory to a larger community extending beyond academia. I theorize that a group of new Black feminists, whom I have named Neo Soul Black feminist singers, utilize the tools afforded them by Black feminist scholars of previous generations to share with a new generation of Black women. I use the term "Neo Soul Black feminist singer" because within the naming of Neo Soul, as the name suggests Neo Soul Black feminist singers bring reverence to the Black Power and Feminist movements that bore Black feminist thought through consciousness raising techniques employed in their lyrics and the images they put forth of Black womanhood through CD covers and videos. Neo Soul Black feminist singers further the principles of Black feminism through their activism in empowerment and community work outside of their music. Their lyrics expand and transform Black feminist theory into action, taking theory from academia to the streets. In this research I define Black feminism and feminist

content analysis. I expound on the link between Black feminist theory to poetry, political narrative, and the music and activism of Neo Soul Black feminist artists. My analysis is based on the Black feminist theories supported by Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Margo Perkins. I explore the foundations for the emergence of a Black feminist continuum within the context of the poetry of Audre Lorde, and Nikki Giovanni.

In the latter stages of organizing this thesis, I began to recall the CD covers of all the Neo Soul Black feminist artists I reference and I experienced an epiphany. As I thought on all their CD covers, I noticed a pattern that brought together Black feminist theory and the embodiment of Black feminist thought by these Neo Soul Black feminists. This manifestation of Black Feminist thought is represented in the production of each artist's successive CD cover over time suggesting an evolving stage of Black womanhood consciousness in each artist. These women seize control of the gaze through the use of camera angles and control of who is looking at whom. With the progression of the first to most recent CD covers by Erykah Badu, India.Arie, Goapele, and Jill Scott, each woman's image changes from a partial facial, eye, and/or body exposure on her first CD cover toward a progression of an assertive gaze in her more recent CD covers. I will explore the implications of this representation more in chapter three.

Neo Soul Black feminist singers' quest for self-definition and self-valuation through activism are concepts bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins define in texts like *Black Looks*, *Yearning* and *Black Feminist Thought* respectively. Both hooks and Collins discuss issues of self-valuation and resistance to stereotypical images of Black womanhood which I argue are reflected in the music of Neo Soul Black feminists. It is

also at this nexus where a self-reflexive approach to my research in my quest for self-definition, healing, activism, and empowerment as a young Black feminist poet begins, and is represented through my own poetic expression. The principles I express through my poetry and community work align with the music of Neo Soul Black feminists and the theory of such Black feminist scholars as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde.

Black feminism, while it can be defined as standpoint theory, is not a monolithic theory. Standpoint theory is grounded in one's material reality and activity. Standpoint theory is also grounded in one's engagement in and questioning of one's position within society. The position of the standpoint theorist grants her a privileged perspective in theorizing because of her social standing. Standpoint theory then becomes useful for Black feminists because it grants Black women access to theorizing from their societal position tied to their race, gender, and class. Standpoint theory personalizes one's experiences as a place of inquiry and position of power in theorizing that one outside of this perspective is not privileged to see (Hartsock 218).

There are common elements that bind Black women's experiences in the United States with regard to racism, sexism, and classism. Gender, race, and class have been and continue to be oppressive forces in Black women's lives today. For example, during Civil Rights and the Black power movements, Black men marginalized Black women based on gender as first and second wave white feminist women marginalized Black women based on race. We as Black women may have reached the point of defining ourselves for ourselves, and have entered academia as professors and young scholars but as Black

feminism has grown, so too have the questions and theorizing about what it means to be Black women in America, as poor Black women, as Black lesbians, as Black feminists, womanists, as middle class Black women, and Black women of the cloth or atheists. At the core of Black feminism is self-definition, a connection to the community, a complex existence tied to race, class, and gender that causes Black women's experiences to remain distinctly different from the experiences of Black men in America and white women in America. The 2008 Presidential Primary Election process re-opened the discussion of theorizing Black feminism and defining allegiances either to race or gender in light of the political rivalry of Senators Hillary Clinton (a white woman) and Barack Obama (a Black man) forcing Black women to choose between race and gender identities couched in the "either/or" categories of "Black" and "woman." This is a conflict Black women in America have faced dating as far back as slavery and the woman's Suffragist movement. From this complex gender and racial problematic, Black feminist thought emerged and continues to flourish in the work of Neo Soul Black feminist singers, in the work of Black women bloggers, and on websites geared towards Black women. Black feminism counters the belief that "all the women are white and all the Blacks are men" (Hull).

What Is Black Feminist Theory?

Black feminist theory emerged as Black women became conscious of her position in a system of patriarchy because of her race, gender, class, and sexuality. Black feminist theory asserts the intersection of multiple systems of oppressions. Patricia Hill Collins offers a comparative definition of womanism and Black feminism in her 1997 piece, "What's In A Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond." "What's in A Name?"

is a chronological timeline of Black feminism as it has evolved from a monolithic theory to representing the multiplicity of Black women's experiences. Black feminism represents a reaction to Black male sexism, internalized racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Womanism, with its roots in Black Nationalism reflects an afro centric view through Black identity. Black feminism and womanism spring from a notion of plurality in Black women's standpoint and not simply a singular Black woman's standpoint. When I use the term Black feminism, I am using Collins' and the Combahee River Collective's definitions.

The Combahee River Collective offers an additional definition of Black feminism I use to define Black feminism and distinguish it from "white" feminism. In "A Black Feminist Statement" the Combahee River Collective discusses its struggles against white feminists' separatist gender ideas. The Combahee River Collective encourages solidarity with "progressive Black men." I am drawn to its definition of Black feminism in its call to collaboration amongst Black women and men. But the Collective also addresses the dilemma Black women face with Black sexism. While Black feminists struggle "together with Black men against racism" the Collective notes the catch 22 of this struggle as also a struggle "with Black men about sexism" (CRC 16). The Combahee River Collective expresses the urgency of Black women's freedom as linked to all systems of oppression when they state "if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression. Feminism is, nevertheless, very threatening to the majority of Black people because it calls into question some of the most basic assumptions about our existence,

i.e., that gender should be a determinant of power relationships” (CRC 18). Thus, Black women may practice Black feminism, but they may also be reluctant to align themselves with the label, “feminist”, because of their solidarity with Black men. This is important to recognize when considering the Neo Soul Black feminists I refer to in the context of contemporary popular culture and when assessing these artists within the frame of a hip-hop generation divided across gender lines.

To assess the evolution of Black feminism, one must first delve into the history of Black people in the United States, by returning to the stories of Black women during slavery. Slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (published in 1861) combined with contemporary texts like Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’nt I a Woman?* (published in 1985 and 1999) should be read concurrently to understand the birth and evolution of Black feminism, and the role of race and gender in Black women’s lives. An assessment and comparison must be made with historical texts to contemporary texts of poetry, popular culture and memoirs to understand the similarities of creative expression as legacies in healing, empowerment and activism in the lives of Black women in the United States.

My research represents a personal and literal quest into the roots of contemporary manifestations of Black feminist thought related to its relevancy, application, and transformational power connected to the use of creative expression by Black women. My research begins with an analysis of the poetry of Black feminist authors of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s which I offer as foundational in paving the way for contemporary Black female bloggers and Neo Soul singers. Specifically, I examine the

political narrative of poet, activist, and former Black Panther and member in the Black Liberation Army (BLA) Assata Shakur. Following my examination of her work, I focus on the contemporary relevancy and application of Black feminist thought in the music and community work of Erykah Badu, India.Arie, Jill Scott, and Goapele. I conclude with a look at internet uses of Black feminist thought through the use of blogging and websites by Black women directed towards Black women. As stated earlier, I include an analysis of my own creative expression as a Black feminist poet. My own work further illustrates the power, tradition and healing components of creative expression in the lives of Black women. Exploring the power of Black female creative expression, I seek to address the following questions --Who are the new agents of Black feminism? How has Black feminism moved out of academia and into popular culture to disperse its teachings/theories? How has poetry by Black women, autobiographical narrative expression, and popular music of a select group of R&B artists influenced today's generation of Black feminist activism? I ask how have poetry, political narrative, music, and the internet become the arena for Black feminism to thrive in the millennium?

June Jordan and bell hooks cite "love" as a source of healing and empowerment. hooks suggests that in order for healing to occur in the lives of Black women, there must be more literature "sharing theories, and strategies of decolonization that enable self-love" (2001: 92). I propose that Black women poets, autobiographers, and Neo Soul Black feminist singers promote healing and empowerment in their work. It creates the potential for collective activism in their audiences. These Black female artists promote consciousness-raising to resist negative stereotypes and encourage self love which I

suggest is the byproduct of healing. June Jordan, a self identified Black feminist, draws upon the need for self love in her statement, “I am a feminist, and what that means to me is much the same as the meaning of the fact that I am Black: it means that I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends on self-love and self-respect” (Whitehead 86). hooks also asserts that “an organized, mass-based, progressive, anti-racist political movement” is needed that makes our homes “sites of resistance, where we create the oppositional spaces where we can be self-loving” (2001: 92). I argue that Neo Soul Black feminists and Black women bloggers create this space of resistance in their lyrics, websites, community activism and community consciousness raising, and for Neo Soul Black feminist singers by the image of Black womanhood they project with their CD covers.

When I meditate on the meaning of the word “healing” I think of words and phrases like: “renew,” “regenerate,” and “to make whole what was once broken or unhealthy.” June Jordan and bell hooks (both women who are poets and essayists) place self-love at the heart of Black women healing themselves and others. I make the claim that it is through Black women’s use of creative expression they can heal, love, and empower themselves and ultimately do the same for those around them. This is a form of activism. When Black women come together to hear and comfort one another, they begin the healing process. Author Evelyn C. White calls Black women poets women who use their craft like a “soothing tonic” (White xv) when describing the poetry used in her collection of essays on Black women’s health.

Methodology

I use feminist content analysis as a methodology for critically analyzing the content of Black feminist poetry, Black female authors, and contemporary Neo Soul Black feminist singers. Feminist content analysis allows me to make a connection between Black feminist theory, early theorists, and contemporary artists. Feminist content analysis provides a tool to investigate Black women's culture, their healing, empowerment, and activism through creative expression. Feminist content analysis also allows me to dissect meaning within texts and products in order to understand how womanhood and race are viewed by Black women (Leavy 224). Through feminist content analysis, I locate acts of resistance employed by Black women within the creative expression of poetry, autobiographical political narrative, music lyrics and their representation on musical CDs. I focus on poetry about womanhood and violence towards women. The creative expression used by the Black women in my research focuses on consciousness raising for Black women, Black men, and society at large. The main focus of these authors, poets, bloggers and musicians is on the empowering and healing of Black women.

Black women have always questioned and continue to question the constructions of our identities, how our race and gender are sculpted, restricted, and misrepresented by American popular culture. When Sojourner Truth's questioned those who attended the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio with "ain't I a woman" she was questioning the contradiction of womanhood related to race. Her critique asks: who am I if I am not a woman? If she as a Black woman can bear children and white women can bear children,

what makes one better than the other? Her awareness of this contradiction has more depth of understanding of the hegemonic system dictating her racial and gender identity than white male oppressors during slavery and white female oppressors during the women's suffragist movement (Truth 36). Harriett Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* offers foundations for Black women theorizing their conditions in narrative form and establishing a tradition of using memoir as a source of empowerment which I explore in chapter two with Assata Shakur's autobiographical political narrative.

Roots of Black Feminist Theory

Black women have been defining ourselves for ourselves long before it was labeled Black feminist theory, as represented in the memoir of Harriet Jacobs and the question "ain't I a woman?" by Sojourner Truth. Black feminist scholars suggest that Maria Miller Stewart laid the foundation for a Black feminist intellectual and activist tradition (Guy-Sheftall). In "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall, Boston. September 21, 1832" Stewart makes an appeal to white women or "fairer sisters, whose hands are never soiled" and who have been "nursed in the lap of affluence and ease." In this article Stewart brings to light the intersection of race, class and gender as it relates to Black women in the United States which are foundational in Black feminist theory. She attacks the stereotype of Blacks as "lazy and idle" which the *Liberator* published. Stewart's article boldly questions publicly held opinions of Black slaves. Stewart articulates an understanding of the intersection of race, class and gender, calls for multiracial and mixed gender collaboration and activism, and lastly outlines how Black women's experiences in America have been vastly different from white women and Black men,

therefore, requiring a movement which addresses this complexity that both white women and Black men have historically tried to ignore or place on hold.

In understanding the historical context of this era, one must read it within the following context: womanhood was defined as purity and respectability. While Stewart is making a plea that Black women are of this same cloth as white women, she theorizes on racism, sexism, accessibility to education and poverty as hindrances to Black women's ability to obtain this praised "womanhood." She is asking the question of "ain't I a woman" before Sojourner Truth by raising questions of access and gender roles. Furthermore, Stewart gives insight into the "wretched and miserable" daughters of Africa as doomed to spend lives as those in a lesser class, what is one's motivation if there is nothing allowed or accessible for a Black person to aspire for? She is a self aware subject, challenging perspectives of women and Blacks as second class citizens who don't understand their plight. This theorizing on the intersectionality of race, class and gender mirror the critiques bell hooks makes in *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins argues against in *Black Feminist Thought* and when one analyzes the poetry and creative expression of poets Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, the memoir of Assata Shakur, the music of Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, Goapele, and India.Arie, one will see that these Black women continue to question white racism and Black sexism.

Black women are still theorizing the idea of a Black female self but have moved beyond academia into music, poetry, and onto the internet utilizing these platforms to promote activism, healing, and empowerment through self-definition. In this vain, there is significance in learning from one's "outsider" experience in order to define one's self

and find value in that self-definition as Patricia Hill Collins notes in her essay “Learning from the Outsider Within” and bell hooks notes in “Black Women Shaping Feminist Theory” and “Choosing the Margin as Space of Radical Openness.” These works lay the foundations for my exploration of the birth of the Neo Soul Black Feminist singer. She has her own style and defies stereotypes as well as responds to the misogyny of contemporary hip-hop lyrics and videos by certain male rappers. The music of this woman is personal and political, continuing the legacy of oral traditions and creative expression that continues to ask “ain’t I a woman” and questions common sexist misrepresentations of Black and womanhood. Sociologist Rana Emerson’s article “Where My Girls At?” and *Essence Magazine*’s “Take Back the Music” campaign address these issues. But before Erykah Badu and Jill Scott, there was Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and Assata Shakur. These poets paved the way for the Neo Soul Black feminists with their poetry and consciousness-raising literature and activism.

Chapter 1:
From Oppression to Expression:
Black Feminist Movements through Poetry

A crucial tool in questioning Black womanhood, Black female self-definition, and the art of bringing awareness to the issues facing Black women in the United States is represented through the feminist poetry of Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and Assata Shakur. Through poetry, these women theorize, empower, and heal themselves and communities. In this chapter I address the importance of poetry in the healing and empowerment of Black women. In what ways are Black women's lives transformed by Black feminist poetry? How and why Black women's poetry is so vital to the lives of Black women and Black feminism. Through personal account and analysis of the poetry of Audre Lorde and Nikki Giovanni, I explore these tools to create a bridge to Assata Shakur's political narrative which I establish as the ideological foundation of the Neo Soul Black Feminist artist.

“Poetry Is Not a Luxury”

In the essay “Poetry is Not A Luxury” Audre Lorde expresses the significance of poetry in the lives of the poet and her audience. Lorde argues that poetry unearths “unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling...for women...poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change” (Lorde 1984:37). Lorde explores this light towards change in her poem “Need: A Chorale for Black Women Voices” a poem for Patricia Cowan and Bobbie Jean Graham “and the hundreds of other

mangled Black Women whose nightmares inform these words” (Lorde 1992:199).

According to the April 11, 1978 *New York Times* article “Actress is Slain At Michigan Audition,” and April 12, 1978 *New York Times* article “Around the Nation: Playwright Held in Death Of Aspiring Actress, 20,” Patricia Cowan was a 20-year-old Black actress who was “bludgeoned to death” by playwright James Thomas with a sledgehammer in Detroit, MI. She was then left in an alley and set on fire as her young son (who survived) cried out for help. According to an article appearing in the February 15, 1986 *Boston Globe* “Jury Convicts Man of Killing Girlfriend,” Bobbie Jean Graham was a 34-year-old Black woman who was kicked to death by her boyfriend early May 1979 in Boston, MA.

In her poem Lorde, describes the horrific events of Patricia Cowan and Bobbie Jean Graham’s deaths in the voice of poet and the victims. Lorde takes on the positions of “witness” and “spokesperson” in this poem as a reaction to the domestic violence and disregard of Black women’s deaths (Georgoudaki 110). Lorde opens her poem in the voice of “Pat” (Patricia Cowan). By addressing the victim as “Pat” suggests familiarity with the victim, as if she were a friend or sister of the poet. Lorde recognizes Patricia as Pat to show a bond. As “Pat” she states “this woman is Black/so her blood is shed into silence...like the droppings of birds to be washed away with silence and rain” (Lorde 1992: 199), I believe this is to set the tone of the entire poem and illuminates the need for poetry as activism to shatter the silence in the violence against and erasure of Black women at the hand of Black male aggression.

Lorde addresses interlocking oppressions of racism and sexism with her questioning of Black men and white men. When she asks “do you need me imprinting

upon our children/the destruction our enemies print upon you...destroying us both” (Lorde 1992: 204). I believe the “us” she is referring to are Black men who transfer their anger with racism upon Black women while the “enemies” are any agents of racist, patriarchal domination against Black women. Lorde continues to play the role of advocate when she asks the reader “how much of this pain can I use?” She is aware of the necessity of using these women’s deaths in order to give voice to the voiceless Black women whose deaths would be in vain like the “droppings of birds,” if she, as poet/woman/advocate/witness, does not address this. While the poem is addressed to Bobbie and Patricia, it is also for the nameless Black women whose names do not appear in the news when they are killed. Lorde is critiquing the sexism and racism that has fostered these crimes against Black women. She continues to challenge witnesses who deny the existence of violence against Black women when she writes:

I do not even know all their names.
 Black women’s deaths are not noteworthy
 Not threatening or glamorous enough
 To decorate the evening news
 Not important enough to be fossilized
 Between right-to-life pickets
 And a march against gun-control
 We are refuse in this city’s war
 With no medals no exchange of prisoners
 No packages from home no time off
 For good behavior
 No victories. No victors. (Lorde 1992: 202)

Audre Lorde’s poem represents the “piercing of invisibility of Black women’s objectification” as described by Patricia Hill Collins when she discusses Black women as the mouthpiece for other Black women (2000:104). Collins continues, “one can write for a nameless, faceless audience but the act of using one’s voice requires a listener and thus

establishes a connection (2000:104).” When Lorde includes herself in this poem as “poet” she establishes a connection and advances the notion of connection between Black feminist author and Black women. Lorde is suggesting that a crime against one is a crime against all Black women because what has happened in Detroit has happened in Boston and is likely happening in other parts of the country but goes unnoticed because it is instigated on an “invisible” Black female body, a body in which Lorde has reclaimed and given voice to in this poem.

Lorde advances her point of a collective Black female in a stanza spoken from the perspective of both Bobbie and Pat when she states, “and I die in alleys of Boston/my stomach stomped through the small of my back/my hammered-in skull in Detroit” (Lorde 1992:204). Lorde is demonstrating that the locations are different. The violent crime is perpetrated by different men. However, these women are one in the same: Bobbie is Pat, Pat is Bobbie and both Pat and Bobbie are all Black women, which is expressed in the line “a ceremonial knife through my grandmother’s used vagina” once again Lorde is establishing a connection between all Black women past and present within this poem. She ends this poem with a line referenced from Barbara Demming--“we cannot live without our lives.” The line is first spoken by the poet and once again closes by “all.” I believe Lorde writes as Poet then as the collective to reflect the internalization of living with our lives: we must be alive to live our lives both figuratively and literally. Lorde’s poem demonstrates the foundation that allows for the emergence of the Neo Soul Black feminist I discuss in chapter three. While Lorde’s poem offers social commentary on the violent deaths of Black women, Nikki Giovanni’s “Woman Poem” offers insight into Black womanhood and the plight of American Black women.

“Woman Poem”: Reflecting On Black Women Past and Present

Nikki Giovanni’s “Woman Poem” theorizes the complexity of Black womanhood, showcases reversed gender roles and looks at the relationship Black women have with each other, Black men and others outside of the Black community. Giovanni’s poem also looks at the emotional scars of alienation that may result from these relationships. Giovanni’s “Woman Poem,” is consistently written in the first person of a Black woman’s voice. The poem opens with a woman whose whole life is “tied to unhappiness” and ends in affirming that unhappiness is the only “real thing” she knows. As the poem continues to unfold, Giovanni reverses the gender roles of men working outside the house and women working inside the home as domestic, with her line “father cooking breakfast...or having no food...proving his incompetence” (Giovanni 55). It is worth explicating the “realness” of “unhappiness” as it relates to Black women, as it may be a direct response to the images of Jezebel and Mammy she addresses in the lines:

it’s a sex object if you’re pretty
and no love
or love and no sex if you’re fat
get back fat Black woman be a mother
grandmother strong thing but not woman (Giovanni 55)

To express “unhappiness” with these images of Blackness is to express an acute awareness of the limitations of these images. Giovanni expresses “unhappiness” in being a pretty sex object (the Jezebel), of being the fat Black mother and grandmother known for her strength and girth (Mammy). There is no reconciling these images of Black womanhood based on Giovanni’s use of the noun “it” denoting that these Black women are not really women but commodities used for their sexuality and strength, as

represented in the line “but not woman.” These Black women are deconstructed into multidimensional “women” versus a singular “woman.”

Giovanni uses “Woman Poem” to critically analyze Black womanhood. Beyond analyzing Black womanhood, Giovanni later questions the relationship Black women have with each other. While Lorde suggests oneness in her poem for Patricia Cowan, Bobbie Jean Graham and others, Giovanni is critical of Black women when she states, “Smiles are only something we give/to properly dressed social workers/not each other” which can connote an internalized racism Black women harbor as a result of being the virgin/whore or Mammy/Jezebel *thing* she addresses the stanza prior. Giovanni then addresses class, and relationships of Black women to Black men in the lines: “it’s intellectual devastation/of everybody/to avoid emotional commitment/ ‘yeah honey I would’ve married/him but he didn’t have no degree’” (Giovanni 56). When Giovanni addresses the intellectual divide that creates a barrier between Black women and men, she could be addressing the dilemma facing Black women in which Harlem Renaissance writer Elise Johnson McDougald addresses in the 1920 essay “Negro Womanhood” and what Julianne Malveaux addresses in 2008 in “Shouldering the Third Burden.” What I am suggesting is that Giovanni’s poem can work as a bridge to the continuum of Black women theorizing their struggles at the intersection of gender, race, and class.

Elise Johnson McDougald essay “Negro Womanhood” addresses the interlocking of Black women’s and Black men’s oppression. McDougald’s essay also notes that as Black women were advancing academically in the 1920s, Black men were unable to attain high paying jobs or because of Black men’s suppressed resentment towards white racism, Black men used their homes as a space of “overbearing domination” towards

Black women (McDougald ed. Lewis, 70 & 73). In 2008, *The State of Black America's* theme was on Black women. *The State of Black America* is an annual report prepared by the National Urban League which addresses pivotal matters concerning Black Americans that current year. In 2008, Julianne Malveaux's essay "Shouldering the Third Burden: The Status of African American" represents a major example of Black feminism's relevancy and Black women's continued dilemmas in 2008 which bind theirs and Black men's struggles together. Malveaux suggests that while Black women are now experiencing more success economically and academically, Black women are shouldering a third burden of economic responsibility as more and more Black men are incarcerated, have generally lower education levels and economic accessibility. The same issues of the 1920s and 1960s still plague Black women in 2008, several decades after legal desegregation and elevated opportunities for Black women. Malveaux suggests what womanist and Black feminists have suggested as key elements to their arguments: "The fate of African American women is complexly intertwined with that of their male counterparts, and injustices plaguing the one (gender) cannot be remedied without addressing the problems of the other (gender)." Malveaux's conclusion suggests why Black feminism is still relevant and important. McDougald and Malveaux explore the interlocking issues of race, class and gender that Black women in America continue to experience today binding them to Black men (Malveaux 3). It is this issue which Giovanni covers poetically and critically in her "Woman Poem" to offer her readers insight into the inner feelings of Black women.

Writing to Heal: When My “Personal Gets Political”

Poets Audre Lorde, and Nikki Giovanni offer examples of Black women using poetry as a place of and vehicle towards healing, empowerment, and activism. Their words display a communal voice. The authors are angry, but the women are affirmative in their anger and words encouraging proactive actions from their readers. The concept of poetry as communal, angry, and affirmative is suggested by Kim Whitehead in *The Feminist Poetry Movement* when describing the poetry of June Jordan, but I suggest this concept can be expanded to include a range of Black feminist poets like the ones I reference in this chapter. With each poem I have referenced, there is the resistance to injustice and/or a cause for self evaluation that drives the poem.

I begin this section with autobiographical reflection. I came to the idea of “writing to heal” through my experience with the suicide of a childhood friend. From 1999 onward I used poetry to navigate through my emotions of grief, guilt, and anger resulting from her death. As I continued to write and work through my emotions, I began noticing the ways in which other Black women were using their creative expression in similar ways. I began to notice a recurring theme or set of themes being echoed in the poetry, music, and autobiographies by Black women whose works mirrored my own feelings and experiences. Before understanding Black feminist theory of self-healing and similarities in Black women’s creative expression and struggles, like bell hooks, I first came to theory and Black feminism because I was hurting.

On New Year's Day 1999, a woman named Timeeka committed suicide by jumping off of a 24 story building directly across the street from my window. She was 20- years-old and had been my best friend since we were three years old. Perhaps she was attempting to fly because words could no longer lift her, or maybe she wanted to send all her friends and family a final message to last in our minds forever. I will never know her motives, yet the pain and guilt I feel because of her death has instilled in me an undying desire to prevent another death like Timeeka's.

The night before Timeeka's death she knocked on my door, perhaps to say goodbye or to ask for help. I will never know because I did not answer. Why? While we had grown up together and were babysat by my grandmother and her mother, our lives took different paths as we matured. The more I became focused on my education and the arts, the more consumed she became by drugs to the point that the woman who knocked on my door that night was no longer the woman I knew. Her behavior was erratic at times. Once a plump little girl, the woman on the other side of my door was a dangerously thin woman as a result of drug addiction. She was a ghost of who she once was. I know now her memory and my choice of not opening the door haunts me; it drives me and reminds me of my inability to help, intervene, or acknowledge her circumstance. Today, I am not that self-centered and fearful young girl I once was. Instead, I am a confident, compassionate and creatively expressive woman who desires to improve the lives of young girls like Timeeka was who feel they have no voice. Prior to coming to this realization, I had to confront my feelings and the larger implications of Timeeka's death that went beyond one young woman's suicide and another young woman's inability

to prevent it. Timeeka's story is my story of taking the personal and making it political, fueling my activism as a Black feminist committed to female.

Timeeka's death moved me to reflect on my selfishness, elitism, and fears. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins asserts the importance of self-definition that advocates action, whether it is an internal transformation to transcend unchangeable circumstances or the type of transformation that goes from silence to words to actions changing external circumstances (2000: 112-113). I have used poetry to heal from Timeeka's death. By writing poetry and journaling, I came to understand my role in improving my community as a burgeoning young Black feminist woman. I wrote poetry and journaled as a cathartic means of understanding Timeeka's death. Through my journey toward self-healing, I learned that Timeeka was more than my friend. Timeeka represented many Black women growing up under the thumb of patriarchy, classism, and racism. Timeeka reminds me of the women in Audre Lorde's "Need: A Chorale for Black Women Voices." I am Timeeka's poet, advocate, and the pupil of her lesson in community awareness. I am no longer self-centered but community-centered. Through her death, I have been made more aware of the ills of my childhood community and other urban places like it self-evaluating my role in the Black community just as Giovanni does in "Woman Poem." Because of Timeeka's suicide, I was moved to re-evaluate my purpose in the community. As a result, I became a mentor in a program known as Community Bridges Dream Catchers of Maryland and a co facilitator of a Girls Circle Group through the Ophelia Project of Tampa, Florida. Both volunteer programs provide young girls a safe environment to express themselves through art, poetry, and role

playing, while helping them build healthy self-esteem and leadership skills. Through my work with the Ophelia Project, I have had the opportunity to work with “at risk” young girls who, unlike Timeeka, have a forum to express themselves creatively and not destructively. I have encouraged the young women of the group to journal and write poetry which has allowed them to see the power they possess within themselves. The girls I have worked with are more self-confident and self-aware of who they are as young Black women. I am doing for them what I did not know how to do for Timeeka. I am helping them; I am encouraging them; and I am empowering them through exercises in creative expression. After Timeeka’s death, I struggled with how to interpret all the feelings. When I tried to journal, I would be overcome with emotions however writing poetry opened me up to understanding my feelings of anger and sadness. Below is the first piece I wrote after Timeeka’s death.

Casualties

A Poem for Timeeka Stokes 1978-1999

Currency leads to
casualties,
this reality is insanity.

Divinity in society?
The existence of Thee
is a mystery.

Poverty is a normality
to majorities in the country
and minorities in the cities.

Racists/sexists/homophobes
plague the airways
and tap my phone.

Conspiracy after conspiracy

yet the government says,
“trust me.”

There’s misery in my community,
casualties of poverty,
of piety,
of apathy,
casualties of reality, and
the reality is insanity.
The **reality** is insanity?

THE REALITY IS INSANITY!

God *saved* me.
God *saves* me.

God, *save* me.

Audre Lorde calls poetry a “ritual...it has always served me to underline for myself and for other people the sources of my power” (Lorde & Hall 146). When I wrote “Casualties,” the poem was my ritual in understanding the circumstances leading to my friend’s death. It helped me comprehend my feelings of powerlessness and guilt resulting from her death. In this poem I am angry, confused, and assertive. In the poem, I express the conditions which create the despair that caused a young Black woman, Timeeka Stokes to end her life. The repetition of “casualties” reflects the idea of her death as a result of “something” outside herself. She was a victim of “piety,” “apathy,” and an insane “reality.” This poem, while it was inspired by her death, also illuminates the patterns of racism, sexism and classism that affects “majorities in the country” (poor white people in rural neighborhoods), and “minorities in the cities” (poor Blacks and Latinos in urban neighborhoods). It questions classism in the statement “currency leads to casualties” and attacks classism, racism, sexism, and religious hypocrisy for the death of

Timeeka Stokes. I question the media and its representations of Black women and homosexuals with the line that begins “racists/sexist/ homophobes plague the airways...” I do not believe this is normal, when I state “reality is insanity.”

In spite of my inability to fully comprehend my friend’s death, I am still affirmed of my relationship with a divine power, or spiritual grounding that has enabled me to work through my friend’s death. This poem was an outlet and a revelation to me that I was part of the insanity and the “apathy” that led to Timeeka’s death. I am using poetry to critique myself and the society. “Poetry—for me—is a way of living. It’s the way I look at myself, it’s the way I move through myself, my world, and it’s the way I metabolize what happens and present it out again” (Lorde & Hall 146). I believed Timeeka’s death was preventable because she knocked on my door the night before her suicide. I assumed she was going to ask for money. Although we had grown up together in the same tenement of the South Bronx, I was considerably sheltered and also consciously blind to the atrocities taking place in my neighborhood (drugs, teenage pregnancy, homicide, poverty, racism, sexism, and classism). It is only now when I recall my childhood I realize how much was going on. The poem reflects insight into the events surrounding the premature deaths of young Black boys and girls in poor communities, and it was Timeeka’s death which opened my eyes to the reality surrounding me.

Attempting to verbalize my pain to my parents or a therapist wasn’t as helpful as my writing poetry. In “Poetry Is Not A Luxury” Audre Lorde notes, “It is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed but already felt” (Lorde 1984: 36). In writing the poem inspired by

Timeeka's death, I gained clarity of myself and my environment, more than the person, Timeeka came to represent my Black community that I had turned my back on when I chose not to answer the door. Her death was the catalyst; poetry was the tool and activism was the result. It was Timeeka's death that drove me to reflect on my own shortcomings and the classism I had learned. I came face to face with myself and the difficult question: "Do I now think I'm better than Timeeka and my poverty stricken Black neighborhood of the South Bronx because I'm pursuing a college degree at a predominantly white school?" I then asked "how can I prevent another sister friend's death with what I'm gaining with an education?" Timeeka's death jolted me into the introspections illuminated in my poetry and ultimately into my entrance into the Women's Studies Master's program of the University of South Florida, the formation of FIST and volunteer work with the Community Bridges of Maryland and the Ophelia Project of Tampa Bay. I wrote the poem to heal from my friend's death. In writing it, I was moved to re-evaluate my lack of activism in the community prior to Timeeka's death. Through my research on Black female creative expression (including my own), I have begun a process of self-healing. Through this process I am empowered to continue the activism and advocacy her death catalyzed in me. For me personally, writing poetry has been a means of self-healing. It is also a part of a legacy furthered by Black women from the Black Arts and feminist movements. Moreover, it continues in the lyrics and community activism of Neo Soul Black feminists. Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and Assata Shakur employed their poetry to teach, inspire, rebel, redefine, and heal themselves just as I have begun to do with my work.

Chapter 2:
**Autobiography as Liberatory Prose and Feminist Practice: A Feminist Analysis of
Assata Shakur's Autobiography**

“If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use
and to our detriment.”

Audre Lorde

In this chapter, I explore autobiography as a creative expression of feminist and healing practice in the political narrative of Assata Shakur. I also deconstruct the poetry Shakur creates in her political narrative. I analyze Assata Shakur's poetry. I explore the formation of FIST: Fighting Ignorance, Spittin' Truth (a group that works with the Ophelia Project conducting writing to heal workshops for at risk young girls) and what lead me to see poetry by Black women as a means of healing, empowerment, and activism. I do not advocate Shakur's innocence or guilt in the murder of New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster (Sullivan February 1977, 76), but I analyze Shakur's memoir as feminist text.

Authors Margo Perkins and Joanne Braxton note the importance of Black female autobiography as an exercise in self expression, community activism, and Black collectivity in their books *Autobiography as Activism* and *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, respectively. The political narrative of Assata Shakur explores the concepts of self-expression, community activism, and Black collectivity through her poetry, as she writes about her involvement with the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army (BLA). She continues through autobiography what Lorde, Jordan, and Giovanni do with their poetry: give voice to silenced Black women of sexism and racism.

She self defines, self analyzes, and speaks for collective rather than individual experience. Lorde, Jordan, Giovanni, and Shakur assume the role of Black female collectivity when they pen their poetry and narratives while continuing to shift the focus of individual Black woman authors to collective politically engaged Black women.

Assata: An Autobiography can be read as foundational in the political formation of Neo Soul Black Feminist consciousness. She uses her life's experience as a Black woman persecuted for her political views by the United States government during the 1960s and 1970s as a critical "standpoint." This is standpoint theory in action. Later in this chapter, I will expound on how her political memoir demonstrates a cultural awareness of the interlocking of racism, sexism and classism in the lives of Black women in the United States.

Despite Assata Shakur's arrest over 30 years ago, she is still the topic of blogs, poetry, and music. Why has this generation taken up Assata Shakur's story and how does her autobiography relate to standpoint theory or Black feminist theory? Within the pages of Assata Shakur's autobiography is the story of an African American female activist who uses poetry and prose to define herself in the face of being defined by others, namely the United States government. Assata Shakur does not describe herself as a feminist, but I analyze her autobiography, her use of poetry, and her method of writing within a feminist framework. As I look at Shakur's autobiography as feminist practice, I also address consciousness-raising within Black women's lives through a personal account of my own introduction to Assata Shakur. I discuss Black female self-definition and its significance as explored by Shakur, in relation to Patricia Hill Collins' text *Black Feminist Thought*. I

analyze the style and content of Shakur's autobiography focusing on her childhood, her activism, her arrest, and ultimate escape to Cuba.

Who Is Assata Shakur? An Overview

As of 2008 the FBI considers Assata Shakur “armed and extremely dangerous,” a “domestic terrorist,” a fugitive and a cop killer¹. It has offered a reward of up to \$1,000,000 for any information leading to her arrest and return to the United States to be imprisoned for the alleged shooting deaths a New Jersey State Trooper and her friend (fellow Black Panther Party comrade) Zayd Shakur. Currently, she is in Cuba with political asylum, but within the last decade her story has become emblematic of institutionalized racism regarding the unfair treatment of U.S. Black political prisoners who were activists during the 1960s and 1970s. Assata Shakur's story has become a reminder of America's racist past to contemporary artists of the hip-hop generation. I suggest that her plight can be read within the context of current police brutality which is a daily reality to Black men and women of New York City and other urban areas of the United States where racial profiling and excessive police force is used on this hip-hop generation.

Kitwana Bakari author of *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* defines the hip-hop generation as “young African Americans born between 1965 and 1984 who came of age in the eighties and nineties and who share a specific set of values and attitudes” (Bakari 4); while author Jeff Chang of *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* suggests, “the hip hop generation has come up in the shadow of the baby-boomer/civil rights generation”

(interview from www.cantstopwontstop.com/qa.cfm). I believe this generation views Assata Shakur as a patron saint of justice: a woman who has been falsely accused of murder and robbery resulting from covert actions used by the United States government to dismantle all Black Organizations and leaders through COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program). COINTELPRO was “the secret FBI program seeking to disrupt and divide the growing Black protest groups” (Kifner B6). According to another *New York Times* article from, June 20, 2004, COINTELPRO’s aim was to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, or otherwise neutralize their targets” (Cunningham SM20). To this hip-hop generation of Black activists, intellectuals, and lay people--Assata Shakur is described as a heroine, poet, activist, and writer. Rapper Common cites Assata as a “power and pride, so beautiful”.² In his song “A Song for Assata,” his lyrics are also cited on the Hands off Assata (HOA) site. Assata Shakur simply calls herself a “Black revolutionary woman” (Shakur 50).

In her autobiography, Assata Shakur uses original poetry in the chapters to further clarify or enhance the chapter’s point. Her incorporation of poetry in her text is of special significance. It illustrates how significant creative expression can be a pathway to healing in the lives of Black women and in transforming language and form into acts of self-expression, protest and activism. Shakur intersperses poetry to show an intimate side of her story. She begins the autobiography with the poem “Affirmation” which opens with “I believe in living...I believe in life...I believe in living/I believe in birth/I believe in the sweat of love and in the fire of truth/and I believe that a lost ship, steered by tired, seasick sailors, can still be guided home to port” before delving immediately into the night she

was arrested. "Affirmation" is a hopeful poem for a dismal situation. This parallels the internal transformation Patricia Hill Collins refers to as developing a "changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom" for Black women who are forced to remain "motionless on the outside" as in the case of Shakur's imprisonment (Collins 2000:118). Author Margo Perkins suggests in her book *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*, Shakur's poem reveals a "reverence for life, her faith in humanity, and her belief in the redemptive value of resistance struggle" (Perkins, 6).

Despite being placed in solitary confinement, Shakur continues to have hope in the possibilities of freedom of herself and of her people. In the autobiography, she later speaks of reading two books which helped her keep her sanity: *Black Women in White Amerika* and *Siddhartha* along with unnamed books of poetry by Black authors. Two Black nurses gave Shakur these books while she was in a hospital. There Shakur was held before imprisonment and was harassed and physically abused by officers convinced she murdered a state trooper (Shakur 9-11). Art became her refuge and aided in her internal transformation: "When I read the book about Black women, I felt the spirits of those sisters feeding me, making me stronger. Black women have been struggling and helping each other to survive the blows of life since the beginning of time" (Shakur 16). Shakur demonstrates an understanding in the significance of art as a healing balm and she expresses it in this statement. She also expresses the idea of the importance of Black female solidarity. According to Suzette Henke, "Autobiography...offers a unique conflation of history and discourse, of verifiable fact and aesthetic

fabulation...incorporating social, psychological and cultural history” (Henke xiv). Shakur does this throughout her poetry-infused autobiography.

When Shakur was arrested, she was often placed in solitary confinement and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights noted her case to be one of the worse cases of solitary confinement (Shakur 66). She spent over twenty months in two men’s prisons with conditions unsuitable for any prisoner, however there is no record of her misconduct within the penal system that would “justify” confinement (Shakur 66). In the conclusion of her autobiography, she is writing during her exile in Cuba and closes with a poem called “The Tradition” where she addresses the resiliency of people of the African Diaspora to carry on their tradition in spite of their enslavement and persecution. The tradition is the “it” she refers to in the following stanza: “Carry it on. Pass it down to the children. Pass it down. Carry it on. Carry it on now. Carry it on to FREEDOM!” (Shakur 265). She considered herself a part of this legacy of struggle but remains hopeful in the freedom of future generations of oppressed people. This connects the idea of the internal transformation with Black feminist theory of self liberation. In this sense “tradition” can be viewed as “freedom” to define her Black self and “freedom” of spirit that remains within the soul of Black women as exemplified in Shakur’s autobiography.

It is no coincidence that Shakur begins her book with an affirmation, which can be interpreted literally as a declaration of her identity and her resistance to being dominated. Interpreting the poem in relation to the first chapter’s expository writing style of the chaos of her arrest juxtaposes hope (the poem) with despair (her arrest). This may also be a symbolic expression of what it is to be a Black American woman. Perhaps,

Shakur wants to demonstrate the strength of Black women as survivors/those who believe in living by suggesting she “believes in living” and even when one is weary and lost these resilient Black women will someday find their ways home. Home is subjective. Is she referring to Africa, Cuba (where she’s found asylum), or America? To begin her autobiography with the incident on the New Jersey Turnpike before introducing herself to the reader struck me as unique in that most autobiographies I have read often begin with the “I was born…” and “I first remember…” scenarios or begin in the author’s youth with her/his earliest memory. But in the narrative of Assata Shakur, the reader does not learn of her “birth” until chapter two. This can be interpreted one or two ways. On the one hand, the woman who wrote this memoir as an activist, supposed domestic terrorist, and Black Panther revolutionary was born that night, as a result of her arrest. On the other hand, a second interpretation might focus on the connection Shakur has with the Black collective. In this sense, her actual birth is not important in the face of injustice. She sets herself (her individual importance) aside for the people.

Assata Shakur’s autobiography reflects a passing down of oral history through narrative, akin to the tales a mother tells her children of their older relatives or the history of Black Americans which may have been negated from their child’s schooling. My parents and family were very active in introducing me to all the well known activists and heroes of the Civil Rights Movement and Black community; however, often those heroes were men. I remember receiving Carter G. Woodson’s *The Mis-Education of the Negro* as a gift for my ninth birthday and poetry books by Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni when I was a teenager. While I was aware of Maya Angelous’s autobiography *I Know*

Why the Caged Bird Sings and had read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, I had never heard of Assata Shakur prior to listening to a rap song about her, after became an adult. For this reason, I look at a select group of musicians as the new agents of Black feminist thought in a later chapter.

A Burgeoning Feminist's Introduction to Assata Shakur through Hip-Hop

I was introduced to Assata Shakur through a hip-hop song by rapper Common called "A Song for Assata." Common often pens socially conscious raps about empowering Black people and raising consciousness of his listeners about issues of racism, classism and political involvement represented in his songs "Be" (from CD *Be*, 2005) and "The 6th Sense" (from CD *Like Water For Chocolate*, 2000). "A Song for Assata" is not departure from these topics however it was the first song I had heard of his which addressed a topic I was completely unfamiliar with. The song opens:

In the Spirit of God.
 In the Spirit of the Ancestors.
 In the Spirit of the Black Panthers.
 In the Spirit of Assata Shakur.
 We make this movement towards freedom
 for all those who have been oppressed, and all those in the struggle.³

God, ancestors, Black Panthers and Assata Shakur--I had never heard of a Black Panther by that name. I was only familiar with Bobby Seal and Huey P. Newton. The song is a replication of "roll call" Shakur uses in her book. Margo Perkins defines "roll call" as a "convention of the oral tradition that recalls the names of other freedom fighters who have gone before and celebrates their place in a continuum of struggle" (Perkins, 11). The song progresses in describing Shakur's arrest, the shooting on the New Jersey Turnpike,

her false police accusations, police brutality, imprisonment, Black Panther involvement, beatings in jail, and escape to Cuba for political asylum. Then the song ends with the voice of Assata Shakur:

Freedom! You askin' me about freedom. Askin' me about freedom?
I'll be honest with you. I know a whole more about what freedom isn't
than about what it is, cause I've never been free.
I can only share my vision with you of the future, about what freedom is (HOA
site).

I listened to the song several times before making up my mind to find out more about her life. It was then I discovered her autobiography. Reading her autobiography, I immediately saw similarities to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* around issues related to the activism, racism, and evolution of the authors' identities as a result of their imprisonment and involvement with the Black Power movement. I also saw similarities between each author's community involvements.

As I have documented my own introduction to Assata Shakur, it is important to understand the historical and contemporary racial climate surrounding the resurgence of Shakur's story. When Shakur was being arrested, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated; the Black Panther Party was under constant surveillance by the United States government and was in the process of being strategically dismantled by the FBI's counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO). Fast forward to 2008 and there are the shooting deaths of Sean Bell and Amidou Diallo by excessive police gunfire. To this young group of Blacks and Latinos who are victims of racial profiling, Shakur's battle with police brutality resonates with them. According to the "Every Mother's Son" documentary, produced and directed by Kelly Anderson and Tami Gold, "between 1994

and 1999, 107 civilian killings by police occurred in New York City under circumstances that community groups felt represented an overuse of force.”

Sean Bell was gunned down by a barrage of police gunfire after his bachelor party in Queens, NY in 2006 under suspicion of having a weapon; in 2008 all police officers were acquitted as many New Yorkers rallied outside the courthouse of this verdict (Associated Press). In 1999, Amidou Diallo, “an unarmed African immigrant shot to death in the vestibule of a Bronx apartment building by officers who mistook his wallet for a gun” (Associated Press). Both incidents involved 41 or more shots to Black civilians by police offices in New York City. Lastly, another incident involving police excessive force involved Haitian immigrant Abner Louima being sodomized with a “broken broomstick” by a police officer in 1999 (CNN.com). It is in the contemporary frame of these racially charged representations of hegemony, a new generation find familiarity with Shakur’s story and empathy for her.

Assata Shakur’s description of police violence and racial profiling is a subject that is likely to resonate with Black men and women of the hip-hop generation based on their own experiences with police violence and racial profiling. Therefore, it is no surprise that rappers, like Common, Dead Prez, Talib Kweli and Mos Def (all of whom are Black men) would take up Assata Shakur’s story and become motivated to create a collective response to injustice through their music and involvement in bringing recognition to her cases, see VH1 article at

http://www.vh1.com/artists/news/1502956/05252005/mos_def.jhtml?_requestid=222936

Hands Off Assata website and an article from the Village Voice referencing the annual Black August festival Dead Prez performs at and is sponsored by the Malcolm X

Grassroots Movement, see link to Village Voice article at

http://www.vh1.com/artists/news/1502956/05252005/mos_def.jhtml?_requestid=222936.

Common's "A Song for Assata" introduces a new generation of listeners to Assata Shakur as her autobiography introduced her story to those of her generation, thereby creating a cross generation connection to shared history and creating a collective push for activism which is now spread through another medium of the internet. Rappers Common and Mos Def offer music and commentary of Assata Shakur on the "Hands Off Assata" website, <http://www.handsoffassata.org/>. Users of social and networking websites such as MySpace, show support of Assata Shakur or an awareness of her through websites such as www.myspace.com/assatashakur. She represents a survivor of police brutality and false imprisonment in an era when Black men are racially profiled, imprisoned and disenfranchised, a woman like Shakur who survived verbal and physical abuse by officers. According to a March 18, 1977 *New York Times* article by Joseph F. Sullivan (Sullivan March 1977, 54), "She was shot by a state trooper as she had her arms raised." This was also supported by neurosurgeon Dr. Arthur Turner Davidson in an earlier article by Walter H. Waggoner in the March 17, 1977 article which also appeared in the *New York Times* (Waggoner 64). Her escape represents a victory against oppression. Assata Shakur's autobiography has become the catalyst for social engagement by a group of Black men and women who have been affected by the hegemonic structures of New York City's Police Department. The Police Department in the life of Assata Shakur and those who support her has come to represent the oppressive arm of abused power. When Shakur writes her poetry and political narrative asserting her identity as a Black woman oppressed by a white male dominated penal system, she uses her poetry and political

narrative as a place of resistance. *Assata* can then be read as representative of standpoint theory although she never calls her work theory. Her experience as a Black woman in America, as a mother, as a member of the Black Power movement and ultimately as an American exiled in Cuba places her in a position of privilege to critique race, gender, nationalism, and classism.

Standpoint Theory and the Reading of *Assata*

Patricia Hill Collins suggests that standpoint theory resembles “the norm of racial solidarity” and “group standpoints (that) are situated in unjust power relations, reflect those power relations, and help shape them” (Collins 1998: 201). In the community of young, racially profiled Blacks and Latinos I mentioned previously who have found affinity with Assata Shakur’s autobiography, it is present and historical experience which has connected them to her that allows for a standpoint theory analysis of her autobiography. Shakur does not write as an individual about individual injustices. She writes for the group of oppressed people. Early in her autobiography, she writes from the standpoint of a Black woman living in an oppressive society divided by race. Yet by the end of her autobiography, she reveals an understanding the need for multiracial collaborations of men and women movements towards dismantling oppression. Shakur says, “Any community seriously concerned with its own freedom has to be concerned about other people’s freedom as well. The victory of oppressed people anywhere in the world is a victory for Black people” (Shakur 266). This concept of one’s freedom as contingent on other oppressed groups is further discussed by Collins in her definition of

“intersectionality” which I expanded upon in a later chapter discussing Assata Shakur’s autobiography as Black feminist thought.

Shakur’s narrative demonstrates a view of the Black community as a body of which she is a part. This is supported by Collins’ point about “exercising agency in response to and/or in behalf of a group requires *recognizing* groups by seeing how past circumstances have profound effects on the present” (1998: 217). In Shakur’s narrative “past circumstances,” such as her encounter with COINTELPRO, police brutality and surveillance connects to the “profound effects” in the present related to the police brutality cases of Sean Bell, Amidou Diallo, and Abner Louima. In Shakur’s telling of her own experience against the hegemony of the United States government and the police departments, she is able to recognize her experience and the experience of those suffering around her as part of a larger and pervasive discourse in oppression. In chapter six of her autobiography, she suggests recognition of this pervasive discourse of oppression when describing how Black men and women interact with one another, exhibiting internalized racism and sexism replicating the system of slavery on the plantation. When referring to how Black men and women treat each other she states, “If you ask me, a lot of us still act like we’re back on the plantation with massa pulling the strings” (116). Is she suggesting that Black people will always be enslaved because of slavery? If Shakur is suggesting that “Black Americans” were created by the hegemonic structures born out of enslavement, how does she explain her own existence as a self-defined, Black revolutionary woman, hopeful of the promise of freedom?

Assata: An Autobiography as Black Feminist Thought?

I explore *Assata: An Autobiography* as “emancipatory,” “reflective,” and an example of a “self-defined Black woman’s standpoint.” According to Patricia Hill Collins “Black feminist thought aims to develop a theory that is emancipatory and reflective and which can aid African-American women’s struggles against oppression...Black feminist thought is of African-American women in that it taps the multiple relationships among Black women needed to produce a self-defined Black women’s standpoint. Black feminist thought is for Black women in that it empowers Black women for political activism” (1997: 252). Collins’ definition allows Assata Shakur’s autobiography be read as a demonstration of Black feminist thought. Shakur’s representation of her life and experience reveal a Black feminist standpoint in 1) redefining herself as a Black woman 2) the reflexivity of her autobiographical work, and 3) the events documented within her text reveal a call toward reader activism as she has been called to activism.

Assata Shakur, the revolutionary and activist, creates her own identity formed out of the oppression Black Americans were experiencing as a result of institutionalized racism during the Civil Rights era and its aftermath of the 1970s and 1980s. Chapter two of Shakur’s narrative opens stating that the “FBI cannot find any evidence of” her birth, but she continues “Anyway, I was born...the name my momma gave me was JoAnne Deborah Byron” (Shakur, 18). Her married name is Chesimard. JoAnne Chesimard becomes “Assata Olubala Shakur” to reflect her changing ideals and awareness of the injustices around her and her commitment to improving these conditions as reflected her statement:

“I didn’t feel like no JoAnne, or no Negro, or no amerikan...From the time I picked my hair out in the morning to the time I slipped off to bed with Mingus in the background...my mind, heart, and soul had gone back to Africa buy my name was still stranded in Europe somewhere...as for Chesimard..Somebody named Chesimard had been the slavemaster of my ex-husband’s ancestors...I would stare up at the ceiling wondering how many Black women Chesimard had raped, how many Black babies he had fathered, and how many Black people he had been responsible for killing...I wanted a name that had something to do with struggle, something to do with the liberation of our people” (Shakur 185-186).

One can read Shakur’s evolution as the same process that happens to women who become “feminists.” Linda Alcoff calls this evolution process a point when the subject comes to view the facts she had known all along in a different position: the subject realizes she is indeed a subject. She calls it a difference in “positional perspective” (Alcoff 350). Shakur reflects this difference when she consciously decides to change her name from JoAnne Chesimard to Assata Olubala Shakur. Each name she chooses for herself reflects her changed perspective as it relates to Black feminist thought and her commitment to the collective of Black people.

“Assata” means “she who struggles;” Olugbala means “love for the people,” and “Shakur” is the name of her close friend Zayd (she chooses it out of respect for him). Through her self-naming, she defines herself on multiple levels bridging a connection between her personal struggles, the Black community and an awareness of her political struggle as a Black woman. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that Black feminism is “a

process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist view of community” (1997: 258), and by Shakur’s self naming, including “one who struggles” and “love for the people,” she embodies the material reality, lived experience, and a humanist view of community. I will not call Assata Shakur a Black feminist. I will, however, suggest her text may be read as Black feminist thought based on the definitions Collins gives. For me to label Shakur as a Black feminist is to impose my view of her identity upon her, thereby stripping her of her own agency to self-define. I am merely suggesting her text should be considered as Black feminist thought for its political activism, struggle, community collective and the effort to improve the lives of those under the thumb of oppression by way of racism and classicism. Her own self-definition as “Assata” and as Black revolutionary activist woman is key to her autobiography being thought of as Black Feminist thought.

Shakur’s work articulates “individual expressions of consciousness” (Collins 1997:247) making group consciousness a reality. She is giving a voice to the struggle that is not separate from real people’s lived experience. I stray away from labeling Shakur a feminist but will suggest analysis of Shakur’s autobiography is significant in creating the collaborations Collins suggests is necessary between “Black women intellectuals” and “commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African American women” (Collins 1997: 250).

Self-Definition and Autobiography

In *Shattered Subjects*, Suzette Henke suggests that autobiography is a “powerful form of scriptotherapy” offering twentieth century women the opportunity to write of

their lives, tell their stories and reconstruct themselves as subjects “ideologically inflected by language, history and social imbrications.” I would argue autobiography offers the same opportunity for twenty-first century women as well as in previous centuries. Henke continues to say, “Life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and to reinterpret the intertextual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by society and culture...(autobiography) is an author attempting to fashion an enabling discourse of testimony and self-revelation, to establish a sense of agency” (Henke xv-xvi). At its core, autobiography is an attempt at agency through self-definition. What autobiography becomes is a reclaiming of identity or establishing a new identity that attempts to rebel against a forced identity in the instance of many Black memoir writers. Shakur is using autobiography to redefine her identity as a Black woman living under the oppression of a racist, sexist and classist society. She discusses the intersections of her racialized and gendered identity.

Shakur’s identities as Black and female do not conflict with each other; however, she writes as a self-aware Black person politically engaged in the dismantling of the oppressions dictating her identity and persecution. This does not mean she is unaware of her womanhood, but in the context of her battles, she addresses the material problems of racism for Black men and women. The fluidity of race and gender are outlined when Shakur discusses her time childhood in Wilmington, North Carolina and her time as a 13-year-old runaway in New York City’s Greenwich Village. Lastly, race and gender are further outlined in her “To My People” taped speech and when she describes her relationship with the three matriarchs in her family: her mother, grandmother, and aunt

Evelyn. Shakur is theorizing the dynamics of race, class and gender in these chapters of her narrative.

In Shakur's description of her childhood, she outlines an awareness of internalized self loathing and in her reflections describes her experiences as being a Black girl in the segregated south. When she describes the "sacrifices to be beautiful" in the burning of her naturally coarse hair and her grandmother's words "marry some man with good hair so your children will have good hair" (Shakur 31), she is describing a scene that many Black women recall and which bell hooks discusses specifically in her autobiography *Bone Black*. Shakur shares an awareness an oppressive power structure which gets replicated within the oppressed culture (a concept she revisits often) when she described "we had been brainwashed and we didn't even know it; we accepted white value systems and white standards of beauty" (Shakur 31). This type of theorizing is what distinguishes Black feminist thought from other feminist theorizing. It reflects interlocking of race and gender in her assessment of "good" and "bad hair."

When Shakur runs away at the age of thirteen, she recalls an incident where she has escaped being gang raped. Shakur describes how the boys argued with each other over who would be her first to rape her, recalls "as if I was some kind of thing" (Shakur 113). Shakur then parallels this to slavery in a soliloquy where she speaks specifically of Black women as "fair game to anyone...master or any guest or redneck who desired her...considered less than a woman...she was between a whore and a workhorse. Black men internalized the white man's opinion of Black women" (Shakur 116). Shakur's re-telling of her encounter with gang rape and then paralleling the experience to conditions born out of slavery allows for a Black feminist standpoint analysis. Shakur's analysis

demonstrates the “legacy of struggle against racism and sexism” Collins speaks of as the common thread binding African American women (Collins 1997: 244). ” In this passage, subjectivity is then shaped by the historical and experiential, as the practices of gang raping Black women by Black men echo the same sexual abuse of Black women as slaves.

When Shakur discusses the making and content of the “To My People” tape, she is re-defining herself in the face of imposed definition by media and government. At the time of “To My People” Shakur had been arrested and on July 4, 1973 (no surprise she would elect to release her tape on the United States’ day of Independence) she calls herself “a Black revolutionary” (Shakur 49). In this speech, she asserts and distinguishes herself as “A Black revolutionary” and “a Black revolutionary woman” (Shakur 49).

Shakur defines these identities in the following passage:

“I am a Black revolutionary, and as such, i am a victim of all the wrath, hatred, and slander that amerika is capable of. Like other Black revolutionaries, amerika is trying to lynch me.

I am a Black revolutionary woman, and because of this I have been charged and accused of every alleged crime in which a woman was believed to have participated. The alleged crimes in which only men were supposedly involved, i have been accused of planning” (Shakur 50).

Shakur later does roll call of slain Civil Rights leaders and unarmed civilians like Martin Luther King Jr., Emmitt Till, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X to describe the criminal activity for which the United States was involved. She also finds solidarity with Third World “brothers and sisters in Vietnam, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, and South

Africa (Shakur 50).” It is important to recognize Shakur’s distinctions between Black revolutionary and Black revolutionary woman. She is aware of the difference and she is being penalized by an oppressive United States government because she is a woman who is “Black” and “revolutionary.” To be “woman” and “revolutionary” are a contradiction terms to a system of patriarchy and racism that doesn’t know how to classify Black women. Her imprisonment is then more about her identity as all three: “Black,” “revolutionary,” and “woman.” Shakur’s acknowledgement of Third World peoples being persecuted expands on the humanist definition of Black feminist thought that Collins defines in the process of raising consciousness in order to create community.

Another significant theme echoed throughout Shakur’s autobiography is the relationship she has with the women in her family. It is her grandmother who instills the foundations of pride. In one scene from her autobiography Shakur recalls her grandmother constantly making her speak assertively, especially among white people. Her grandmother would drill it into young Shakur’s mind that pride and dignity were paramount (Shakur 20). Shakur clashes with her mother, likely as a result of Shakur’s admitted shortcomings. She recalls the argument that led to her running away “I don’t even remember what the argument was about, but I was hardheaded, stubborn, and under the impression that a grave injustice had been done to me. The next day I got up, packed my clothes, and headed straight for the Village” (Shakur 99). It is her aunt, Evelyn who she has the strongest bond with, of the women in her family. This aunt would take her to museums as a child and as an adult she was the first of her family allowed to see Shakur after her arrest. Evelyn is also a major figure in Shakur’s life as her legal council. Shakur only briefly mentions her one year marriage to Louis Chesimard whose name wasn’t

mentioned in her memoir. I found Chesimard's name in Margo Perkins' *Autobiography As Activism*. Perkins writes, "In a single paragraph devoted to both her marriage and its dissolution, Shakur suggests that her union with Louis Chesimard...dissolved after just one year primarily because they were unable to renegotiate traditional gender-role expectation" (Perkins 103). Shakur mentions how her ex-husband expected a homemaker but Shakur was more interested in the "Black Liberation struggle" rather than "mundane things like keeping house or washing dishes" (Shakur 196). Beyond this, she never speaks of her ex-husband neither negatively nor positively only to explain how she obtained the last name Chesimard. It becomes clear in her autobiography that she is married to the struggle to empower and free oppressed Black people.

Shakur manipulates language by using poetry in her autobiography. She also manipulates language through her re-spellings of words linked to systems of oppression such as "America" and "court." She transforms words court to "kourt," America to "Amerika," American to "Amerikkkan" and her use of "I" is always lowercase which I interpret as her humbling herself for the greater good of her cause. It could be read as dismantling hierarchy. Is this not the same thing we as feminist scholars try to do in feminism? Shakur's shifting of language is both to reinvent, re-articulate and bring awareness to the social injustices of America. I interpret Shakur's use of "K" in America and court as her theorizing on the American connection to the Ku Klux Klan, signaling to readers the severity for which she and her Black community suffers from American injustice. To merely read the shift in language from "c" to "k" is to overlook the author theorizing her oppression by manipulating language. To overlook the author's refusal to capitalize "I" is to overlook the attempts at shifting power through language. Moreover

Shakur's manipulation of language suggests a pragmatist approach to language. Shakur's manipulation of words and lowercase "i" invites her community and readers to see her at their level. She does not use her status as writer and creator of her narrative as a means of leverage above "the people." Instead, she speaks in a language that gives insight into their circumstances and realities. By manipulating language and using lowercase "i", she uses language to create balance between herself and the reader.

Shakur blurs the line between creative expression, expository, persuasive and narrative writing, allowing poetry and essay to co exist without dichotomizing the two forms of expression. She also uses what Margo Perkins calls "roll call" of persecuted and/or slain activists" (Perkins 11). This "roll call" re-affirms the concept of collectivity and standpoint theory which Patricia Hill Collins suggests is embedded in Black feminist thought. Shakur begins the "roll call":

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
 It is our duty to win.
 We must love each other and support each other.
 We have nothing to lose but our chains:
 In the spirit of:
 Ronald Carter
 William Christmas
 Mark Clark
 Frank "Heavy" Fields...
 Fred Hampton
 Lil' Bobby Hutton
 George Jackson...
 Zayd Malik Shakur
 Anthony Kumum Olugbala White
 We must fight on. (Shakur 52-53)

I believe Shakur's autobiography is cathartic for Assata the individual and Assata as part of the collective: "Revolution is about change and the first place the change

begins is in yourself” (Shakur 202). In Shakur’s statement, there are suggestions of the need for one’s consciousness to be transformed in order to affect change. When Shakur recognizes her subjectivity, she begins to heal from the historical wounds of racism, sexism, and other injustices. Shakur transforms herself through autobiography to begin the healing and opens herself for the reader and her community to transform as well. In Shakur’s closing chapter, she notes upon escaping to Cuba, “The nightmare was over...the dream (of freedom) had come true. I was elated. Ecstatic” (266). This mature and reflective Shakur offers hope as her poems suggest; freedom is a possibility.

The autobiography of Assata Shakur is a work that can be read as Black feminist thought. By reading it as such, we place “Black women at the center of critical discourse and her own literary experience, instead of at the margins where she has been to often found” (Braxton 10) by second wave feminism and patriarchal attitudes exhibited in the Black Power Movement. Shakur’s autobiography engages the history of oppression, offering recognition and reflection on this oppression of Black women and men. Shakur’s narrative also connects its reader to political activism seeking to eliminate this oppression. The reader is left with a memoir documenting history and requiring social activism upon reading it. As stated earlier, Shakur’s words, though written thirty years ago, resonates with a contemporary hip-hop generation experiencing racial profiling and dying from excessive police force. Her battle continues and serves as an example of persecution, oppression, and hope; however, it also serves as a reminder of an unjust American past. Assata Shakur’s story is more than one Black woman revolutionary’s

story; her story represents the errors of America's past but the vision to create a better future for Black communities and Third World communities.

Shakur's story is significant to Black feminist scholarship introducing a new generation of feminist scholars to the work of Black women applying Black feminist theory to their work as literary and community activism. Feminist autobiography is personal and political. Margo Perkins proposes "autobiography as a form of political intervention, to educate as broad an audience as possible to the situation and issues at stake" (Perkins 7). However, this can also be applied to interventions taking place on the internet and in music in 2008. It is through blogs, music, and activism that Black women are taking their collective lived experiences and turning it into something powerful. Black women are sustaining themselves and communities through creative expression by bringing to light what is happening in their communities to a broad audience. Blogs and music are the new "political interventions" Perkins refers to when describing the memoir of Assata Shakur.

Chapter 3:
Neo Soul Black Feminism: the Music is Activism/the Activism is Music

In this chapter I place Black feminism in a contemporary context through Black female musicians I call Neo Soul Black feminists speaking in a communal and affirmative voice against racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. I argue that these women continue the legacy of the poets Lorde and Giovanni mentioned in chapter one, with the same candor, urgency, and consciousness raising as Assata Shakur in chapter two. These women embody the Black feminist theories put forth by Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and the Combahee River Collective. Neo Soul Black feminists use their music as a platform to express self-love, community building, political activism, and consciousness raising through the critique of unjust practices towards Black women, the environment, and the poor. In my conclusion I suggest bloggers create an internet safe space for Black women to express their health concerns and anger with injustices they face because of their race, gender, and sexual orientation. This chapter will reveal where and why Black feminism is alive and thriving beyond the academy and “in the streets”, being spread to a larger and more diverse audience.

Contemporary Black feminism has found a home on the internet in blogs and in web-based support networks of other Black women. A new generation of Black feminists has a willing audience and the ability to connect with Black women in their neighborhoods, and across the U.S. Black women are creating blogs, sharing poetry, and mobilizing around issues relevant to their communities. They are connecting around such subjects as Jena Six, the role of gender and race in the Presidential election, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina through Postcards from Katrina, and social networking sites like

Facebook and MySpace. Black feminism has reached a larger audience through the music of artists like Erykah Badu, India.Arie, Goapele and Jill Scott. These musicians, bloggers, and community leaders continue to advance Black feminism and utilize principles of theory through their lyrics, their news articles, websites, and social activism. The new Black feminist answers the call to action and activism through utilizing mass media and her craft to shape identity, tell her stories and thereby empowering herself and her community. She is conscious of health disparities, economic disparities, and she does not need to be an academic scholar to theorize her Black womanhood. She uses the tools of Black feminism through her insight on lived and local experiences. Like poets Audre Lorde, and Nikki Giovanni who used their poetry to advance and disseminate Black feminist theorizing on Black women's status in the United States, these Neo Soul Black feminists are using their music and celebrity status to create community organizations to improve their communities. These women display a great depth of compassion and understanding of art as a healing and an empowering tool to improve the lives of Black women nationally and globally. But why call them Neo Soul Black Feminists?

Neo Soul: When Life Imitates Art

In 1998 *Time Magazine* published an article defining Neo Soul, a genre its author suggest garnered mainstream recognition with Lauryn Hill's CD "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill." According to Time.com's Christopher John Farley "Simply defined, neo-soul describes artists—like song-stylist Erykah Badu—who combine a palpable respect for and understanding of the classics soul of the '60s and '70s...Neo-soul artists tend to create music that's a good deal more real, a good deal more edgy than the packed

pop...And they tend to write lyrics that are more oblique and yet more socially and emotionally relevant than those of gansta rappers” (Time.com). Neo Soul with its consciousness raising lyrics and reverence to the 1960s and 1970s soul music marks a renewal of the past and urgency towards a transformed future. The women I consider Neo Soul Black feminists--Erykah Badu, India.Arie, Goapele, and Jill Scott--demonstrate the ideals of Black feminism. These artists have managed to advance their careers while helping their communities. Each woman is linked to a community based organization which uses creative expression to improve the lives of Black girls and women.

These artists demonstrate an awareness of how their music and their projected images relate to Black feminist theorizing of self-liberation when considering Erykah Badu and India.Arie’s link to the groundbreaking “choreopoem” by Ntozake Shange *For Colored Girls Who’ve Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. The play follows the struggles and self-discovery of Black women in the United States. Each woman in the play is named by the color she wears and the play concludes with all the women coming together ending with the chanting in unison “I found God inside of myself and loved her fiercely” (Shange 63).

Erykah Badu: More than a “Bag Lady” with “Mama’s Gun”

Erykah Badu’s video “Bag Lady,” a song released off of her 2000 CD “Mama’s Gun,” pays homage to Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who’ve Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* from start to finish. The video opens with the following lines scrolled across the screen: “A poemeography by e. badu” which is a direct correlation to Shange’s play which she called a “choreopoem” (see Figures 1 and 2). The women of the video are

dressed in blue, yellow, red, purple, and green to reflect the ladies of Shange's play. "Bag Lady" the song is about letting go of personal baggage and loving oneself enough to not carry everyone else's baggage or your own about beauty, single motherhood, physical abuse, or drugs as represented in the instrumental break which flashes the following across the screen: "nickel bag lady," "booty bag lady," "paper bag lady," "punching bag lady" and "baby bag mama." The lyrics begin: "Bag Lady, you goin' hurt your back, draggin' all them bags like that, I guess nobody ever told you, all you must hold onto, is you, is you" and the song ends "let it go, let it go, let it go... betcha love can make it better" (lyrics courtesy of

http://www.vh1.com/artists/az/badu_erykah/2114165/lyric.jhtml).

Figure 1
Cover of N. Shange's Book *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* courtesy of <http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/51FH3XDXZEL.jpg>

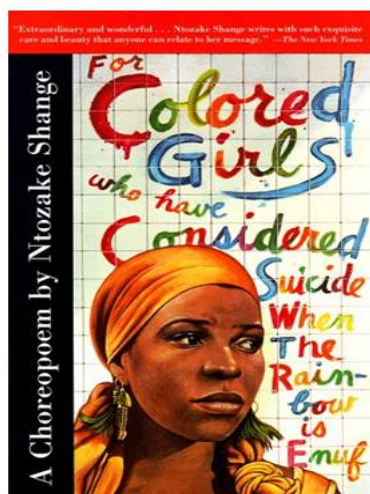


Figure 2
Erykah Badu's "Bag Lady" video still courtesy of www.singingfool.com/photos/405/017050_1.jpg



I believe these lyrics directly relate to Shange's closing line, "I found God in myself and loved her fiercely," which correlates with the self love necessary for Black women to

empower and heal themselves from their past pains. This is a concept expressed in the poetry of Black feminist poets Audre Lorde, and Nikki Giovanni countering racist and sexist notions of Black womanhood, while establishing clearly positive self-definition and self-valuation of Black womanhood.

Erykah Badu continues a tradition Patricia Hill Collins denotes in Black women blues singers who drew “progressive art” from their struggles to produce art that was emancipatory. Combining “thought, feeling and action” while helping Black women among others to see their world differently and act to change it” (Collins:2000, 111). Erykah Badu demonstrates her vision of the world and action to change it in her activism through her nonprofit organization B.L.I.N.D. (Beautiful Love Incorporated Nonprofit Development). BLIND’s mission is “to create positive social change through economic, artistic, and cultural development of the community, B.L.I.N.D. will provide community driven development for inner-city youth through music, dance, theatre, visual arts, and the refurbishment of the Black Forest Theatre” (<http://mattworks.com/supportblind.org/missionVision.html>). In an interview with *Philanthropy World Magazine* <http://www.philanthropymagazine.com/Articles/9-4-Badu.htm> Badu states, “I try not to preach, but to reach... God has not forgotten you, the community is here.” Badu’s activism reflects the emergence of contemporary Black female artists theorizing their place in society and how they can affect change within these communities through their creative expression and activism. India.Arie represents another Neo Soul Black feminist who, like Badu, uses her music and celebrity to improve the in Black communities.

India.Arie: Not the Average Girl in the Video

India.Arie, like Badu, has used her lyrics to address Black women's self-definition and self-valuation. India.Arie's "I Am Not My Hair" reflects issues of race and gender. By using the metaphor of hair, she draws a connection to identity which bell hooks discusses in *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*. In a chapter on Black women and beauty, hooks notes "The first body issue that affects Black female identity, even more so than color, is hair texture...Negative thinking about our hair is usually conveyed in the home" (2005: 63). hooks continues by suggesting that a major aspect of "white supremacist thinking" which permeates the "Black psyche" is the assumption that straight hair is good hair, and Black hair is both problematic and in need of being conquered" (64). India.Arie's "I Am Not My Hair" (which was released in 2006, a year after hook's *Sisters of the Yam*) provides a continuous story of the singer's evolution of identity as reflected by her changing hair. Arie admittedly succumbs to the beauty standards of each era by altering her hair. She goes from relaxing her hair to make it straight or curly, locking it and then cutting it until finally concluding she is not her hair, her skin or the expectations society places on her. The song skirts with irony by restating the chorus or chant, "I Am Not My Hair" as each change to her hair would imply she is her hair. In order to define herself she had to detach herself from her hair. She is challenging the accountability that comes with processed hair, locked hair, or no hair at all.

This song is significant as Black feminism in action as it addresses the beauty standards placed on Black women by Western society, while resisting notions of self

loathing resulting from internalized racism and sexism Black women experience in having or not having “good” hair which Arie references in the following lyrics:

Good hair means curls and waves
Bad hair means you look like a slave.
At the turn of the century
It’s time for us to redefine who we be...

I am not my hair, I am not this skin
I am not your expectations, no, no
I am not my hair, I am not this skin
I am a soul that lives within.

Lyrics courtesy of

http://www.vh1.com/artists/az/arie_india/12816763/lyric.jhtml

Arie uses this song to reaffirm natural beauty of Black women and an understanding of the importance of self-definition and self-valuation which Patricia Hill Collins considers “foundational to politicized Black feminist standpoints, thus much more is at stake here than the simple expression of voice” (Collins 2000:111). Hair becomes a metaphor for beauty and a signifier of identifiable Blackness when she recounts different types of hair from locks, to perms to kinky natural afros, and her own progression in identity from press and curl to Jheri curl to relaxer (all of which damaged her hair) leading her to lock then cut her hair off.

The evolution of hair identity reflects a theorizing of Black womanhood. Arie’s assertion “I am not my hair” reflects Black feminist thought in countering the hegemonic structures of beauty placed upon Black women’s bodies through their hair. Black women’s hair then becomes a modifiable aspect of the self which once the subject is free of her hair, she can be her own autonomous self as suggested in the lyrics, “I am not my

hair, I am soul that lives within.” This song also addresses breast cancer, an illness that affects Black women more lethally than their white counterparts.

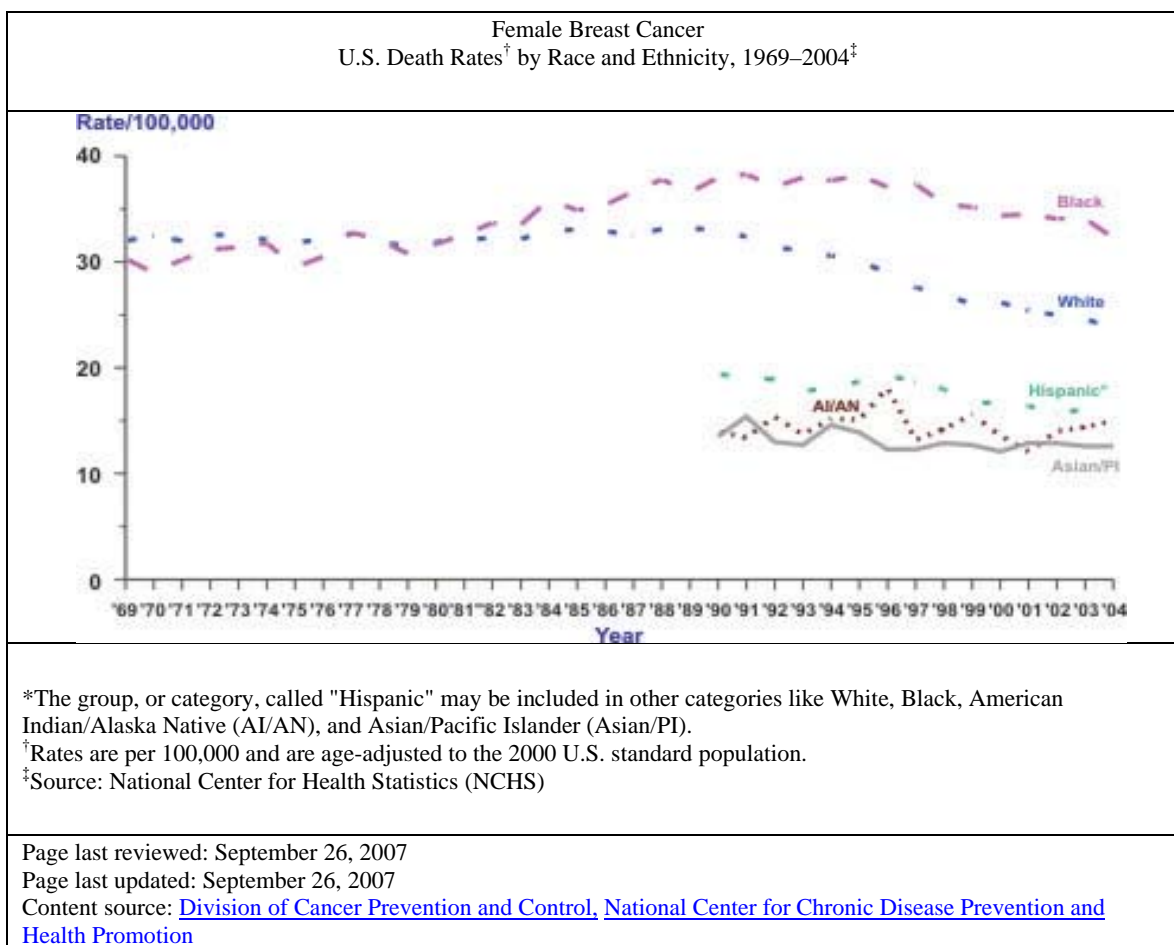
While Black women suffer less breast cancer, nationally Black women’s mortality rates from breast cancer are higher than their white counterparts (see figure 3 below).

Figure 3

Deaths from Breast Cancer by Race and Ethnicity

“The graph below shows that in 2004, Black women were more likely to die of breast cancer than any other group. White women had the second highest rate of deaths from breast cancer, followed by women who are Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Asian/Pacific Islander.”

Image courtesy of National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) obtained from <http://www.cdc.gov/Cancer/Breast/statistics/race.htm>



Black feminism set the stage for India.Arie to address beauty standards, self-definition and valuation as well as the effects of breast cancer in the Black community to a contemporary audience that is accessible by people of all ages and backgrounds. Similar to Badu, India's activism extends beyond her lyrics as she is a Goodwill Ambassador to UNICEF (see site for article on her UNICEF work)

http://fieldnotes.unicefusa.org/2007/01/unicef_ambassador_indiaarie_in.html. Similar to Badu's use of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* in her video, India.Arie connects to the play as she is slated to make her Broadway debut in the play which was to be produced by Whoopi Goldberg according to a June 25, 2008 *Seattle Times* article before lack of funding prevented the opening, source below:

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/entertainment/2008016524_webindiaarie25.html.

Musical artists like Goapele and Jill Scott can be placed in the category of Neo Soul Black feminists for their socially conscious lyrics and community activism. Both women are affiliated with organizations that promote self awareness and empowerment through creative expression.

Goapele: If A Song Could Change it All

Goapele is an example of a musician who uses her music to further her activism in an accessible form. She states on her site: "I want my music to truly represent me, instead of trying to fit stereotypes that women in this industry are encouraged to fit into." Goapele's quote parallels to theories expressed in bell hooks' essay "Choosing The

Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” which reflects hooks’ feelings of isolation and alienation in predominantly white institutions. Yet she finds power in that isolation and “Othered” identity. This mirrors the same isolation and alienation Black women experience within the context of a misogynistic hip-hop culture. Instead of the margin being a place of awkwardness and discomfort, there can be power within the margin. hooks argues that “those of us who live, who ‘make it’, passionately holding on to aspects of that ‘downhome’ life...do not intend to lose while simultaneously seeking new knowledge and experience, invent spaces of radical openness. Without such spaces we would not survive. Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised....For me this space of radical openness is a margin-a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary” (1996: 51). hooks’ words, “difficult yet necessary” imply without discomfort there is no progression, no change, no action this is the kind of environment that breeds Black feminist thought in the lyrics of Goapele, India.Arie, and Erykah Badu. hooks’ quote captures the whole essence of “otherness” within an oppressive and dominant culture which Neo Soul Black feminists challenge within their lyrics. When hooks speaks of inventing spaces of “radical openness,” I believe it is a call for action to those of us within the Black feminist struggle who call ourselves such and who are Black women, to speak openly and honestly of our experiences. In other words if we (Black women, Black feminists, Black artists, and progressive thinkers) do not see what it is we want to see, we must create our own path and create new visions, new voices: this is what the Neo Soul Black feminist does with her lyrics.

According to Ask.com <http://randb.about.com/od/artistinterviews/a/GoapeleArticle.htm>, in 2006 the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights presented Goapele with its first-ever Human Rights Cultural Hero award for her activism in the community. Goapele's song "Change it All" was a response to the 2000 presidential election of George Bush noting the high price of war and voting rights that were seemingly taken by the descendents of the formerly disenfranchised Black Americans and women. Goapele's use of music as activism and her connection to social activism outside of her music reflects the new face of Black feminism in the digital age. Similar to how Nina Simone used her music as a platform for change, Goapele does the same in attempting to "change it all" through music...Goapele ends her song, "if a song could change it all." I find this particularly significant as a continuation of how Black women have used their life experiences and resources to contribute to community activism.

Goapele's community activism extends beyond her consciousness-raising lyrics. She is affiliated with "Be Present," an organization that advances Black feminist thought through their work in the community and the lives of Black women in Atlanta, GA, New York, NY, and San Francisco, CA. Goapele is photographed on the site's opening page. On June 27, 2008 I attended a fundraiser for "Be Present" held at The Loft in Atlanta, Georgia where she helped raised money for the organization. The concert was advertised as "a concert for all ages." The concert also celebrated the 25th anniversary of "Be Present" which Goapele has been a member since the age of ten. "Be Present" is an organization that uses a "transformation model" for change and was created by Lillie P. Allen. The "Be Present Empowerment Model" (BPEM) "provides individual leadership skills" (BePresent.org). The mission of "Be Present" is "to learn how to expand the

dialogues and analyses on race, class, gender, age, and power, and to encompass what until now has been polarized between intellectual and emotional discussions, and then apply theoretical understandings in practical ways” (BePresnt.org).

Jill Scott’s Critique of Black Male Misogyny (In Song)

Jill Scott’s “How It Make You Feel” asks Black men, “How would you feel if all the Black women in the world were gone?” The song critiques popular culture’s representation of Black manhood and Black men’s internalization of such misogynistic representations. The song can be interpreted as a response to--absentee fathers in the Black community, the disproportionate deaths of Black women due to HIV/AIDS and violent crimes, and/or the commonly held assumptions by many Black women that Black men are choosing to date and marry women (or men) of different races. Scott’s simple question “how it make you feel?” is answered throughout the song addressing the significant value Black women play in the Black community. It ultimately concludes that in order for the Black community to thrive it requires collaboration between Black men and women. On Jill Scott’s first CD “Who Is Jill Scott,” her original question which addressed the relationship of Black men and women was simply “Do you remember me?” “Do You Remember Me?” The song takes the listener across history of the steadfast relationship between Black men and women. The lyrics could be perceived as slightly abstract and less direct. But in “How It Make You Feel?” Scott asserts the question: “How it make you feel?” There is no misunderstanding to whom she is directing the question. “How It Make You Feel?” is direct, communal, and affirmative.

I chose to focus on “How It Make You Feel?” because it reflects Black feminist analysis of the complex and contradictory relationship Black women have to Black men. In Scott’s rap, which could be a direct response to the misogyny in some rap music, there is a critique of sexism: “You be tripping, Say you pimping it, Talking 'bout how you "Da Man.” then saying, “but you are something different.” Scott then critiques racism and the legacy of slavery when calling out the behavior of Black men as a by-product of when "Massa" ruled your life, Spreading babies everywhere, couldn't think, couldn't care.” Scott suggests an opportunity for Black male decolonization ⁴ when she sings, “But you can (change) now” as in, Black man, you can think and can care now for Black women. Her critique places the culpability on Black men. Scott prompts the question: how can we, as Black men and women, improve our community together? In this song, Scott is exploring the concept of collective collaborations paralleling what the women of the Combahee River Collective suggested decades earlier in their essay “A Black Feminist Statement” when they assert the following: “Our situation as black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race...we struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism” (Collective 213).

Like the other Neo Soul Black Feminists, Jill Scott is involved in activism beyond her lyrics. Scott’s organization “Blues Babe” provides financial support and mentoring to students in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Camden, New Jersey area, nurturing college bound students of color, ages 16-21 artistically and academically (BluesBabeFoundation.org). In 2003 the organization donated “\$60,000 to the graduating class of the Creative Arts High School in Camden, NJ.” Blues Babe is the nickname of

Jill Scott's grandmother. According to Scott's website, the name was given to her grandmother because of the blue tint of her brown complexion. Scott's choice to name her foundation after her grandmother pays homage to her legacy, giving recognition to a previous generation. Choosing to name her foundation after her grandmother is reminiscent of Gloria Watkins decision to pay homage to her grandmother in renaming herself, "bell hooks."

The Oppositional Gaze on Neo Soul CD Covers

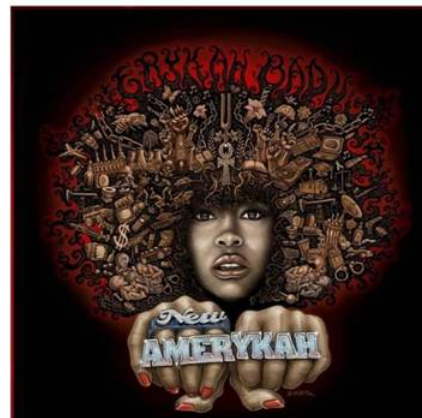
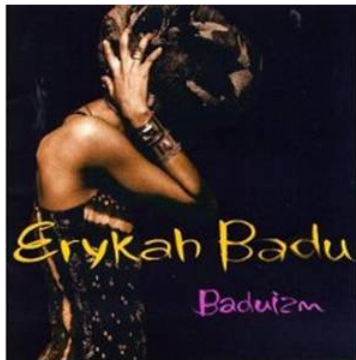
Neo Soul Black Feminist artists are more than creative songstresses and entertainers; they are contemporary conduits to the theories of Black feminist thought. The Neo Soul Black feminist artist transforms Black womanhood and experience into the source for her art. She is healing and empowering listeners with her consciousness raising lyrics which calls the listener to activism. Neo Soul Black feminist artists also "practice what they preach" through their community work that advocates for the transformation of Black female images. Neo Soul Black feminist provide scholarships for young Black girls and boys, fundraise for organizations that help empower young girls, work with UNICEF, and through all their efforts, they create spaces of "radical openness" for young Black girls and boys. More than their talents, activism, advocacy, and theorizing, Black Neo Soul Artists utilize the space of their CD covers as a place for what bell hooks calls the "oppositional gaze."

bell hooks suggests that the oppositional gaze can be used by Black women in film to create a place for Black women to assert a possible space of agency. Simply

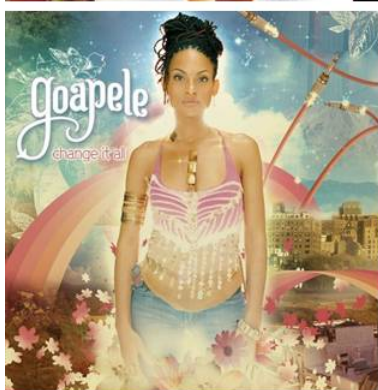
defined, the oppositional gaze is “the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it” (hooks 1992: 116). Conscious of one’s power to manipulate external perception, the oppositional gaze “opens up the possibility for agency” (hooks 1992: 116). I believe the “oppositional gaze” can, and is, employed by a select group of Neo Soul Black feminist artists through their CD covers.

From their first to their latest CD covers, the Neo Soul Black feminist seizes the gaze of her viewers/listeners by moving from a covered pose to a full front-on representation of herself. In the release of her CD covers over time, there is a transformation of consciousness marked in her music and mirrored by her cover art. I suggest that by the Neo Soul Black feminist seizing the power of the gaze, she is asserting the power of liberated Black womanhood. She reclaims her body, her power, her image, and her agency. The Neo Soul Black feminist’s act of resistance through the transformation of her gaze is an act of affirmation of the power and diversity of Black womanhood, in the midst of a culture that seeks to distort Black womanhood as hyper-sexualized or dehumanized. With each CD cover the Neo Soul Black feminist asserts herself. Although Badu’s final cover doesn’t show her body, Badu utilizes her “hair,” a source of Black womanhood, to place various symbols, including symbols of life, death, and commerce. The images that follow represent the CD cover progressions of Neo Soul Black feminists Erykah Badu, Goapele, India. Arie, and Jill Scott advancing from left to right (see figures 4-7). Images are courtesy of the artists’ respective official websites and amazon.com.

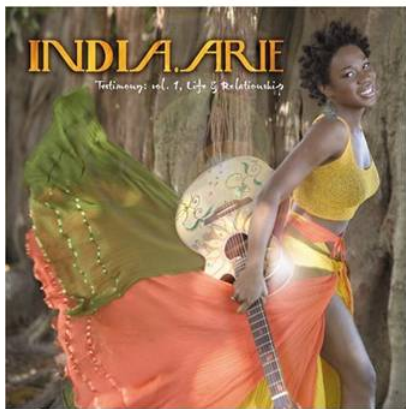
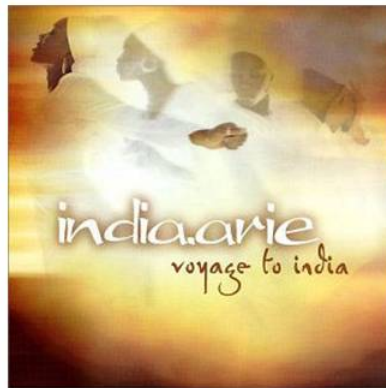
Figures 4a,4b,4c, 4d, and 4e of Erykah Badu's CD Covers



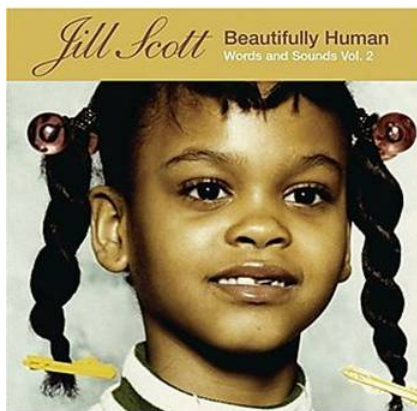
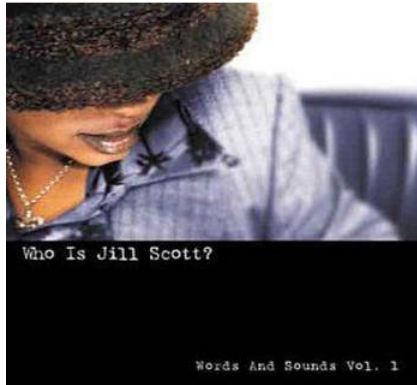
Figures 5a and 5b of Goapele CD Covers



Figures 6a, 6b ,6c, & 6d of India.Arie CD Covers



Figures 7a, 7b, 7c, & 7d of Jill Scott's CD covers



CONCLUSION

In 1990, the *New York Times* published Michelle Wallace's article "When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music is Rap." The article stated that male rappers had little respect or regard for the humanity of Black women as represented by their misogynistic lyrics and videos laden with scantily clad women in heels and short skirts compared to men in baggy jeans. However, Wallace's critique of Black male misogyny in hip-hop in 1990 is still valid in 2009. The music Wallace challenged as having no regard for Black women continues to shape culture and perceptions of Black womanhood. Black women are still devalued and the representation of Black womanhood is still distorted today in a misogynist hip-hop lyrics and videos. Wallace states, "Can they (female rappers) inspire a more beneficent attitude toward sex in rap? What won't subvert rap's sexism is the actions of men; what will is women speaking in their own voice, not just in artificial female ghettos, but with and to men" (20). I propose Neo Soul Black feminists respond to that question and answer in their own voices. Black feminism has found a home among bloggers, musicians, college students, artists, and in many other outlets which were formally unavailable to this group.

WWW.BlackFeminism: Blogs and Sites of Resistance

Sites that are extensions of printed magazines, like *Essence Magazine* and *Heart and Soul* offer Black women internet sites to connect with other Black women as well as experts on health, finances, and romance. But beyond that, they also offer spaces to give voice to the many silenced voices of Black women. Web Blogs offer less formal platforms that create the spaces of "radical openness" that allow concerned or "angry"

Black women to express themselves and receive feedback. The web blog has created a space to make public and political that which is (or was) personal. In a culture that sadly continues to place Black womanhood in the margins of mainstream health, beauty, and womanhood, web blogs and sites like essence.com and heartandsoul.com place Black women and their concerns in the center. In conclusion I focus on essence.com, heartandsoul.com, [Blackwomenshealth.com](http://blackwomenshealth.com) and two blogs “The Angry Black Woman” blog and social networking sites like Facebook. Each of these sites offer insight into the present and future of Black feminism. I chose these sites because they represent some of the diverse interests, demographics, and diverse forms of expression Black women are using via the internet.

In 2005 *Essence Magazine*, the premier African American woman’s magazine, sponsored a campaign called “Take Back the Music” to address the misogyny and negative representations of Black women in music videos, specifically hip-hop videos (CNN <http://www.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/Music/03/03/hip.hop/index.html>).

Essence’s campaign represented Black women attempting to redefine Black female sexuality by addressing the misrepresentations in videos. The “Take Back the Music Campaign” marked a contemporary demonstration of Black feminism in collective activism, self-definition and self-valuation by Black women. Unfortunately, the site no longer appears on the internet. When it was operational (June 2008) the “Take Back the Music” site allowed visitors to post comments and read comments by *Essence Magazine*’s editorial staff and in the music industry to engage in a dialogue about how art can be harmful or powerful.

The *Heart & Soul* website, www.heartandsoul.com serves as an extension of the magazine in hard copy form. Both contribute to the mental and physical health of Black women. The site offers information on “diet and exercise, money matters and self improvement,” while creating an online space where visitors can “meet to share ideas and discuss topics that are important to them.” The site is divided into “healthy, wealthy and wise” an allusion to the adage “early to bed, early to rise, makes a man, healthy, wealthy and wise.” These sections offer easy to read tips on managing one’s physical health, wealth and mental health. An additional component, which is more representative of Black feminist theory in practice, is the blog component. A disproportionate amount of African American women suffer from diabetes, low birth rates, and HIV/AIDS. A recent blog offered on the *Heart and Soul* site offers a place for women to openly discuss these issues such as the “Diabetes Diaries,” “The New Mommy Files,” and “It’s Time to Get Serious About HIV/AIDS.” Through the internet, a community of Black women has formed to share wisdom and encouragement regarding issues affecting Black women individually and in their communities. These women are networking with each other in order to improve their mental and physical well being. By creating this environment in cyberspace, these women are creating their own space to address the effects of racism and sexism on their health, actively seeking to improve their communities for themselves.

The “Angry Black Woman” site at <http://theangryBlackwoman.wordpress.com/> offers blogs by a seemingly “angry Black woman” alluding to the stereotype that all Black women are angry. Instead, this site takes the “angry Black woman” stereotype and turns it upside down to analyze the catalyst for legitimate grievances Black women face as individuals or as part of the larger Black community. These grievances include racism,

sexism, and classism. The most recent blog addressed Fox News' reference to Michelle Obama, the wife of then Senator Barack Obama, as his "baby mama." The author of the site states she would have written her own response, but another blogger wrote something that captures her reason for dismay and anger. Ironically, the link was to a blog posted by a white, heterosexual male blogger named John Scalzi at <http://scalzi.com/whatever/?p=870>. His analysis of why Fox News' "baby mama" comment is so troubling marks the relevance of Black feminism today *and* the hope that Black feminist thought is not restricted to those it attempts to empower, engage, and represent: Black women. The fact that a white heterosexual male can analyze such a blatant racist and sexist remark by Fox News gives me hope for the future that Black feminist theory can transform individuals to critique racism and sexism. Scalzi remarks "Calling Michelle Obama a 'baby mama' isn't just Fox News having a happy casual larf; it's using urban slang to **a**) remind you the Obamas are Black, **b**) belittle a woman of considerable personal accomplishment, and **c**) frame Barack Obama's relationship to his wife and children in a way that insults him, minimizes his love for and commitment to his family, and reinforces stereotypes about Black men."

In addition to blogs, free social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn also create internet spaces for Black women to form online groups to reconnect with old friends and family or to make new friends based on similar interests and concerns. Facebook offers users the opportunity to support causes on their site. Some causes include: The Black Women's Health Imperative, breast cancer awareness, diabetes awareness, the American Heart Association, and causes against domestic violence. Users are allowed to recruit other supporters via the Facebook site and to donate money to any

of the causes that are registered as a “501(c)(3) nonprofit or Canadian registered charity” (<http://apps.facebook.com/causes/about?m=5c6d4cb0>).

The last of the sites I cite as a contemporary demonstration of Black feminist thought in action and the future of Black feminism is The Black Women’s Health Imperative (BWHI) site <http://www.Blackwomenshealth.org/site/c.eeJIIWOCIrH/b.3082485/> whose mission, similar to the *Heart and Soul* site, is to “promote optimum health for Black women” physically, mentally, and spiritually. This site is significant in addressing the new challenges Black women face in healthcare. The BWHI’s site creators note, “It is imperative that we move beyond documenting the enormous health disparities that exist for Black women, and focus our efforts on actionable steps to eliminate them.” The Black Women’s Health Imperative works with national and local organizations to create programs and policies that affect Black women nationally and globally. A closer look at the BWHI’s timeline shows their exchange program with South Africa to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic effecting Black women disproportionately in the U.S. and on the African continent. The Sisternet Blog connects readers to each other and offers monthly commentary of special interest to Black women, such as “patient-provider relationships, inadequate medical care received by Black women,” and the importance of self-love,” for example. The site offers much more-- promoting self-valuation and community activism, two core elements in Black feminist thought. Overall, Black women’s mortality rates in preventable illnesses continue to rise making sites specifically geared towards the health concerns of Black women an imperative in the future of Black feminism in the 21st century.

The Arts as a “Space of Radical Openness”

Through their poetry, essays, and books, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis cite art as a major form of empowerment and self-valuation that is highly beneficial to the healing, influence, and consciousness-raising efforts for and by Black women. For example, Patricia Hill Collins asserts, “Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge” (2000:105). As stated in chapter one, Kim Whitehead’s description of June Jordan’s poetry as communal, angry, and affirmative (86). Whitehead also affirms that all feminist poetry is political (35).

When a Black woman speaks for herself and her sisters about sexual violence, sexism, racism, classism or health disparities, it becomes an act of resistance and in turn becomes political. In Audre Lorde’s “Need: Chorale for Black Women Voices,” in Nikki Giovanni’s “Woman Poem,” in my poem “Casualties,” in *Assata*, in the lyrics of the Neo Soul Black Feminist artists, and in the blog of the “Angry Black Woman”--a communal, angry, and affirmative statement resounds about Black womanhood. We are challenging the erasure of Black women’s stories, deaths, and conflicts with Black men and women. Through our work in the radical space of poetry, music, and the internet, in these processes Black women are healing ourselves. Black women are empowering ourselves. Today, Neo Soul Black feminist artists have become activists and advocates for Black women who have been silenced, shamed, raped, killed, and abused.

It should come as no surprise that poet Nikki Giovanni employs creative expression as a strategy for, healing, empowerment, and activism through her work with WritersCorps. WritersCorps is an organization founded on the principles of establishing

“a group of artists to teach creative writing at public schools and social service organizations in order to help underserved youth improve their literacy and communication skills and to offer creative expression as an alternative to violence, alcohol and drug abuse” (WritersCorps 128). Nikki Giovanni authored the foreword in the WritersCorp publication *Paint Me As I Am*, a collection of poems by WritersCorps teens from sites in San Francisco, California, Washington, D.C. and Bronx, New York.

Through creative expression, Black women are consciously questioning the effects of sexism, classism, and racism on their communities, dominant images of Black women representation and misrepresentation. Beyond the artistic and entertainment value of creative expression, through writing and music in these forms there is a space for Black women to challenge stereotypical representations of Black womanhood, establish connections to other Black women and form “spaces of radical openness” to create change. Audre Lorde created it in her piece on two Black women brutally killed. Nikki Giovanni created it when she expressed the dynamics of Black women’s relationships to Black men and other Black women and continues to do so in contemporary writing and her involvement in the WritersCorps. Assata Shakur reclaims her identity when she penned her political narrative in *Assata* while in exile in Cuba. Her work through prose and poetry has connected members of the hip-hop generation to her activism. *Assata* prompts readers to get involved in challenging racism and sexism in their communities. Musicians Erykah Badu, India.Arie, Goapele, and Jill Scott take the Black feminist and womanist theories of bell hooks, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, the Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, Darlene Clark Hines and Rana Emerson and mold theory into an accessible form that extends to Black female and global communities in the form

of music, activism, and advocacy. Neo Soul Black feminists continue the tradition of Black women theorizing Black womanhood, Black women shaping their own identities, empowering their communities by empowering themselves, and “bringing Black feminist thought to popular culture” (Zook SM86). Similar to Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou who employed their novels, poetry, and autobiographies to give nameless Black women voices and sparked conversations about the legacy of slavery, domestic violence, and sexual abuse of Black women. The Neo Soul Black feminist artist uses her creative expression in music as a catalyst for political activism. Neo Soul Black feminists utilize their celebrity power to establish community based organizations or to align themselves with established activist and advocacy organizations to improve the lives of Black women in their community and internationally. They put into play voice, power, and an opportunity to heal the wounds of slavery and internalized racism and sexism to a new generation of Black women.

In my own research on Black feminist creative expression, I have healed. In my attempt to give voice to my departed childhood friend Timeeka, it has been a labor of love. In the process, I have learned to forgive myself for not intervening on her behalf. I held onto feelings of guilt for so long, it became toxic to the completion of this research because it was too personal. I wanted to walk away from this project. But in my journey through the grief of Timeeka’s death, confronting the hidden feelings of sadness and guilt years later, I found comfort, encouragement, and community in the art of the women I chose to research. For me, writing poetry was only part of the process towards healing, empowerment, and activism. The poetry of Audre Lorde and Nikki Giovanni, the autobiography of Assata Shakur, the feminist theories of bell hooks and Patricia Hill

Collins, and lastly hearing the CDs of Erykah Badu, Goapele, India.Arie, and Jill Scott all have helped me heal. Each woman's work has empowered me in understanding my story as not just my own but also belonging to the "herstory" of Black women's quest for voice. The common theme in all of the works I have cited is the quest for self-love. If Black women can love ourselves enough to forgive the wrongs perpetuated against Black womanhood (in and outside our communities), to tell our stories, and open ourselves to hear the stories of others' struggles against oppression, only then can Black women heal, experience self-empowerment, and be committed activists for social change.

In the spirit of Timeeka Stokes, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Patricia Cowan, Bobbie Jean Graham, Sojourner Truth, Maria Miller Stewart, and the beautiful Black girls and women who history denied knowing your name, strength, beauty, and existence-
-the transformational power of Black feminist thought is for you. Its legacy lives most profoundly in the work of Neo Soul Black feminist artist.

Notes

¹ Current status of Assata Shakur by the US Government obtained from:

http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/fugitives/dt/chesimard_jd.htm

² Hands Off Assata (HOA) Website <http://www.handsoffassata.org/>

³ Hands Off Assata (HOA) Website (contains lyrics by Common)

<http://www.handsoffassata.org/>

⁴ The term decolonization is from bell hooks' *Sisters of the Yam*. In it, she states, "decolonization refers to breaking with the ways our reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture and asserting our understanding of that reality, of our own experience" (2005: xxxi).

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