

As Seen on TV: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Race and Reality Television

Robin M. Boylorn

Studies of reality television often overlook a first-hand, first person account of the implications that representations of race have on individuals. This autoethnographic essay discusses the multiple consciousness of a Black female scholar. Layering storied excerpts and theoretical framing the author proposes the use of an “oppositional gaze” and “oppositional reading” to interrogate and engage images and representations of Black women on reality television shows. Given the historical legacy of Black female representation and the destructive images that result, a critical awareness could ultimately alter or inform the images of Black women we see on reality television. The author urges Black women to become critical consumers of how their experiences are depicted on reality television.

Keywords: Black Women; Reality TV; Oppositional Gaze; Oppositional Reading; Autoethnography

The Autoethnographic and Oppositional Gaze: Looking In (and) Looking Out

Autoethnographers look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural. Autoethnographic research combines the impulses of self-consciousness with cultural awareness reflecting the larger world against personal lived experiences—oftentimes blurring the lines between them (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As Mark Neumann (1996) states, “autoethnography reminds us that forms of cultural representation . . . matters deeply in the lives of others who find themselves portrayed in texts not of their own making” (p. 191). Neumann goes on to

Robin M. Boylorn (M.A., University of North Carolina at Greensboro) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. She thanks Dr. Mark Orbe and the anonymous reviewers for their continuous encouragement and guidance with the project. She also thanks Antoine Hardy for his insightful commentary and suggestions which were immeasurably useful in the final draft. Correspondence to: Robin M. Boylorn, Department of Communication, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620-7800, USA; Email: rboylorn@mail.usf.edu

say, “autoethnography historically originates as a discourse from the margins and identifies the material, political, and transformative dimensions of representational politics. Autoethnography is a form of critique and resistance” (p. 191).

Offering a viewpoint of autoethnography from an anthropological perspective, Irma McClaurin (2001) cites autoethnography as an opportunity for correcting misrepresentations and distortions of a culture by an outsider or an opportunity for people to “describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (p. 65). Particularly for people of color and in response to the crisis of representation¹ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), autoethnography does not attempt to speak on behalf of others but instead makes the researcher the research subject. Turning the ethnographic gaze in on itself, autoethnography allows the marginalized voice to speak for itself. Grounded in experience and written in evocative prose, autoethnography is intended to provoke other stories.

The oppositional gaze, in contrast to the autoethnographic gaze, is critical, interrogational, oppositional, consciously aware, seeking to document, and concerned with issues of race and racism (hooks, 1992). The oppositional gaze resists intended and embedded ideologies that are based on racist and internalized racist views. bell hooks (1992) believes that the oppositional gaze leads to agency because “there is power in looking” (p. 115). She continues, “we [Black women] can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see” (p. 116). When Black women position themselves as spectators and gazers they can use their critical eye to resist, and in some situations recognize, stereotypical representations.

Stuart Hall (1993) proposes three hypothetical positions for how people interpret media texts, including an oppositional reading where the social position (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) of the reader situates them in opposition to the hegemonic interpretation; and the negotiated reading which allows audience members to accept the preferred reading while also resisting and modifying it in order to represent their experiences. The oppositional reader understands the dominant interpretation but rejects it because it does not resonate with their experience of reality. The negotiated reader generally accepts the dominant interpretation but resists it in order to have their experiences represented. This article frames an oppositional gaze as an opportunity for Black women to see themselves and how they are presented in reality television, and a way for Black women to shift standpoints and gaze through the eyes of an “other.” Black women viewing audiences can use their gaze and personal experiences to both resist and relate to media representations, finding both commonality and contradictions.

According to hooks, Black women “do more than resist . . . as critical spectators, Black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revis[e], interrogate and invent on multiple levels” (hooks, 1992, p. 128). In this essay I use autoethnography to look in, and hooks’s oppositional gaze to look out, in order to challenge and identify with representations of Black women on reality television. In addition I am inviting other Black women to become critical consumers, using their gaze internally and externally (looking inward at their own lives and

consciousness and outward at the images and depictions of Black womanhood that are currently available on reality television) to oppose and challenge rather than immediately and readily accept negative representations of Black womanhood. Further, in those cases where identification is made with a Black woman on TV, reframing race and gender representations will allow Black women to embrace a binary of both/and rather than either/or (Hunt, 2005)—so that you can accept the negative and positive representations together rather than isolating them.

Black women must be willing to critique and challenge popular media images in contrast to their lives and experiences so that what is presented as an authentic or “real” experience of Black womanhood is not based on the most exaggerated stereotypes. Black women should not have to choose between ‘being real’ and ‘being Black’ (Squires, 2007). Because Black women often find other Black women to be their mirror image—seeing Black women boxed into stereotypes is like seeing yourself there. Some of it fits, some of it doesn’t (Means Coleman, 2000).

Lived experience makes it impossible to consider gender without considering race (Collins, 2004b). In what Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) refers to as “representational intersectionality²” I consider the ways that race and gender images “are produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color” (p. 1283). Patricia Hill Collins (2004b) uses intersectionality as a way of viewing race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age (and others) as mutually constructing systems of power (p. 11), all inextricably linked together and interdependent. I offer in this essay an autoethnographic response to the internal struggle I have with the meaning/reality/effect of Black women on reality television shows. Pushing against the ubiquitous representations of Black women as inferior, unshakeable, nonfeminine, criminal and promiscuous (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, pp. 12–34), I find myself constantly pushing against negative stereotypes. The essay follows my thoughts as well as the research on how Black women have been portrayed in the media to document how Black women can assemble counterstereotypical experiences and relationships to resist the negative effects of what is shown on television.

Weaving autoethnographic reflection with research about representations of Black women on TV, I layer my experience with research to create what Carol Rambo Ronai (1995) calls a “layered account.” Layered account methodology allows researchers to write in a stream of consciousness structure which resembles the way we think about and live in the world (Ronai, 1995).

Like all autoethnography what follows is messy, sometimes contradictory, sometimes complicated. By telling my story and reflecting on my own lived experience (reality), I am using autoethnography to talk to myself (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and make myself aware of how racial representations on reality television influence my perceptions of Black womanhood.

As an autoethnographer, I do not intend to speak on behalf of all Black women or to insinuate that my reaction is the only/best/right response; it is simply my response. I do not have the burden of speaking for the other—I am the other (Richardson,

2000, p. 931). My story is about my life and carries with it the validity, reliability, generalizability and verisimilitude (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751) that is associated with my life and situated in my experiences. I do, however, hope that my story evokes and inspires other Black women and women of color to investigate their feelings about race and their responses to the negative images displayed in the media, urging them to think and look differently at the complexities and contradictions present in reality television.

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Seven years old and brown-skinned I am standing in front of a mirror with the bathroom door closed, looking at myself and mimicking stern looks I have observed on TV. No longer do I aspire to be just like my mother when I grow up—in this moment I want to be like the Black woman I have seen on the news. She wears her hair in a mushroom and her lips are painted with red lipstick, not unlike the shade my mother wears. She reads the news from stacks of white paper she holds while sitting at a desk beside a White man with a suspicious smile and receding hairline. They volley words back and forth, taking turns talking about the day's events and introducing sports and the weather. Miriam Thomas was the first Black news anchor on channel 11. It would become a ritual for my family to sit down to watch her talk about the goings-on in the heart of North Carolina every night. The adults in my family say that I will probably be on the news some day, smiling wide and laughing to themselves as they say it. "Since you talk so proper," they say, curious about where I got my "white girl" voice from. It was clearly my "white girl" voice and "white" way of speaking that would get me on television, not my Black ass or Black girl ways. Real Black women are not on TV, unless they are mothers, maids, or matrons. I don't want to be motherly, maid-like or matronly when I grow up. I am motivated to get inside the television set, like Miriam Thomas, so I rehearse in front of the big mirror, pulling rubber bands from my hair and borrowing mama's good lipstick.

It was a peculiar joy, as a child, for me to witness a Black woman on television. It was an unlikely occurrence on the Black and white thirteen inch TV, then the colored floor model television of my youth. Located at the center of our house, the wood framed box was a source of entertainment and information for my family. The floor model television looked like a wide table, its lint infested surface serving as a place for doilies, picture frames, and ashtrays. The screen was like a window into the lives of other people, mostly White, sometimes Black.

My reward for good behavior and punishment for not minding was connected to the TV, which held cartoons, the news, my grandmama's stories (soap operas), and The Price is Right. My sister and I would rush off the bus to see re-runs of What's Happening and Good Times before we did our homework, mesmerized by the Black characters who found a reason to smile despite their setbacks and always made a way out of no way. We connected with Rahj and Dee because of father absence and we laughed at JJ, not understanding the effects that negative images of Black people had on us and those around us. All we saw was a Black kid like us—and at the time, that was enough. At night we gathered together in the den to watch the six o'clock news, nightly news,

Jeopardy, and Wheel of Fortune, in that order. On weekends we watched The Jeffersons, and 227, and on Thursday nights The Cosby Show.

The shows by Black people and for Black people allowed us to see what “other” Black families were like, though none of them resembled my un-nuclear household. My family consisted of my grandmother, her third, fourth, and fifth children and two grandchildren living together in a three bedroom trailer. It never occurred to us how different and distant we were from the Black women on the TV shows (by class, environment, and available opportunities). Weezie Jefferson did not have to clean her own house and could afford a live-in maid. Mary Jenkins was a housewife and didn’t have to work. Clair Huxtable negotiated a respectable career as a lawyer, was married to a successful doctor, and mothered five well-adjusted, well-behaved children who never lacked supervision or attention despite her busy schedule. The Black women on TV didn’t struggle financially, or have issues of self esteem (Smith-Shomade, 2002). They didn’t worry about disgracing the race or inadequate school systems. They dressed nice, had equal social and personal lives to their White counterparts and made living seem easy. They had husbands who loved and supported them and were providers for their children. Their reality was not my reality, but their inherent Blackness/femaleness compensated for our incompatibilities. At the end of the day we were more alike than different—bonded by Blackness and femalehood. The absence and invisibility of Black women on television had meant something, so their sudden visibility meant even more. It was the 80s, Black women on TV were to be admired as role models.

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Black Women On Television: Modern Day Mammies and Jezebels

Society defines African Americans by stereotypes that often touch at the intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality (Collins, 2000, 2004a,b; Hunt, 2005; Jackson, 2006). The images of Black women on television have been historically manipulated to leave a particular impression (Means Coleman, 2000; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Often typecast into stock/token characters, Black women on television fall into historical categories of stereotypes that range from the hypersexual Jezebel to the asexual Mammy and contemporary versions of each (Bobo, 1995; Bogle, 1997; Collins, 2000, 2004b; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Means Coleman, 2000; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Patricia Hill Collins (2004b) discusses class-based controlling images for Black women that range from bitches and bad (Black) mothers to modern mammies, Black ladies and educated bitches. “The controlling image of the ‘bitch,’” Collins (2004b) states, “constitutes one representation that depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy³” (p. 123). Other negative images include sluts, divas, hoochies, weepers, waifs, whores, antagonizers, shrills, welfare queens, freaks, and hot mommas (“Black Women on TV Still Stereotyped”; Collins, 2000, 2004a,b; Hudson, 1998; Morgan, 1999; Potier, 2002; Pozner, 2004).

Fitting the stereotype of the White and Black imagination⁴ (Morrison, 1992), Black women are situated on television sitcoms, dramas, and comedies to reflect these

stereotypes. In current representations an either/or binary exists; Black women are either extremely educated or a high school drop out, ambitious or listless, sexy or ugly. Her relationships with men are always daunting, because either she is too educated and independent to need or want a man *or* she is desperate and lost without him, incapable of going on and willing to fight, cheat, or lie to get or keep him. These false representations of what it might mean to be Black and female on television leave limited opportunities and possibilities for a Black woman to be presented outside of the expected boundaries (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Black women who do not fit a stereotype do not make sense (Potier, 2002).

* * *

When I was growing up, a Black woman with issues that were familiar to me was missing from television. In the early 1990s, as I was coming into my womanhood, the long running sitcom *Living Single* depicted the friendships and relationships of four single Black women who, though single, were all successful. Khadijah, Synclaire, Maxine, and Regine were complicated characters who seemed to represent the strong, silly, intelligent, and overconfident aspect of Black women, exaggerated in these separate characters. An updated version of this “Black woman” representation emerged in 2000, when *Girlfriends* premiered on UPN. Similar characters include Joan (the successful but unmarried lawyer); Maya (the romanticized ghetto assistant who was pregnant and married before graduating high school); Lynn (the nymphomaniac who has numerous college degrees but no motivation, and who struggles with her bi-racial identity); and Toni (the money-hungry golddigger who seeks men who can take care of her financially). These shows came to represent the range of Black womanhood—all updated versions of outdated stereotypes. These Black female characters presented Black women in contradictions and confirmations, reifying and dispelling stereotypes simultaneously.

Black women are misunderstood, misrepresented, and mis-portrayed. Accordingly, there are real-life consequences to the stereotypical portrayals of Black women. Jewell (1993) asserts that stereotypical representations of Black women influence how the dominant culture sees and treats Black women. She goes on to say that without a more holistic and accurate reflection of Black women in the media, Black women will continue to be maligned. The lives and experiences of Black people who do fit between the extremes are rendered invisible. For example, a well-behaved Black woman is not going to bolster ratings or seduce viewers back for more (Wiltz, 2004), but a Black woman who performs and perpetuates stereotypes attracts record breaking viewing audiences.⁵

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I am wondering how I can possibly be annoyed and entertained in the same moment. I had promised myself (lied to myself) and said that I was not going to watch another reality television show that typecast Black women into negative and limiting roles, yet, here I am sitting in front of the television watching, in some moments laughing, in other moments silently shaking my head and pursing my lips. I can't take my eyes off of the TV.

It is like a train wreck—I know I should not be watching, I should be doing something to help, to clean up the debris and salvage the damage but all I can do in this moment is watch. I am paralyzed and my eyes are fixed on the screen—consuming the story. Most of the women are voluptuous, loud, brown-skinned with weave down their backs and wide eyes made for rolling, fake nails and an attitude for days. I can't help but smile to myself, knowing that there was a time, not too long ago, when I would have been a visual twin to them.

Maybe it is an age issue. I am almost thirty now.

Maybe it is a class issue. I make enough money to perform middle class status.

Maybe it is an issue of education. I am obtaining a Ph.D.

Or shame. (Though I can't determine if I am ashamed of them or myself for feeling such disdain towards them).

Or maybe I am just buying into the same prejudice bullshit I am trying to write myself out of.

Am I embarrassed to be Black in this moment? Or am I only embarrassed because I know these exchanges are accessible to mixed company? I grew up being taught that what goes on in the house stays in the house—reality television brings house business in the public (blurs public and private spheres), making it visible and accessible to any and everyone. Black women on television are speaking for and standing in for me. I am implicated by any and all representations of Blackness on TV. Interestingly I always find myself somewhere between New York⁶ and Clair Huxtable⁷—chasing success and running from the bad girl image of my childhood peers. I feel conflicted because I find myself embracing some images and rejecting others while finding a piece of myself (the good and not-so-good parts of me) in them at the same time. The representations, both stereotypical and atypical, are so familiar to me. I know people who could fit both extremes and I am stuck somewhere in between.

* * *

Mammy is described as nurturing, self-sacrificing, and subservient (Collins, 2000). Mammy has also been described as “matronly; desexualized; bossy; stern, yet somewhat comical; broad featured or fat with huge breasts; and nonthreatening and warm” (Fuller, 2001). Jezebel, in comparison, is hypersensitive, hypersexualized, and classless. She is presented as sexually attractive, sexually confident, and oftentimes promiscuous. Sapphire, according to Hudson (1998) “both repudiates and embraces the Mammy and Jezebel images . . . necessitating the presence of a Black man (p. 246).

The re-creations of the historical stereotypes make room for new updated versions of mammy, with less restrictions. It is not uncommon to see a mammy-bodied Black woman in scantily clad clothing and Jezebel values, or a sexy Sapphire⁸ who is bossy and emasculating while also being sexually available and promiscuous. Reflecting and influencing culture simultaneously, “television . . . provides a space which continually updates and re-creates Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, and in turn, presents them as icons of what Black womanhood is today” (Hudson, 1998, p. 245).

The welfare queen is a new type of Jezebel, stigmatized for her sexuality and child-bearing. The welfare queen is also a synonymous stereotype that first appeared in the early 1990s on talk shows as the “gangsta bitch.” Described as “urban, lower-class, Black women who exude sexuality,” these women “are sexually and verbally promiscuous, highly fertile, and socially inert” (Hudson, 1998, p. 246).

* * *

I watch my ten-year old cousin rehearsing (much like I did with Miriam Thomas) who she wants to “be.” Standing in front of the mirror in the living room with earphones on she is sashaying around, pointing her finger at herself, rolling her neck and her eyes, and smacking her lips. She is wearing a tank top that shows more of her coconut-brown skin than anyone needs to see and has already picked out “sexy boots” for Christmas. She watches TV to study mannerisms, speech styles, and fashion. She is learning who and what to be by what she sees. The only Black girls she sees are stereotypes. She has chosen not to be Mammy-like.

She admires me but doesn’t want to be like me yet. I am not a “real” Black girl to her, not “authentic,” not “down.” When she tells me she is “keeping it real,” I immediately picture the images of Black womanhood that are pushing everything else to the side. She doesn’t have a Clair Huxtable. Instead she watches re-runs of Girlfriends and idolizes the Flavor of Love girls who “tell it like it is.” She doesn’t have a Miriam Thomas. There are no Black newscasters on Channel 11. I am worried about who she will aspire to be (like).

The Real(ity) Deal: Fake Names & Claims to Fame (An Identity Crisis)

I am a working-class turned middle-class, educated, southern, rural, heterosexual Black woman who is also a feminist, a Christian, and a college instructor. I know who I am yet my identity is in question, my standpoints blurred. As a Black woman I oftentimes feel like I am “performing” an identity rather than just being myself. I am supposed to be independent—the “strongblackwoman” (Morgan, 1999). Independent. Indestructable. Emotionally numb. Strong.

I am in conflict. I relate to Black women on reality television in more ways than one. In more ways than I would readily admit. Though I resist some of the ways that they choose to express themselves and “represent the race,” I understand the desperation to have your voice/experience heard after being silenced for far too long. I understand the impulse to be loved/wanted/desired/chosen by a Black man when statistics suggest a crisis in Black male-female relationships (Franklin, 2000; Morgan, 1999). I oftentimes find myself “performing” and “being” whatever it is people expect from me in given situations.

* * *

One of the first scenes of *The Flavor of Love*, a dating show on VH1 where women from around the country compete for the heart of 1990’s hip hop hype man Flava Flav, focuses on the re-naming of contestants based on a brief introduction. By refusing to refer to the women by their “real” names, there seems to be a stripping of

the women's "real" identity, allowing them to perform and portray their given name from Flav, rather than who they are in the real world.⁹ The supposed spontaneous names give them a "character" and identity to play while on the show and once the show is over because the public will refer to and remember them by the "character" they played rather than by the person they are.¹⁰ It is not until they are dismissed from the show do we learn their real names, at which point they have been characterized by (and will be remembered by) their fictional names. This makes their time on the show similar to acting.

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As a Black woman, I am an excellent actor. I have been playing dual roles in the public and private sphere for decades. It is an inherited talent.

* * *

In a criticism and commentary on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Michaela Meyer and Jennifer Kelley (2004) identify how the character who performs the stereotype of hyper-homosexuality is perceived as "authentically gay," in much the same way I argue that stereotypical representations of Black women on reality television come to represent supposed "real" or "authentic" Blackness. Reality television, then, offers a dangerous representation of an exoticized other (Hunt, 2005) and a dangerous reflection of me, as a Black woman (Meyer & Kelley, 2004). The danger is embedded in the inability of some consumers to distinguish between reality and fiction on the television screen.

Entman and Rojecki (2000) argue that

people tend to disregard counter-stereotypical or counter-schematic information. This is apparently true even in many cases where a person recognizes the existence of misleading stereotypes. It takes active, self-critical awareness and discipline to counteract schematic tendencies in one's own thinking, which most audience members have neither the motivation nor the skills to accomplish, especially on a subject as perplexing as race. (p. 215)

There must be an acknowledgment of the role that racism and sexism play in the image portrayals of Black women on television (Bobo, 1995; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992; Means Coleman, 2002; Smith-Shomade, 2002). A consequence of this oppression contributes to how and why (White male) critics oftentimes misunderstand Black women's experiences (Bobo, 1995), leaving them responsible to give an account for themselves. Jacqueline Bobo (1995) acknowledges the need for Black women to serve as critic and audience to texts that include representations of them.

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It is important that Black women are given alternatives to stereotypes, on TV and in real life, without having their authenticity questioned. I want to be a woman who "makes sense" outside of stereotypes. I am tired of my non-stereotypical behavior being interpreted as "acting white," which translates to being civilized or friendly or educated, not simply knowing how to act because you mama taught you better than that. I struggle

with my own anger, at the women who “show out” on reality TV and the part of them that does represent me, or the part of me that recognizes in them the nerve and confidence that I swallow with tears every time somebody tries me. Pushes me to limits. Challenges my “blackness,” because a real Black girl would move outside the archetype of virtue that has come to represent whiteness instead of inside a stereotype of what it means to be Black. I find myself seeking an alternative to “keeping it real” when the expectations associated with Blackness perpetuate negative images of Black women (Potier, 2002).

Pozner (2004) concluded that the more successful and profitable reality shows are, the more negative and derogatory its representations of women become. The women, therefore, did whatever they could to shock, they cussed, they spit, they fought, they called each other a bitch, they back stabbed and confronted and rolled their eyes and necks and popped their fingers and smacked their lips and tried to out-intimidate, out-shine the other. I don’t recognize myself in them.

I am conflicted. Disgusted. Confused. Not a wannabe, just wanting to be an alternative to what is assumed to be “real.” I want there to be more than one way to be seen as authentically Black.

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We are given repeated negative and stereotypical images in the media on a daily basis, so much so that we have become numb to its effects and implications (Jackson 2006). Entman and Rojecki (2000) urge audiences to “become more critically self-aware as they deal with the culture’s racial signals” (p. 205), challenging stereotypes while acknowledging the embedded truth that is often found in them. Trading all negative for all positive is no more a true representation of Black womanhood as current depictions. I am not dismissing individual responsibility but rather writing myself out of the box of stereotypes imposed on my Black body/identity/reality through media portrayals that ubiquitously place racist “scripts” (Jackson, 2006) on my body that have ongoing and emotional consequences. I am critiquing my own behavior and expectations. I am criticizing myself as an audience and challenging myself as a viewer along with those who, like me, see themselves and look for themselves (or representative images of themselves) on TV. I am acknowledging my bias and vulnerability while “working the hyphen”¹¹ (Fine, 1994; Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008) that joins me to my research, my race and my gender. Race and gender are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing. Therefore a critique of how Black women are represented in reality television shows must acknowledge both racist and sexist implications. Because racial and gender oppressions are inextricably linked in the lives of Black women, these factors cannot be captured separately¹² (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244).

A Black Woman’s Reality

The reality television genre is defined as “programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur” (Nabi, Biely,

Morgan, & Stitt, 2003, p. 304). Consequently, reality television offers a supposed lens into the everyday experiences, thoughts, and actions in the lives of participants. The (re)presentations of Black women are especially harmful because Black women are often assumed to represent their entire race and gender through their personal choices and actions (Brooks & Hebert, 2006; Collins, 2000, 2004a,b; Cosby, 1994; Fuller, 2001; hooks, 1992).

* * *

I started watching reality television while I was in college and finding myself. For the first time ever I had cable television and access to more than the six repetitive and copy cat channels from my mother's house. It was 1996 and I began to watch Black people in real-life scenarios that placed them in the back of police cars on Cops, or fighting over a trifling man on Jerry Springer, or exposing the probability of a man's fertility on Maury. These representations made it seem like all we, Black people, do is break the law, sleep around, and bleed each other dry. And I struggled with knowing people whose realities were no different but not wanting the inevitable implication of "reality" television. But I didn't turn my television off. In fact, my friend girls and I often gathered in one person's room to watch these so-called realities. From Real Sex to The Real World, we became the proverbial fly on the wall and watched people play out their lives for us to see. We laughed at them and with them and defended them like we knew them personally because they were one of us and representing us. So even when I didn't agree, I found myself getting mad at their choices like they were mine or getting pissed off when someone made a Black girl or Black person generalization from their "real-life" response to a "real-life" stimulus, which seemed to say "See, Black women are angry, Black men are violent. Here's the proof. This is real!"

* * *

I have an emotional and physical response to representations of blackness on reality television. I recall the pride of seeing a black contestant on Jeopardy and holding my breath every time he offered an answer, praying for it to be right; or seeing a black woman on Deal or No Deal risk everything to win everything and understanding her struggle; or the frustration of watching a white news reporter hold a microphone at the lips of an unkempt, inarticulate black person to share their opinion of a recent event, the background highlighting a dollar down house, broken down car, and run down yard; or the humiliation of seeing an image of an alleged perpetrator flash across the screen, black, unapologetic and presumed guilty by virtue of his skin; or the anger of watching black women use their bodies and profanity like they are going out of style and knowing that whoever sees them will see them in me.

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I am both a fan and a critic of reality television (Fiske 1994, as cited in Orbe, 1998). I concurrently enjoy watching the shows that reiterate stereotypes while also engaging them as a critical practice. Similarly, bell hooks describes her joint fascination and repulsion to images of Sapphire on Amos and Andy. She writes:

I laughed at this black woman who was not me. And I did not even long to be there on the screen. How could I long to be there when my image, visually constructed, was so ugly. I did not long to be there. I did not long for her. I did not want my construction to be this hated black female thing . . . Her black female image was not the body of desire. There was nothing to see. She was not me.” (hooks, 1992, p. 120).

Like bell hooks, I am equally fascinated, connected and disgusted by images of Black womanhood that are derogatory. However, I know that many Black women (myself included) see in this image “the symbol of the angry part of themselves white folks and Black men could not even begin to understand” (hooks, 1992, p. 120). My irrevocable connection (to all images of Black womanhood) and cultural curiosity corners me as a consumer of the culture and a spectator of the spectacle. “Many black folks do not want to think critically about why they can . . . find pleasure in images that cruelly mock and ridicule blackness” (hooks, 1992, pp. 5–6). By examining their own lived experiences Black women can contest the negative images and confront the realities of those images of women with whom they share a common struggle and history but not identity (Collins, 2004b).

Until recently, I did not see a Black woman on reality TV beyond the talk show genre (*Maury*, *Jerry Springer*) and occasionally a weight loss program (*The Biggest Loser*), but Black women were not made over (*Extreme Makeover*), desirable (*The Bachelor*), or surviving (*Survivor*) on reality television. That reality has changed. Black representation on reality TV has emerged as a quick claim to fame and the more outrageous and memorable, the better. The public can’t seem to get enough of the glamorized and ghettoization of Black womanhood.

How can Black women’s lives be engaged outside of a merely sexist and racist view? How can Black women’s realities be seen beyond stereotypes? How can we embrace ourselves and our sisters without shame, embarrassment and resentment? How can Black women demand multiple representations of her reality that are not connected to a historical, demeaning or assumed stereotype? These are questions that I continue to ponder as the private becomes more public and reality TV serves as Black public sphere, making home and family life visible and accessible to the public (Collins, 2004a; Pough, 2004). In the home we resist saying out loud what we know people outside are thinking.

* * *

My family is less intrigued with the lure of reality television than I am. At most, they watch game shows, but my mother and aunts remain oblivious to what my younger cousins are watching/seeing. I want to tell them, but I know that talking about Blackness as if I am not Black myself will make it seem that this expensive education we can barely afford is causing me to see them differently, see Blackness differently, to think I am better than them—to be ashamed of where I come from and who I really am. So I swallow those words and resist the urge to have those conversations. My family and friends, non-academics, don’t want to have deep conversations about stereotypes. They don’t want to be reminded that the only way they can see themselves on TV is in an extreme they can’t realistically fathom. They know, from their own lives, that Black women are complex and

complicated beings—by nature, by reflex, by necessity. They want to be proud of any representation of a Black woman on TV and I can't blame them.

I need to say it out loud, though. I need to express my frustration with how being a Black woman is becoming synonymous with the roles and representations that are being reiterated in the media. I need to find a space to speak out or write about my conflict with being a stereotype and an anomaly simultaneously.

S.W.A.: Sista With Attitude

I live within a culture that challenges me to defy the stereotypes that frame me as a Black woman, wrapping expectations of inadequacy around me until I give in or prove them wrong. While I am coming into myself—my whole self—my mean yet sweet, strong yet vulnerable, independent yet needy, intelligent yet sometimes un-eloquent self—it is becoming more difficult to prove them wrong.

* * *

According to Teresa Wiltz (2004), the sista with an attitude is a

perpetually perturbed, tooth-sucking, eye-rolling, finger-wagging, harpy, creating confrontations in her wake and perceiving racial slights from the flimsiest of provocations. She is all sharp edges and raw nerves, an angry, aggressive know-it-all, presenting a one-sided view of black womanhood (Wiltz, 2004, p. C01).

Scholars and critics have identified versions of the sista with attitude as occupying categories ranging from working-class women (who are presented as bitchy, promiscuous and extremely fertile) and educated, middle-class Black women (Collins, 2004b; Morgan, 1999; Pozner, 2004). Lower and middle-class images compete with each other. Working-class women are self-proclaimed bitches with a capital B. These women are “super-tough, super-strong and often celebrated” (Collins, 2004b, p. 124). This woman is often materialistic and highly sexual, using her body to get what she wants from men. This image, popularized on talk shows, judge shows and dating shows, is a representation many middle-class Black women resist and reject.

Sistas with attitude don't cry, don't break, don't need (or ask for) help, don't need a man, don't need a friend. A sista with attitude is synonymous with the strongblack-woman that Joan Morgan (1999) describes in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down*. Strongblackwomen, according to Morgan (1999) are not utterly independent and self-sufficient, a designation they receive by birth. The façade becomes a mask that Black women wear because of the expectation that they be everything for everybody except themselves. Educated, independent and capable, strong Black women are also known as superwomen, who Michele Wallace (1999) describes as “too domineering, too strong, too aggressive, too outspoken, too castrating, too masculine” (p. 31). The reality show character becomes a version of the sista with attitude, superwoman, strongblackwoman, who comes to represent Black women collectively, distorting the positive characteristics by exaggerating the stereotypes.

* * *

S.W.A. (A Poem)

*beautiful teeth and skin and
angry defensive words
demanding respect or love or
to be heard
listened to, remembered
I want to tell her to
keep in mind
her actions reflect
somewhat, sometimes
on me
another
black woman with
beautiful teeth and skin and
an education that is almost paid for
and shoes from the consignment store and
just as much need for a voice and a man
but not needy or greedy
just a
quiet country girl with
beautiful teeth and skin and
eyes that look back in time again
trying to figure out who I be
images of black women on tv
not clair huxtable
but fuckable
demeaned and
wrapping herself in stereotypes
bearing the shame for fame
I watch her
like watching myself in slow motion
killing me softly
innocently
an inarticulate part of me
Black. White.
flunking out of charm school
crazysexycool
and desperate for a flavor of love
giving me another name
and calling me out my name
til my lips are poked around
beautiful teeth and skin and
a story I understand*

of struggling, dangling, left hanging
at the would be altar
crying my damn eyes out
because this part of me
drowning in misery
is my
everyday
reality
being judged without witnesses
or the ability to defend myself
against lies you tell
assumptions you make
the way you look down on me
with the things you say
its real, world
not a different world
no other mother
or sisterfriend
with beautiful teeth and brown skin
bringing me back to life again
putting our issues on the table
and having our lives produced
and reproduced
like the babies we left at home
and the daddies who never came home
like the lies we tell when we say
that's not me
sacrificing progress to be on tv
making money for an invisible entity
that's not my fine ass
bare naked and exposed like the first tear
that falls from hurt eyes
my scars are not visible on tv
that girl, her words, that doesn't represent me
but beautiful teeth and skin and
reality sets in again
cause it's a personal thing sister,
this is just me
milking this temporary celebrity
and my beautiful teeth and skin and
there you go again
judging me because that girl on tv
put you in the mind of me
and she took off her clothes

and her hair and
left me exposed
acting like she didn't have home training
or home school, or no school
she dropped out of school
or put herself through school
how much does it cost
to sell yourself
short
with beautiful teeth and skin and
no
I'm not like
New York

As Seen on TV: Unrealistic Realities

Black women "must configure our private realities to include an awareness of what our public image might mean to others" (Collins, 2000, p. 100).

* * *

Few studies have allowed Black women to serve as critics of media depictions of their lives and realities (Bobo, 1995). As such, Black women have been voiceless to counter negative and re-emerging representations of Black women that implicate their everyday lives. As a Black feminist, I began with my own contradictory and controversial response to Black women on reality television, not to represent the Black female response but rather to position my own. I hope to invite other Black women scholars to critically engage reality television and race through their own critical assessment and investigation of how the supposed reality that is represented comes to affect them. Though there have been several articles focusing on the phenomenon and genre of reality television (Dubrofsky, 2006; Moorti & Ross, 2004; Orbe, 1998), the gaze has not focused exclusively on race or exclusively on women.

Using autoethnography, I offered a critical and self-reflective gaze at the one-dimensional representation of Black womanhood on reality television. Situated within my multiple consciousness as a Black female scholar and consumer of reality television culture, my response is dichotomous, consisting of both tears and laughter, both relation and disassociation, both understanding and shame. I do not know where this leaves me.

* * *

Sitting in front of the television screen I struggle with why it seems like a mirror showing me other sides of myself that are now being shared with the world. I call a friend, a Black woman who also watches reality television. We talk about the characters and compare narratives of what we have seen, mostly shows with a Black following or

mostly Black cast. *Divorce Court*. Maury. Judge Mathis. *College Hill*. *Flavor of Love* 1, 2 & 3. *I Love New York* 1 & 2. We don't discuss the deeper issues and consequences of negative representations of black women on television. We don't interrogate our gaze as black women consumers or contemplate what the embodied stereotypes on the shows come to mean for us in our everyday lives. My friend is not an academic and simply wants to talk about what happened, so we exchange words like good gossip.

We . . . I decide to use what happened (what we saw, how we saw it as black women and how we talk(ed) about it as black consumers of culture and media) to respond to my observations and research. We don't have those conversations but I think about them when our conversation ends. Our not talking becomes the beginning of my own story as I consider the implications that not talking about these issues creates and ponder what initiating the conversation could mean. Reality television coupled with autoethnography could be an opportunity to challenge and expand media reflections of race and gender.

* * *

In *Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, Michele Wallace (1993) seeks to “promulgate ‘cultural reading’ as an act of resistance” (p. 122). She urges Black women to interpret and analyze what they see with a critical gaze that challenges the hegemonic gaze while simultaneously recognizing or relating to what they see. Responding to the absence and silence of Black women and the misinterpretation of Black feminism, Wallace advises Black women to think for themselves and embrace their Black female subjectivity or voice. Wallace invites Black women to speak for themselves. She says

. . . it [is] impossible for anybody to speak in anybody else's voice, [and] such a project tends to further consolidate the lethal global presupposition (which is unconscious) in the dominant discourse that women of color are incapable of describing, much less analyzing, reality, themselves, or their place within the world (Wallace, 1993, p. 129).

She continues, “Black feminism must insist upon a critical oppositional representation of the black female subject” (p. 130) which would allow for a gaze of escape, fantasy and imagination as well as a gaze of negotiation (Hall, 1993) and confrontation (hooks, 1992).

* * *

Robin Means Coleman (2000) found that when asked Black women are more likely to associate themselves with favorable characters or characteristics of Black women on television. Black women tended to reject characters who possessed some deficiency—the socially powerless—opting instead to accept only the powerful part of the images. Yet, that is not a whole or honest view of Black womanhood. Resisting an all-negative representation seems to necessitate a resistance of an all-positive representation because our lived realities exist on a continuum that is fluid. As consumers we can re-inscribe and re-construct blackness so that we can find ways to be empowered by the images we see on television. The ability to resist representations that hooks (1992) and Hall (1993) offer allows Black women to own the positive and

negative, good and bad, real and fictional aspects of Black womanhood that are depicted on television. Black women must bring their own personal experiences and realities to the forefront to serve as a place and point of comparison.

Through this autoethnographic essay I have allowed myself to be self-critical and reflexive of the role race and gender representation on reality television have on the identity negotiation of Black female consumers. Given the historical legacy of Black female representation and the destructive images and unique issues that effect Black women from all walks of life, a critical awareness of reality television could ultimately alter or inform the images of Black women we see on reality television. By adopting an oppositional gaze Black women can politicize their lives and interpretations of their lives in popular media. If Black women become critics of the depictions of their lived realities and construct their realities beyond stereotypes they can invite representations that acknowledge the diversity of Black women's lives. Paying attention to the lives, experiences, and conversations of Black women who watch reality television can expand current scholarship by recognizing that Black women's lives are more than what is seen on TV.

Notes

- [1] The crisis of representation in qualitative research refers to the concern about whether or not researchers can ever accurately represent the experiences of participants, particularly those of marginalized populations, without further marginalizing them. In response to this "crisis" many researchers who were also members of oppressed groups began to step forward to tell their own stories, in their own words. For a historical discussion of the crisis of representation, see Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) introduction to the *Handbook on Qualitative Research*.
- [2] Some criticisms of Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality claim that her categories are overly simplistic therefore creating problematic binaries. Gendered racism, which is the main premise of Crenshaw's argument, is not created exclusively by sexism and racism—but additional factors including but not limited to sexuality, class, age, ability, education, etc. However, as a legal scholar, Crenshaw's theory has a limited aim to highlight how crimes against Black women are not only sexist but also hate or racist crimes. The double impact of hate that is both gender and race-related impacts Black women in a unique way in the judicial system which explains her simplified version of intersectionality.
- [3] Collins explains the various distinctions of a bitch, a term that like the n-word has been reclaimed in the black community. "Not all bitches are the same . . . all women potentially can be 'bitches' with a small 'b.' This is the negative evaluation of 'bitch.'" The positive bitch is with a capital "B" and they are "super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated" (p. 123–24). There are also "bad bitches," "sexualized bitches," and "educated bitches." Other contemporary examples of how black women proudly embody the label and/or use it as a weapon is found in popular hip hop songs. For example in the anthem-like rap Queen Bitch, Lil' Kim self-describes herself as a Bitch (capital B) and is repeated in later songs including *I Need A Bitch* (2007).
- [4] In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison discusses the dualism between Whiteness and blackness in literature. She posits that the role of blackness is always offered in comparison to Whiteness because there is a need for an exoticized "other" by which to compare, differentiate and explain Whiteness. Particularly, here, this ideology is reinforced through the reality television genre because even in the absence of

- Whiteness (or the presence of blackness) the idea that White is good and black is bad is continuously reaffirmed.
- [5] The reality dating show, *I Love New York*, debuted with 4 million viewers nationwide, breaking all records to date of any series debut on the VH1 network.
 - [6] New York (whose real name is Tiffany Pollard) is a television personality from the reality dating show *VH1's The Flavor of Love*. Her widespread popularity led to her being a finalist in two consecutive seasons of the popular dating show. New York appears in a spin-off reality dating show of her own, *I Love New York*, which premiered its second season on VH1 October 8, 2007.
 - [7] Clair Huxtable was the fictional wife on the popular television series, *The Cosby Show*. Clair was a successful lawyer, attentive wife, doting mother and was amazingly successful at all roles. The television version of a superwoman, Clair Huxtable was able to manage a career, home life, and marriage while looking good doing it. Though unrealistic, her portrayal of the contemporary successful black woman (portrayed by Phylicia Rashad) became an icon and role model of what black women could be.
 - [8] Sapphire images are prevalent on various types of reality television shows including, but not limited to, dating shows, talk shows, and court shows. Some of the most widely known Sapphires are Coral from *The Real World*, Bootz from *Flavor of Love*, Saaphyri from *Charm School*, Omarosa from *The Apprentice*, and New York from *I Love New York* and *The Flavor of Love*.
 - [9] In the reality show *Charm School*, a spin-off of *The Flavor of Love*, actress and comedienne Mo'Nique serves as a mentor to the women who were dismissed from *The Flavor of Love* and gained celebrity for being disrespectful, ignorant, belligerent, confrontational, promiscuous, and desperate for love and temporary celebrity. Mo'Nique attempts, at the beginning, to give the women their respectability back (which was lost as a result of their public behavior on TV) by first allowing them to re-claim their 'real' name and dignity by throwing their previous reality TV show re-names into a burning fire.
 - [10] Ironically, my references to reality television personality New York, in the paper, follows this logic. I automatically and unconsciously see her as the character she portrayed rather than the person she is, as if they are interchangeable. Though, perhaps, by now they are.
 - [11] The hyphen acknowledges the identity of the researcher and their social location in relation to the subject/topic of study. Michelle Fine (1994) explains, "by working the hyphen, I mean to suggest that researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study . . . understanding that we are all multiple in those relations" (p. 72).
 - [12] A view of intersectionality theory asserts that "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1244).

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