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Idrissa J. Snider
Wayne State University

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Intersectional research that focuses on the experiences and representations of Black women should place emphasis on examining the communication of resistance, since this focus is essential to progressing communicative approaches at the nexus of ethnicity and gender. This essay builds upon the work of Womanist (Walker, 1983) and Black Feminist scholars (Collins, 1991; Perry, 2011) in order to identify and interrogate the harmful systemic nature of various stereotypes and controlling images of Black women. These controlling images historically include representations such as the Mammie, Sapphire, Jezebel, tragic mulatto, and even newer images such as the angry black woman or the "bad bitch."

Through a close reading of Josephine Baker's "Danse Sauvage," this essay argues that we must respond to these mis/representations through what Patricia Hill Collins (2004) identifies as a process of "self-defining." By self-defining, we center black womanhood as an epistemological site, advancing black women's social movements, and creating a stronger body of knowledge about the impact and importance of Black women's experiences in a system that often generates knowledge from a European patriarchal perspective. Ultimately, this reflexive research approach of centering ourselves and our experiences as black women further strengthens and (re)establishes the importance of Black Feminist Thought as a valid epistemological approach to communication studies research.

Keywords: self-defining, womanist, controlling images

Long before millions of women around the nation joined in solidarity to support the rallying cries of #MeToo or offered support to Hilary Clinton as she attempted to break through the presidential glass ceiling, Black women were trying to figure out how to stand up straight in America. Although limited in their opportunities, early pioneers sought recognition and acknowledgment in distinctive and creative ways. For instance, Sojourner Truth interrupted a debate about the abolitionist movement and women's suffrage held in

Akron, Ohio in 1851, asking the very poignant question, "Ain't I a woman?" Seventy-five years later, in 1926, Josephine Baker's topless banana-skirt routine in the *Danse Sauvage* broadened the avenues utilized by Black women for activism internationally and in the United States, thus making her the world's first African American superstar (Guterl, 2009; Jules-Rosette, 2009). Acknowledging Truth and Baker as principle characters within the study of womanist identity development is necessary to understanding the premise of self-defining. Contemporary modes of resistance resemble the actions of women from the past, and this case study outlines modern examples of self-defining demonstrations performed by some of today's most prominent and influential Black women. Examining activism from a Black feminist perspective broadens our knowledge of and approach to feminist studies, and utilizing a womanist lens to assess the women selected for this project will allow us to determine the impact notoriety and socioeconomic status may have on Black women's activism.

The term *womanist* was initially coined by novelist and poet Alice Walker (1983) in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose." A womanist refers to a Black feminist or one who unapologetically loves and appreciates Black women's culture and the strength of other Black women. Some African-American and non-Black researchers identify as Black feminists, or even as Hip-Hop feminists. However, I prefer to be recognized as a womanist scholar. In concentrating on Black women's identity formation, my perspective encompasses a broader context, rather than a particular niche. As pointed out by Hamlet (2000), womanist thought focuses on suggesting a holistic understanding of African-American women by prompting examinations that highlight the historical, cultural, intellectual, socio-political and spiritual consciousness (p.421). It distinguishes itself from other Black and mainstream feminisms by addressing Black women's subjugation under a patriarchal sphere and by its acknowledgment that Black women experience intersectional modes of oppression (Griffin-Padget and Allison, 2016, p.150). Therefore, in the spirit of being properly named and identified within a matrix of Black women's unique perspectives, womanist terminology more closely aligns with self-definitive discourse and it employs terminology originating from an actual Black woman. Given these factors and the nature of this project, embracing ethnic pride is meaningful. Respectively, self-defining denotes to internal or public articulations, which involve Black women resisting controlling images through prompting or invoking acts of power while assuming a womanist standpoint. (One of the goals for me writing my dissertation is to delineate a concrete definition for self-defining. As it stands, Collins list a series of passages explain what self-defining could be, but there is no concise terminology for it yet. With that being said, this is my attempt to define the term). Keeping in line with these concepts, the purpose of this article is two-fold. First, it explains why self-defining is critical to advancing Black women's resistance to controlling

images. Secondly, it theorizes the usefulness and utility of the crooked room effect (Perry, 2011) by advocating for authentic representations as opposed to merely encouraging the need to create more positive ones.

While similar to other forms of self-actualization, self-defining differs from widespread identity-based psychological concepts in the way that it explicitly addresses Black women's resistance to stereotypes. It is considered as a counter-hegemonic knowledge essential for consciousness-raising, the making of political identities, and for mobilizing resistance in direct response to controlling images (Alinia, 2015, p.2335). According to Collins (2004), controlling images are "the gender-specific depiction of people of African descent within Western scholarship and popular culture (p.350)." Some of the oldest and most common types identified in the U.S. are Mammie, angry black woman, strong black woman, tragic mulatto, Jezebel, and Sapphire; these characterizations are also the prototypes to which many nuanced labels are based. They include bad-bitches, baby-mamas, THOTs (that whore/ho over there) and other insidious typecasts too numerous to cite here.

It is imperative for us as Black women to understand what we are capable of when we self-define. Self-defining is a viable means for social and political advancement. It is also critical to Black women's survival, interpersonal development, and our ability to thrive as individuals. Without such articulations, women of color are more susceptible to openly accepting the identities thrust onto the group from outside community members. As it stands, the discourse surrounding self-defining speaks to the need and purpose for it but fails to convey the next steps. To move the pendulum forward, scholars should identify and evaluate these kinds of performances so that feminist researchers can generate and further engage into in-depth dialogue surrounding the subject matter. Without doing so, this category or field of womanist studies lacks the profundity and breadth necessary to remain vital within the discipline.

Given that Black women from all walks of life have to contend with such warped and degrading representations, this article seeks to recognize and establish groundbreaking self-definitive performances to which women of color can look to, to garner their activism. By employing a textual analysis of Josephine Baker's international debut, I am providing an examination of Black women who use their status and celebrity as agents of change. Even though Truth and Baker are historically recognized as trailblazers in their respective genres, Baker is the first to respond to and disavow the stereotypes of Mammie and Jezebel with aplomb and on the world stage or via mass media.

This trend is especially prevalent in today's wave of womanist and feminist activity. During the 75th Golden Globes, media mogul and the first Black woman recipient of the Cecil B. Demille Award, Oprah Winfrey, delivered a soul-stirring acceptance speech (Adelman, 2018). Winfrey shed light on the story of Recy Taylor, a young married African-American mother

who was gang-raped and beaten by six White men in 1944 while walking to church. Taylor's accusers were never convicted for their hideous crime. However, her intention in sharing this account was to reiterate her belief that, "speaking one's truth is the most powerful tool we have." Then, Winfrey closed the speech emphatically stating, "Their time is up!" The day has also come when Black women must be vocal about who we are as an identity, as individuals, and as a community.

Self-Defining is Resistance

Controlling images developed during the era of slavery and remain salient in contemporary culture. These characterizations are problematic in the sense that they are ubiquitous and capable of creating a false authentic persona of even the most esteemed individuals. When some people identify Black women who resemble or possess characteristics associated with controlling images, they may believe that real Black women are exactly like the typecast they share similarities with. Lack of representation of African-Americans as complex individuals reinforces justifications used to mistreat the group, because if Black women are truly Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels it is appropriate to handle them accordingly. In other words, these fictional characters can attach themselves to any woman of color, irrespective of her level of achievement, education, or class and thus the authenticated false image is humanized. Second wave Black feminists like Collins, Crenshaw, Davis, and Lorde, were responsible for pinpointing how the objectification of Black women leads to undergirding widespread problems facing the African-American community. They have also been instrumental in bringing awareness to the psychological harm caused by labels commonly utilized for the systemic oppression and marginalization of women of color.

hooks (2015) argues, "Devaluation of Black womanhood after slavery ended was a conscious, deliberate effort on the part of whites to sabotage mounting Black female self-confidence and self-respect," and without such efforts, existing social hierarchies dissolve (p.59). Undoing the influence associated with controlling images seems unattainable. These depictions expose the intersectional nature of womanist ideology, functioning in tandem with existing rape culture, economic disenfranchisement, and within a social system that devalues Black women as citizens. Therefore, womanist scholars concerned with image representation have to be concerted in their efforts to produce research that will enable Black women to build their self-confidence.

The Oppositional Gaze & Perry's Crooked Room Theory: Giving Shade to Stereotypes

Womanist discourse is rooted and anchored in an Afrocentric rhetorical philosophy, which is about viewing Africans as subjects, rather than as objects. This perspective also aligns with what womanist scholars refer to as the oppositional gaze. In contrast to the autoethnographic gaze,

the oppositional gaze is interrogational, consciously aware, seeking to document, and concerned with issues of race and racism (hooks, as cited in Boylorn, 2008, p.414). West suggests it "requires us to critically examine, challenge, and ultimately deconstruct stereotypical images" (2005, p.287). Equally important, Boylorn (2008) acknowledges other integral aspects of the oppositional gaze while noting that it resists intended and embedded ideologies that are based on racist and internalized racist views (p.414).

One of the goals of self-defining is the expectation of being able to shift perceptions about Black women from the objectification of controlling images to the assumed standpoint we recognize ourselves as being in. Self-defining is not about trying to convince others or even ally community members to view Black women from a more optimistic perspective, although the assumption is that it should. The emphasis is to encourage Black women to express themselves authentically and realistically. Respectively, Black women's identity studies reveal that African-American women are often expected to 'wear the masks.' Even within academic circles, "the unapologetic Black woman is scary, not because she is rude, disrespectful, or angry but because she is truth" (Walley-Jean & Grange, 2016, p.3). Therefore, self-definitive research supports emphasizing genuine representations of women of color, since these are the images that promote empowerment. Concentrating on Black women's interpretations and articulations of themselves within feminist themed discourses also strengthens Black feminist thought as a valid epistemological approach to communication studies.

Allen (2002) claims, "As a (Black woman) communication researcher engages in the radical act of placing Black women at the center, she must be especially conscientious of her choices and actions. She may have to challenge traditional, mainstream knowledge, ideas, and approaches." (pg.22). Perry's (2011) metaphor of the crooked room paradigm as a theoretical technique suits this case study and provokes an awareness needed to make valid predictions and assumptions about demonstrations that can be qualified as self-definitive. Taken from a study conducted post World War II to examine field dependence, which also refers to an individual's critical thinking or cognitive learning style, psychologists discovered that most individuals would askew their own visual perceptions in order to attempt to locate upright or align vertically in a space (p.29). This phenomenon symbolizes the experience of Black women in America as being equivalent to the difficulty of standing up straight in a *crooked room*. Although, it is believed that all Black women are inclined to confront controlling images at some point during their lives, those in the public eye have an especially tough challenge. Black women celebrities are particularly vulnerable to being identified as and compared to stereotypes. Unlike everyday Black women, there is not an opportunity to get to know them personally. Therefore, prominent African-American women are often reduced to being recognized as a monolithic personality.

Perry (2011) argues, "To understand why Black women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior" (p.29). Utilizing characters from Ntozake Shange's, *For colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf,* Perry addresses the afflictions of the entire group by referring to those who are the most disadvantaged. The point is not to suggest that poor Black women have no hope or that wealth and status undo discrimination, but rather to highlight the gravity and burden of Black women dealing with controlling images, when exasperated by additional social barriers. Through the application of this theoretical framework, self-definitive studies can then "give voice to Black women and acknowledge the challenges they face" (p.30). Which suggests why womanist scholars should initiate the conversation by concentrating on those with a public persona, and in doing so, they speak for multiple African-American female communities.

Characterized as a "problem of recognition," the crooked room theory describes how controlling images prohibit citizenship. Perry's explanation is derived from Hegel's 18th-century philosophy of recognition, that outlines social contracts as affording individuals more than just access to resources like food, shelter, and economic power. In her discussion of the crooked room, Perry (2011) argues that citizens "desire meaningful recognition of their humanity and uniqueness, and they are willing to make the sacrifices to get it" (p.36). She goes on to qualify citizenship as a "membership in a body politic, a nation, and community" (p.36). Contrariwise, others claim that sexual and racial politics are two separate issues (hooks, 2015). Crooked-room theory appropriately tackles them both, in that it is a reminder of how damaging misrecognition of any kind can be. Plus, misrecognition is a frequently used theme in the discourse of African-American studies.

"Allow me to reintroduce myself; my name is Josephine…not Jezebel"

While on stage during her iconic dance choreography in the *Danse Sauvage* at Foliés-Bergere in Paris, critics celebrated Josephine Baker's bold display of sexuality and cultural flair. In her birthplace of the United States, Black and White audiences condemned Baker for what was then considered to be a provocative number. Most Americans found it difficult to praise Baker's performance not only because her artistry was controversial, but because she presented the unfamiliar narrative of a powerful Black woman. This mysterious jungle scene act, which displayed White men fixated upon the Black female body, was a realistic reflection of the nation; it was art imitating life, and the overtly sexualized image of Jezebel was personified. Nonetheless, Baker's ability to manipulate the trope was equally compelling and intriguing since she also forced America to question its idealizations about women of color.

During the dance, Baker was able to disempower the White male gaze. When she gyrated and moved her body sensually and playfully for onlookers of European male characters dressed in safari costumes, she seemed to be suggesting that she was an exotic creature. Not perplexed or phased by their attention, Josephine reclaimed her power. At the close of the scene, she jokingly looks back at them and walks away- unharmed and untouched. In this instance, Baker asserts her position as the gazer. This specific demonstration aligns with what hooks and other womanist scholars deem as the oppositional gaze. Considering that this performance occurred during a time when White male rape against Black women was common and often unchallenged, it is especially revolutionary and deserves our attention. Unlike many other Black female performers from that era, Baker exuded Black feminine sexual dominance on the stage.

In one book review covering her life and art, Thomas (2007) maintains that Baker's success was built upon her talent to "consciously create narratives and scripts from essential images as building blocks, which also functioned as justification for her life choices" (p.209). In addition to deconstructing Jezebel, after becoming a spy for the French Resistance and adopting 12 ethnically diversely children, Baker disrupted the trusting jovial smile of the nurturing Mammie. In fact, Baker often put her children on public display in lavish performances to promote her political agendas (Guterl, 2009). Ultimately, Josephine Baker changed the trajectory of how Black women celebrities could participate in the fight against social injustice.

Conclusions

Many African-American women choose to self-define as an act of resistance in response to the pejorative representations associated with the group. Recently, pop-star songstress and icon, Beyoncé challenged mainstream feminist identity perceptions and shined a spotlight on Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) with her Coachella performance—which is notably a predominately white space. She celebrated the country's unique higher-learning institutes and also awarded scholarships totaling $100,000 to four of them. There are several other examples of privileged Black women celebrities using mass media platforms to resist and reframe Black women's identities. In fact, Black women occupy a variety of educational, political, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds, and researchers should reflect these variations within identity discussions. For example, Boisnier (2013) claims "Previous research suggests that the experiences of feminist identity development may differ from women from different racial or ethnic groups, or those with different racial identities;" which reiterates the need for additional studies about identity formation across feminist camps and within Black feminist studies (p.211).

Alinia (2015) suggests "As groups occupy different positions, they have different access to power and resources, play different roles in

shaping oppression and resistance, and have different experiences and goals" (p.2338). She also argues, "U.S. Black women are simultaneously privileged and penalized (within a global matrix of domination)" (Alinia, 2015, p.113.) In conclusion, feminist researchers should be cognizant and aware of these variations in identity development, and their work should demonstrate that even when Black women are privileged, it does not negate their tendency to experience oppression. Author, Tamara Winfrey Harris (2015) puts it this way, "Black women are not seeking special treatment – just to be treated as human beings of worth…We are hoping for relief from twisted images of ourselves and the burden of always having to first disapprove what people think they know of us. If society will not give us this – if our communities will not demand this for us…Black women will still be alright (p.119).

Unfortunately, we must first initiate this process by recognizing that we have to separate our understanding of self from the controlling images that we are introduced to from as early as birth. Perhaps the more significant takeaway is that Black women from all walks of life, at some point, must wrestle with age-old stereotypes. I argue that liberation comes from saying "Girl Bye!" to Mammie, Sapphire, Jezebel, and their kin; and begins with welcoming one's inner truth and authentic self. Without Baker's tenacity to create and define herself by presenting a multifaceted public image, would others like Dorothy Dandridge, Mahalia Jackson, and Nina Simone—be able to bring awareness to the issues of their time? Black women in the 21st century are no different and in the same interest of the leading women that came before them, accessing opportunities for empowerment remains a significant concern.

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