THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD HABITS, BODY IMAGE AND OBESITY OF BLACK-AMERICAN WOMEN IN COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

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by

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THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD HABITS, BODY IMAGE, AND OBESITY IN BLACK-AMERICAN WOMEN IN COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

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a candidate for the degree of [doctor of philosophy, of Rural Sociology],

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

First, I would like to acknowledge God for providing me the strength, opportunity and endurance to make it through this process. All of those endless nights at the computer, when I sat with a loss for words -you presented new ones. I want to thank my mother, Bonita Wallace for all of her support and being there when things got overwhelming. For finding the right words to keep me going, watching the children and for cooking all those meals because I was buried in my work. Your words of encouragement, that focused on me "having come too far, to quit now" finally resonated. But above all, many thanks for unconditionally providing me a home of refuge. A place where I could find rest, find comfort with no distractions when weary. With all my heart, I always "love my momma, she's my favorite girl".

I would also like to thank, Darryl Kirkland for all your support. A special thanks to the late Anna Wright, "Granny" who reminded me so much of my grandmother and always believed I could accomplish my goals. God placed you in my life at a crucial time. To my late father, Joseph Leggings whom in our last conversation knew I would make it far from my humble beginnings and to focus on the future, only periodically looking back to draw off the wisdom of the past. To Ernie and Wendy Ygelsias for being there through so many hard times and their endless support that constantly helped me refocus on the future. For my children, may this work continue the legacy my grandmother and mother instilled, to believe in yourself, to maximize your efficiency, succeed and have hope in a brighter future where the sky is the limit.

To my dearest grandmother, to whom this book is dedicated; here's to your presence, your wholeness, your words of encouragement and providing a bosom with open arms. And to all the many generations of strong black women that paved the way, you are not forgotten.

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As your teaching assistant, I absorbed your passion in educationally reaching others. As I came into the understanding that knowledge can be burdensome, you emphasized that making a difference in society can be in teaching those that want to learn or as you would often say, "changing one grain of sand at a time". When I pondered the world, you aided in answering the questions. When I gave up, you revitalized my direction. When I was lost, you found me and when I stumbled from life experiences, you nurtured my soul. All of which, I am eternally thankful. Without you none of this would have been possible.

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As my advisor, I have been blessed and can only hope that my achievements in life model your training. In which, my lifetime work retains the zeal and commitment you have displayed. But above all, may my successes inspire others and honor your memory.

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THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD HABITS, BODY IMAGE AND OBESITY IN BLACK-AMERICAN WOMEN IN COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

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ABSTRACT

Obesity as a growing epidemic in the United States occurs in higher rates within Black-American populations. Although 100 million Americans in the United States are considered overweight or obese, Black-American women have the highest prevalence rate of obesity than any other subgroup. Most studies focus on unhealthy eating practices, lack of exercise, sedentary lifestyles, differential access to nutritious food and lack of adequate healthcare as contributors of obesity in Black-American women. But these studies are narrow in approach, lacking cultural constructions and food habits pertinent to the history and biography of Black-Americans. This dissertation explores Black women's perceptions of black culture, food habits, body image and obesity in Columbia, Missouri.

This dissertation is theoretically rooted in the tradition of symbolic interaction, which is best suited to explore the culturally derived ritualistic behaviors and traditions within Black Culture. By investigating food habits and cooking practices as symbolic manifestations, direct associations to the development of self, identity and in-group ethnic affiliation emerges. This research uses narratives from 15 in-depth interviews, compiled over a two year period. Results indicate black women's perceptions of self, identity, food habits, and body image was socio-cultural constructions. When holistically viewed, insights provided rich interpretations of one's life experiences and interactions within the groups' cultural milieu.

PREFACE

As the construction of this research project evolved, much thought went into how to present this topic using an innovative approach. One in which would effectively maximize utilizing symbolic interaction as a theoretical approach. In using narratives throughout the dissertation, participant responses could retain its' authenticity and maintain viability within academe. At the close of my field research, the commonalities among the responses provided were strikingly similar to that of my own life. The food traditions, holiday rituals and other commentary were nostalgic representations that reminded me of my grandmother. The transcription phase further solidified my assumptions.

Since the narrations provided by the participants were filled with such commonalities to my own experiences, it was an added dimension to include aspects of my life that also displayed a sense of collectivity. Furthermore, readers would possibly have a sort of intimate association in taking a brief walk through some of my life occurrences. While there are so many other details that will hopefully be told in future writings, the reader may find at the close of their review that the dissertation was a holistic narrative.

My personal narratives have been placed in the beginning of this text under the preface. This would allow the reader the opportunity to either read those first or read each as linked to a corresponding chapter. In addition, the placement of these narratives would avoid any confusion in reviewing the academic work. In this, each could be sorted appropriately. While this dissertation has taken years to finalize, the hope is for the reader to find character within the contents. In reading this work, it was my goal that one could unwind with a drink of their preference and share an exchange of emotions as I have in writing this narration. If you find moments of laughter, sadness, intellectual thought or other sentiments of fulfillment then this culminating experience has reached its' intended outcome.

MY GRANDMOTHER

My grandmother, Mary Ann Wallace was born in 1913, a time when, the practice of segregation was pretty much the status quo. Growing up, my talks with my grandmother would lead me to wonder how this *"black woman"* with such daunting memories could provide such a balanced opinion on the dominant white culture. I still revel in this question today, but have not found a response worthy for academe. Her teachings never restricted me to racially classifying myself, even though I was cautioned about the harsh reality of racial prejudice and discrimination that existed within America.

My grandmother's life was about people. As a housing specialist, she worked directly with people in the community. She was politically active and saw it activism as her civic duty. She enjoyed her time with friends and her weekend travels on a "bingo bus". Helping people was my grandmother's second nature, which I did not truly understand until much later.

My grandmother was a leisure traveler and on most trips I played her shadow. Most of her weekend excursions to the bingo halls and casinos included Atlantic City, Philadelphia and Maryland. Her leisure travels were often with the same circle of friends, and most of those journeys, provided the opportunity for me to be privy to the stories of these older women. These women often told of times of strife and hardship. There was laughter in the moment, but many would make reference of placing their burdens in the hands of God, one in which they seemed to derive their strength. Most often, I listened attentively because a child's place was to be seen and never heard. But during our private moments, I eagerly asked for more explanation and she was always willing to provide responses until things were clear. For me, that beginning, that core socialization began with my grandmother.

What I experienced during my travels with my grandmother and living in my community that introduced me to the vile nature of intra/inter group "prejudice" in America. With her innate compassion and people skills, she managed to positively redirect many of these negative occurrences and my growing pessimism with the utmost class and dignity. I can still hear her

say, ''Javonna, you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar''. But I would walk away thinking - that I did not care much for honey anyway.

I grew up in one of the most disadvantaged housing project areas of Brooklyn, New York known as Brownsville. My grandmother often spoke of a time when Brownsville was a serene place to live. The photographs she took out of the photo album were black and white images. The pictures of her sitting on the bench with a baby carriage showed no litter on the grounds, the fences still had chain links, store fronts were clean and white faces could be seen in the background of random people passing by. However, my reality of Brownsville had made those stories of a serene environment and photos quite unbelievable. [1]

Although she remained an integral part of the community, serving on tenant patrols and on neighborhood watch programs until her death, Brownsville was far from serene. By the time I became a teenager, the community was a war zone. It had become a drug infested, overcrowded area with rampant black on black crime. In fear of the cataclysmic downward spiral of the community and schools, I was later sent to an integrated high school well outside of my neighborhood. I must admit, that there were many instances in which one might argue that I was sheltered, but in no way, was I to escape the intra-racial bias within my own ethnic group. Since I was a lighter shade of black, I was classified among other blacks as a ''redbone'', ''yella'' or on occasion referred to as ''piss color''. My hair was too straight, my vernacular was too white, my persona was too white, and as far as they were concerned my color was also too white. Until my later teenage years, I was ostracized by the children in my neighborhood, which forced me to make friends outside of my ethnic group.

Despite the sheltering from my mother, by the time I turned seventeen I was already married with a child on the way. In retrospect, having children so early, I can only imagine the disappointment my mother must have felt over my youthful decisions. A few years later, my grandmother having battled terminal cancer for years became deathly ill. My decision to leave

[1]Donaldson, Greg (1993). The Ville, New York: Ticknor & Fields: A Houghton Mifflin Company (See Appendix #1).

my husband's side, while in the military would later have a detrimental impact on the marriage. But even now my decision would have still been the same—to return to my grandmother's side. I spent considerable time propped on her bed watching the news (the television would never leave channel two, CBS) listening to stories of old, her prospects of me attending college and cracking ice from a cup, until the stories were no more. I can still faintly recall those moments, although the specifics have faded. However, those memories instilled a sense of pride in family values, the love and dedication she placed in both, my mother and myself was a significant part of her life. The care she placed in nurturing would leave such a lasting impression, which warmed the soul. Years later, I would find the need to draw on that strength and the values instilled to overcome the poor choices of my youthfulness.

As the term "soul" entered the equation of my research, it led to many other questions about the social construction of the Black woman. How is it that we become who we are? Where do the values and characteristics that comprise "self" originate? Why do we eat and practice certain food habits? Why do black women tend to have a more robust figure? What prompts that? The training within my discipline prepared me to consider factors beyond the superficial. However, the foundation for transmitting normative beliefs, values and behaviors would inevitably go back to starting point – culture and socialization. It is the caregivers that shape the child's perception of the social world. As stated previously, that beginning, that core socialization began with my grandmother.

My journey through graduate school has certainly not been easy. The reality of raising five children while building small milestones of success has often challenged the essence of the "self". Although I am a firm believer that people are placed in your life during times of need, the challenge has been one of the soul. With this research topic, the significance of these women, the pillars of the family would resurface. Many of these women represented the heart and soul of the family structure, moreover they did the cooking. While these women were often classified as matriarchs, their presence was undeniable and allowed a glimpse into the history and traditions

of Black-American cooking practices. These women, as conciliators of the family, were also the keepers of oral traditions, which would be passed to future generations. In fact, these women served as the eye to the family and at its' core retained the legacies of their respective families.

As mentioned previously, to explore the topic of obesity, one would certainly have to consider food preparation and intake. Fortunately, my immediate reference point would not take me from my own lineage. I began my thought process with what was familiar – home. Having an ideal reference point, I noted the places and interactions with my grandmother most cherished. As I traced through so many personal memories, searching for places of the heart, the cherished memories stored deep in the corridors of my mind – narrowed down to the kitchen. Duly noting the common *responses of other* black women, it was relatively ironic that it likened a kindred response.[2] Those memories seemingly served as snapshots of love and family ties. It is from the teachings of my grandmother ''an astute Black-American woman'', without a college degree that I have compiled additional personalized accounts to those of my sample. *These narratives were designed for several reasons, (1) to follow the narrative research design used in this study, (2) to add richness to the typical dissertation design, (3) above all, to illustrate the remarkable similarity in the responses of the women interviewed with my own life experiences.*

Conceptually, this project can easily be classified as lifelong work and not the exercise of a doctoral student. At the beginning, this project seemed relatively straight-forward, but as with most things as I searched one dynamic, two would unfold. In retrospect, had these issues been uncovered early, I would have opted for a path of least resistance. The construction, deconstruction and refining process of this dissertation proved challenging and trying to the patience. But despite it all, I have not regretted my selected path.

[2] I recognize some may not share in this reality. Therefore, no absolutism rests here, but for those with any remote similarity, there was usually one woman that was referenced in an endearing manner.

CULTURE: IT'S MY HOUSE AND I LIVE HERE

Growing up, my grandmother played a major role in my socialization process. She made sure to instill home as a place of refuge. There were no modern luxuries in projects, but compared to many, our little extras made us moderately privileged. Nevertheless, my home was filled with love and support, a place where I could strip away the facades, "let my hair down" and just be me. Black culture and ethnic characteristics were embedded in everything surrounding me. Culture was in my grandmother's narratives, mannerisms, the music and hairstyles that were popular. But above all, culture was in the food habits, preparation and cooking traditions, the sweet aroma that filled the apartment. Culture just existed and in this, understanding black culture was something you learned along the way. Ethnic culture was observed, articulated and reified in participant interactions. In this regard, culture was everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It was the invisible particles within the air that you inhaled and exhaled, a sense of being and the way in which things were done. These cultural experiences is best equated the chorus line of a song by Diana Ross, "*It's my house and I live here*" (Ross, 1979).[3]

My grandmother's teachings and narratives often inferred culture and race in the same context. But the one concept that she frequently distinguished-was gender. While she often commented on racial issues, the plight of the "Black-American woman" was frequently referenced. Her teachings were never hostile or Afro-centric, but womanhood and the issues that would arise from being a black female always took precedence. She was adamant that this knowledge would prepare me for the future. Unfortunately, a full understanding of these messages did not resonate until much later.

Much of my grandmother's spirit and perceptions regarding womanhood were developed as a consequence of her life experiences. If there were any repetitious messages

[3] Diana Ross, "It's My House" video viewing http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjXJqwZFp4k

were the importance of being a self-directed independent young woman in control of my own destiny without falling blindly to male domination. These messages were not intended to create an overpowering female, dominant enough to castrate the male, but one that could successfully navigate through life. The older generations of Black-American women were wise in their teachings and how these issues could be negotiated. They were strong women, allowing the male to retain his dignity as head of the family- a lesson that I still have not adequately mastered. Often listening attentively to the words of wisdom, I failed in implementing many of those lessons early on and opted to attend the school of hard knocks. My grandmother was obviously onto something with those lessons emphasizing gender and ethnicity, but there would be many times which required referring to her teachings in reassessing the situation.

Throughout my graduate career there was several times that I reflected on "home" and the lessons learned. It was a means of staying focused, in remembering where I came from aided in determining where I was going. Looking back on my childhood memories, the division of labor and the way things seemed to work in my home could be compared to the Amazonian structure, meaning women ruled. My grandmother ruled from one red chair in the living room— she *was* the matriarch. While the males (my father and grandfather) were present, rarely were they involved in important decisions. The women were the breadwinners, the task specialists making the final decisions on life matters. Amidst these issues, they tolerated the ups and downs, catered to the egos of the males while still managing their own needs and sense of identity. Males were allowed to offer their opinions, but women ruled. In fact, women were the threshold of my family, the very glue that held everything together.

It is clear that my family was fragmented across gender lines, but the women always did what had to be done. Males were inferior creatures that were just there. Despite the dysfunction, it was empowering to observe. Although my interpretations have now changed, I grew up considering males rather insignificant. It seemed that the legendary Amazonian women were advanced in their thinking and treatment of males. There was a sort of verity in my notions, since

I was always allowed to speak my mind (within a proper context), sometimes to my own detriment. But in my home, adults never sugar-coated their perceptions of reality, this was absolutely non-existent. Most conversations began at a typical decibel level, but rarely ended that way. This was simply understood as a heated discussion. It was the main point or principle of an issue that was being debated and no one took offense to loud voices.

My mother never shared my sentiments regarding males. But this was ironic, since we were raised by the same woman. While it initially seemed rather paradoxical that our views varied so much, it is my presumption that our conflicting perspectives had a lot to do with the difference in my grandmother's thought processes and life stage by the time I came along. I suspect she was more passive in her younger years, but later less tolerant of certain things.

As a sociologist, with my background it seemed relatively ironic that I never situated myself within the theoretical lines of feminism. Somehow my educational attainment steered away from that body of literature. While the works in this area are exceptional, gaining a broader knowledge base allowed me to reflect on my former assertions of men. Needless to say, these changes were often difficult and sometimes I still battle those demons. Ironically, it seems as if karma granted me four sons and one daughter. With certainty, raising boys has been considerably different, where the challenges have required a completely different source of energy. But it is often presumed that behind every good man, is a strong woman. While this perception may speak to many women, it was an ever-present reality for the black woman. A reality that even if desired she could never escape.

It *was* the culture— and role of the "Black-American woman". As she carried the burdens she recognized she was "damned if she did" and "damned if she didn't". She found solace with other Black women that shared in similar life experiences. She was "the clean-up woman". She worked, she reared, she cooked, she taught; but rarely rested from the life dilemmas and family strife. Her zeal in life was nothing short of relentless. I respected her, revered her and placed her on a pedestal, even when I did not understand her—and one day, I became her.

TO BE A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST OR NOT TO BE THAT IS THE QUESTION?

In writing this dissertation, I have had to refocus my attention on the significance of symbolisms, ritualistic behaviors and social interactions from which meaning is derived. Many of these constructions required me search the corridors of my mind for concepts that once had little significance. But in looking back through the lens of life with a broader scope, the people, places and events had new meaning. In fact, many references coincided with some of my fondest childhood memories. Some of my past memories were stored so deep that these occurrences were never mentally retrieved until now. While these events were just part of my life experience, I gave little credence to how these details and idiosyncrasies derived meaning or shaped my perceptions of self, life and reality.

Throughout my first few years of graduate school, theory was never my stronghold, but by the latter part of my graduate tenure I had acquired a newfound appreciation for theoretical constructs. I had developed a pretty good grasp of the underlying assumptions and classical theorists within functional and conflict theory. But symbolic interactionism was overwhelmingly fragmented into different paradigms, so I avoided this theory when possible. However, in preparation of my dissertation symbolic interaction as a theoretical perspective, was best suited for understanding perceptions and socio-cultural meanings, which brought my avoidance to a halt. So I geared up for what then, seemed like a challenge of a lifetime.

I began my research by chronicling the classical theorists in the field, making visual charts of the different areas within the perspective, noting each of the prominent writers while placing them under their prospective areas of study. Understanding the symbolic interaction approach was certainly a process. But the further my dissertation developed, so did my appreciation in the powerfulness of this paradigm. By uncovering its' utility, I embarked on a journey that would impact my understanding of self, leading me to deconstruct my own perceptions of "self', reality, ethnic affiliation and identity.

My graduate courses on research methods and field research were quite guided. Since methodological approaches are extremely important in the discipline of sociology, considerable emphasis was placed on the structure of the proposed research design. We are trained to consider or be cautiously aware of how our presence impacts the empirical information gathered. The guidelines for properly conducting yourself in the field were not to be taken lightly. This did not mean your design had to be flawless or that the field would not bring about growth, but you had to display a working knowledge of the approaches. In this, my professors never cut corners. Each especially interested in ones understanding of how methodological techniques integrated into the theoretical construction researched.

Entering the field, I had a pretty good grasp of the theoretical literature in my area and research design. But all of my in-class training could *never* prepare me for the emotional and psychological abyss entered in my work. While my research instrument included various themes organized and color coded with particular questions, I made no presumptions as to the viability of any one theme over another. Yet, there were shifts in my original research that emerged from the field.

In recording the information of each participant their stories were filled with pain, strife, triumphs and even memories of segregation. But what truly took me by surprise, was the unavoidable emotion and sincerity in their voices, as each participant entrusted me with their depictions and experiences as a Black-American women. The age differential of the participants formed narratives that were cultural continuums where the past seemingly collided with the present. But there were several times in leaving the interviews, that the past fifty years had showed limited black cultural ideological progression. I absorbed the field. At some point, picturing their experiences as they narrated became second nature, until I was no longer a mere recorder of information, but a keeper of souls.

At this point, I was reasonably versed in the literature having read well over three hundred articles and books. Nevertheless, I continued to review more sources of information until my mind lapsed into an intellectual flux. Welcoming the mental downtime as a form of withdrawal was always short-lived. I spent a lot of time pondering, before actually writing. As soon as I regained my mental strength, bam! I plunged myself deep into the literature on culture and symbolic interaction again.

Becoming fully immersed in my work, the realization set in that this theoretical paradigm was serious business. Many times frustration set in, but with the time and work already invested in the project, I had reached a point of no return. My ability to use reflexivity had become second nature and the interviews would leave me either emotionally drained, elated or psychologically stagnant. After some of the interviews, all I could do was flop onto my sofa at home, ball up with a blanket while their stories played over and over in my mind. At times, those entrusted narratives filled with such heart and soul became burdensome. Almost as if the ancestral ghosts of the past filled the pages of my work, my role as recorder became more prevalent.

My focus remained on the ability to maintain objectivity, but the subjective was omnipresent. Therefore, I moved cautiously through my work. While I remained culturally conscious, I knew my own presence as a Black-American woman allowed for the openness in their responses. Since each interview proved draining, occasionally I welcomed the prospect of encountering one that would be superficial. But this never came to pass. Instead, each subsequent interview increased in intensity. With each narrative capturing some identifiable commonality to my own life experiences, it projected an invisible mirror of reflectivity to my own "self" image. Although mentally and emotionally exhausted, objectivity required tucking away any cultural skeletons and ghosts, but there were times when my own reflection in the mirror had become a psychological haze. Maintaining the focus of my study, the oral narratives were recorded preserving the voice of each participant.

In pondering the data collected, there tended to be more questions than answers. Theoretical connections were multidimensional. The individualized stories of the participants in this study were like branches on a tree. Underneath the surfaced ground each was singularly rooted, but culturally entwined giving strength and vitality to the visible structure. As the pieces merged, a sort of cultural transparency mirrored. A transparency weaved from commonalities, formed by collectiveness in the history and biography of the black woman—a sisterhood overshadowing differences.

In this, my intellectual chasm of confusion began to diminish. The questions I had pondered in the beginning sprouted intervals of clarity. The oral accounts of my participants were part of my own upbringing and experienced reality. From the distant shadows an apparition of my grandmother became visible. She smiled at me and nodded approvingly before she turned away, her image fading into the darkness.

A FEMALE SOCIOLOGIST OR A BLACK-AMERICAN SOCIOLOGIST

In the summer of 1997, relocating to Columbia, Missouri to attend graduate school entailed quite a bit of culture shock and re-adjustment. Having eight weeks to settle in before classes started provided sufficient time to prepare. Setting up the little furniture brought from New York or other matters pertaining to moving was more than viable in the time allotted. I did lack certain resources mandatory to life in Columbia that made grocery shopping and enrolling the children in school and daycare difficult. Not having driving license, vehicle or even the ability to drive was problematic. I walked or had to call a taxi to go most places. Nevertheless the summer of 1997, before graduate classes I recall having nothing to do. It was the last time that my house was spotless, every item put in place and all necessary business finished. Those were the good old days.

There was a certain enthusiasm in beginning the next tier of my education. I hoped to meet people similar to myself, thirsting for knowledge. But this reality quickly took back seat, once immersed into graduate life. In graduate school, a free exchange of knowledge was frequently discussed, but in reality purpose-driven relationships based on reciprocity were often formed. The competition among graduate students was fierce and out of circle exchanges were cut-throat. My first two years of graduate school, was spent relatively lost. It was evident that my undergraduate training had not adequately prepared me for a traditional university and many years were spent in what I term academic catch up. Back then, I hungered for free exchange of knowledge with colleagues, especially from the veterans of the academy that were well indoctrinated into the study of sociology. I felt the bickering and back-stabbing had little relevance and just seemed like a fruitless way to expend much needed time. It was quickly learned that competition was part of the process and despite efforts to dodge these occurrences, it met with no avail.

In all honesty, it would falsify truth to state being a black female had nothing to do with my personal and academic experiences in life. Despite upward mobility, being black and female were characteristics hard to escape. In my first year of graduate school, the harsh reminders came in every direction—messages vividly held and avowed by black budding intellectuals were frequent topics of conversation. Attempts to distance from presumptions were taken offensively, usually branding the individual as a black outsider, which led to scrutiny under watchful eye.

Many Black-American graduate students shared sentiments that academic life was far from a pleasant experience. In my discipline, the Black-Americans graduating from the department of Rural Sociology could be counted on both hands. There had never been any Black-American faculty members in our department, which magnified sentiments of Black-American graduate students. Single females with children often found the support lacking and the lessons learned - hard ones. In my department the combination of gender, race and single parenting took the term minority to another level.

To find favor among faculty was rare and certainly not a common phenomenon. In short, I was lucky to have studied under a tenured "icon", a faculty member whose vested interest was truly in advising and nurturing his graduate students, which included those of minority status. Many faculty members questioned whether some of us even belonged in a graduate program and diligently seized every opportunity to posit their discontent. Despite these professors' impassioned grievances, my advisor passionately defended our viability.

My advisor tended to rotate his efforts, placing more care on the new comers. It was practical to give more time to those starting the graduate process. He delegated advanced tasks to senior graduate students provided their expertise. While it is rest assured that my advisor was always the exception, it never stopped the internal overt and covert hostility expressed within the ranks of his advisees.

I was still a new jack and gave a considerable credence to the comments and thoughts of senior graduate students. After all, they had been around awhile and knew the ropes. In addition, I was still finding my way. Having to play academic catch-up, my initial development as a graduate student was slow. My advisor was more than patient, nurturing me each step of the way. He was adamant that *all* his advisees would have the experience in both, research and teaching which he usually spearheaded.

Surely, my deficit on every level required more of my advisors attention than the average. Seeking his guidance on coursework, research and teaching kept me in close proximity. While I never considered myself the exception, his nurturing was viewed by senior graduate students with hostility. Sharing an office with these graduate students made it impossible to avoid certain conversations or to avoid their discontent in my admiration for the one person that expressed any sincerity in my academic growth. At that stage of my graduate experience, color did not matter. Working to academically catch up consumed my time. But with venom, it was emphasized that "I needed to remember I was nothing more than a "black" sociologist and compared to white graduate students my accomplishments or stature meant nothing. Be clear to never lose sight of that reality". Granted, these sentiments were understandable, but I failed in fathoming how taking ownership of that philosophy would enhance my overall academic growth.

I failed to defend my perspective on the matter, which would have possibly added more fuel to the fire. Considering it best to be quiet and do some soul searching, I left the office upset. Resonating on the comments took me back to my childhood where perceptions of other black children left me isolated. I was always classified as a white girl—my vernacular was too white, my demeanor too white and my thirst for knowledge were certainly deemed as being white. Certainly, society treated me as if I were black. But here I was, a grown woman with children and there was still a need for Black-Americans to remind me that I was "*black".*

In my grandmother's teachings, I had learned to look beyond just one aspect of self and to recognize there was a lot more to me than just a racial depiction. Granted, I am a black female sociologist, which may make the road to success more difficult. But being bitter and carrying a "black" chip on my shoulder would surely make experiences negative. These were possibly things black graduate students stated to each other. However, I knew one thing--the depictions of my colleagues were not something I had to wear. The representation of who I am could stand on a lot more than just color and gender. While many will label me, why be hateful in the process. Accept certain things that you cannot control, but when be part of the solution and not the problem.

According to my grandmother people would always find something negative to say about you, but at the end of the day what mattered was how I defined self - and what values I upheld. Above all, try to inspire positive change in the lives of those that I touched along the way. Be reflective, but never lose sight of who you I am, where I came from and where I was going and let the rest take care of itself.

I knew it taboo to discuss the comments with my advisor, but I truly wanted his guidance on the matter. My advisor's comments supported the viewpoints learned as a child. He summed these statements with one of his most popular phrases, ''you have to be, what you want to see''.

MY GRADUATE JOURNEY: A REFLECTION OF MY DISSERTATION TOPIC AND FIELD EXPERIENCE

My journey has been one of mixed emotions that have challenged me in ways never expected. This dissertation project would lead me inward, deeply searching the corridors of my mind for knowledge and clarity. These moments were more vivid alone at the computer for hours writing parts of chapters or second guessing newly attained information. But above all, this path would constantly bring my own sense of self into question. The process of thought and reflexivity as a part of my theoretical approach intensified the research practice.

As a single female, attending graduate school was no easy task, but one that required dedication and perseverance. In the dissertation process, there are moments filled with a sense of accomplishment, but many more of doubt. Despite the reasonable responses, there is doubt as to why anyone would sign up for such brutal undertaking. Some may read this and find inspiration; others may laugh out loud when visualizing the experiences articulated in this journey and pursuit of a higher degree. Know you are not alone, many of us have shared in these moments, but you too will survive this process.

As a woman whose life experiences have never been average and usually inundated with the "Murphy's Law Syndrome", I laugh now at my initial thoughts of selecting a low key topic dissertation topic of relative interest. Better still selecting a topic that I had some relative knowledge, limited in controversy would certainly speed of the process. With a working knowledge, researching black woman's perspectives on food habits, preparation, body image and obesity was not remotely far-fetched and well within the scope of reasonability. But I should have known it then…somehow my opting for easy never quite works out.

As with many doctoral students, my initial thoughts and drafts were in the rough. Determining the best suited theoretical approach and style of writing also required refining. From the offset, the one thing I wanted to avoid was wading through another typically dry,

monotonously written academic manual to partially fulfill the requirements of obtaining the PhD. But outside of that, everything was fair game. Commonly, graduate students adhere to the logic of selecting a topic of interest, presumably one that does not require a lifelong commitment. Why? The dissertation is a process that is not intended to be lifelong work. However, we often require constant reminders to limit our grandiose objectives in selecting a feasible project. The challenge for many is that it is rigorous enough to finalize the dissertation project, let alone being left without attractors that will keep us wedded to the project.

My preparation for writing this dissertation took several years, much of which was spent thinking and rethinking pertinent concepts and methodological approaches. Considerable time went into conceptual mappings, organizing charts and making endless notes on slips of paper that were devised to remind me of the little details recapping "this" point or considering "that" fact. Nevertheless, as with my fellow colleagues, I too have had to narrow my scope several times. Despite my motivations, determining where to cut without sabotaging the goal of my research were always difficult tasks. When trained to consider everything, everything seems important. In my mind, eliminating aspects was an open omission of something *possibly* relevant. In spite of my efforts, my dissertation research remained ambitious and encompassed a broad range of work.

The necessary tools to completing a dissertation project are what I refer to as the three deadly D's—dedication, determination and discipline. Dedication and determination was part of the process, something that keeps you going. But discipline- well now that is another beast. Then there is the irony that every event or life occurrence lurking on the peripheral becomes a factor, frequently delaying progress and derailing the process. For every instance of flickering light, signaling the end drawing near, prompts some ravine of dark issues are omnipresent on the horizon. These life issues are mechanisms, mere deviations of completing the dissertation in a timely manner. In this, single females with children often find the long haul requires a different

level of commitment than that experienced by the traditional graduate student. Successes are in small milestones. For us, the graduate experience seems a journey of no return.

At some point, a love-hate relationship is formed. That sense of moral duty keeps our focus dispersed caring for many things. While everyone states that there comes a time where you must divorce yourself from everything else and get the dissertation FINISHED. It is a noble concept that is easier said than done. Especially when every fever, snotty nose, employment, dinner, calls from school seemingly fall directly on your plate.

To further complicate matters, there are then the patriarchal views in the academy, in which some professors harbor deep-seated perceptions that the challenges of graduating the single parent female are beset with more problems than it is worth. Since these sentiments are ingrained, many do not even actualize how their views are manifested indoctrinations in sly comments demeaning the individual's characteristics or life issues. It is only the very few, rare advisors that recognize wearing many hats helps us through the process. But encountering these directors of fate are few and far in between the process. For those, rest assured there is recognition in your commitment, the time, work and energy placed into our success. These make for lasting memories, good ones that ease the pain of the entire journey. Students that were fortunate to have had my advisor certainly know this to be true.

With this said, let's turn attention to the methodological process and field experience in the dissertation. Each dissertation section brings its' own challenges, from the introduction, literature review, methods, substantive areas, results and conclusion. But the compilation and integration of existing literature requires a lot mental filtering. Since the theoretical application is merged here that must correspond to the methodological approach used in the study much time is exhausted here. Lacking appropriate knowledge here stagnates in any further development. For sociologists, the field is what brings our work to life.

My graduate coursework had adequately prepared me for field research and the various methodological approaches used in collecting data. But despite my proficiency in classroom

practices, nothing could prepare me for upheavals that I would soon experience in the field. Entering the field fully dedicated to doing a thorough job as a recorder of information, was quickly transformed in my participants mannerisms. Each entrusted me with intimate details of their lives. Stories with memories from childhood filled with joy, strife, tragedy and the achievement of Black-Americans. The close of these interviews often left me mentally and emotionally drained. As I accompanied each participant through their reminisced narratives, memories of the past, present and future also brought a variant of feelings. Even though, I carried the burden of documenting accounts of their truth, these moments were often enriching, empowering or enlightening. Before long, I questioned my role, goals, directives and even myself. This would soon dictate my task as caretaker of information and "keeper of souls".

I held my composure departing from the interviews, but in my car I just sat there. The ignition off glaring out the window- at times I cried, other times I laughed. Grappling with the current state of the black community, it was as if the historical strives of Black people had dissipated. I was too young to remember overt segregation or the Civil Rights marches discussed, but the passion in their accounts took me with them in mind and in spirit. Projecting on their discussions of struggle and observing the dysfunction in the Black community today left me scared observing a future that looked painfully bleak. Black-Americans as an ethnic group have made progress, but it seemed in taking a few steps forward, in lieu of those successes a series of detrimental steps had taken backwards.

At home, my moments of solitude were spent on the living room sofa reflecting the details of each interview. What was the egalitarian fight for? How did we get here from the objectives of our ancestors? Did our Black leaders die in vain? Questions and then.....more questions, which forced me to search the core of my being. With time and reflexivity, I acquired an enlightened "sense of self," which opened the door of new inquiry.

If anything has been learned, the trajectory of my field is simple that understanding the discipline of sociology is an intricate process. But once obtained its' uses is extremely powerful

in the hands of the practitioner. Development and growth as graduate student is ever-changing, but along the journey, insights will become epiphanies and the material begins to resonate, as if acquired by osmosis.

Grappling with a vast theoretical approach, built on the premise of reflexivity has made me a better sociologist. Even though, hours were spent reading into a mental stupor it was worth it. While the work involved in my research was far from my original presumptions it was enlightening on many levels. My field experience proved an imperative component in my development. Adamantly, my experiences from the field will last forever and it is my hope that as with my encounter you will find yourself within your work.

THE STORYTELLING AND FOLKLORE OF AN OLD INDIAN

Some of my fondest memories of my grandfather were sitting on the sofa, watching Western movies on television, what he referred to as "Shoot 'Em Up Bang Bang Movies". My grandfather was a Cherokee Indian with silky jet black hair. He may have been bi-racial, but he always referred to himself as Cherokee.[4]My grandfather was a great storyteller. Sometimes he talked about legendary Native Americans such as Geronimo, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse and his stories always seemed so real, though I raised an eyebrow in doubt. But more than anything he spoke about the green grass in Kentucky. It was not until I was grown that I actually learned Kentucky does have green grass.

My grandfather often had white loaf bread sopped (dipped) in black coffee with sugar. I am not sure where he learned this, but since coffee was usually off limits for me when the opportunity arose, it was a rare treat. Grandpa used words like "*mata"* (tomatoes) and "*tata"* (potatoes), but when I tried that vocabulary my grandmother was quick to correct me in not using that form of linguistics. She stated, "Now, I never want to hear you using those words, use the correct pronunciation".

Late at night, my grandfather would tell his stories of old. His favorite was the hand from under the house or the red-eyed devil from across the tracks. Many nights I would run crying in tears because I believed something dark lurked close by. But despite all of his stories, grandpa never spoke much about his childhood. Story has it that my grandfather had a steel plate in his head, either acquired from an accident working on the railroad or jumping off a boat into the Mississippi. My grandfather said his mother and father lived on the Indian reservation and that he had brothers and sisters, but did not know where they were. Matter of fact, he never mentioned their names, so all that is known is that through courage he landed in Virginia.

[4]Cherokee Indians were part of the Iroquois. They could be found in Virginia, West North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, Kentucky, Tennessee and the mountain regions of the South Alleghenies.

As my mother explained across the tracks, you found almost everything; drinking, gambling, prostitution etc. The unsavory characterization may have prompted the story of the red-eyed devil, but my mother was sure that as the story went, if you crossed the tracks that red-eyed devil would get you. My grandmother referred to this area as the red district, but she never mentioned much else. There were times I thought my grandfather's stories were just that-stories, but I am sure the way they were framed there were lived experience within them—and I was just not listening carefully enough.

Alcohol was my grandfather's demon, which ultimately killed him. As I recall, we never used the term "alcoholic" in my family, but my grandfather was certainly a "drinker". Hanging on the corner of the main "Ave", (avenue) with his comrades until the sun went down, he consumed almost anything considered booze. Then he stumbled on home, shouting "yeah-o" to those that he passed. Most nights he came through the door intoxicated, demanding his *one* favorite song be played on the hi-fi. I recognize most people have a favorite song frequently listened to, but this record played over and over, back to back for years. Stevie Wonder's *Superstition* was an insatiable desire that seemed to borderline psychosis, especially since I was the one that had to start the record over for six to seven hours.[5]

My grandmother's lineage was from the Sioux Indians.[6] My great-grandmother, Betty Davis was a slave, often spoken of as a *"Meat Mammy"*. I presume as a meat mammy, she was responsible for preparing and cooking the meat on the plantation. Grandma was the last born of her thirteen children, from her second marriage, so the family was divided, at least in last names by the Stevenson's and the Davis'. My grandmother grew up in Newport News, Virginia and spoke frequently of her family members working in the Chesapeake Bay shipyard.

[5]View Stevie Wonder's Superstition video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDZFf0pm0SE.

[6]Among the Sioux, Dakota, Nakota and Lakota represented the different dialects. But I have no knowledge of which group my family heritage falls under.

BEING "YELLA" DID NOT ALWAYS HAVE ITS PERKS

My grandmother and grandfather were dark brown in complexion, but then sprang forth the next two generations of "yella". Sometimes color distinctions were part of the evening's conversation, many of which would end up at the same point—"at the end of the day, I don't care how *yella* you are, you are still black". During those times, my grandmother would periodically mention the societal differences between white and black folks, using "ooh folks and boo folks" to describe white and blacks.[7]

In my family, the two major distinguishing characteristics among black folks were "skin-color" and "texture of hair". In my mother's younger years, she had very little in the area of pigmentation and my father was also light-skinned. Both my mother and father had what was then called "a good grade" of hair. In fact, as the story goes my mother had such straight shiny black hair, coupled with her light skin pigmentation that my grandmother and good friend, determined it may be best to kink up my mother's hair just a little. Well, the combination of oils was said to have changed the grade and kinked up my mothers' hair permanently.

By the time I came along, there were strict guidelines about what could be used in my hair. Not to mention what kinds of hairstyles were considered appropriate for me to wear. Grandma always said, "a woman's hair is her glory", so hair cutting was really not an option. Trim yes- cut no! A day rarely went by without someone saying, "Ooh! you got good hair; you can do all kinds of styles". My grandmother always braided my hair, which was usually parted down the middle. Every now and then, for change I would luck up and get three braids. Of course, my grandmother did not call them braids, rather she referred to them as "plaits". When it came to my hair, the rule was to never have anyone playing in it. But my friends always gravitated to the notion that it would be good to do my hair. I don't know if you remember when "Bo Derek" made corn rolls a hot commodity. But what was once considered a hairstyle that women wore during

[7] This was a manner of speech. There was never an undertone of distain or dislike, but a means of differentiating others.

enslavement came back to life. Most of the girls in my neighborhood wore them in all kinds of styles. Well one day, I got the bright idea to get my hair corn-rolled and trimmed while being outside.

If I would have anticipated the wrath that was about to happen, surely I would have taken another approach. But here I was bouncing into the house, happy as can be after sitting through the pain of getting my hair corn-rolled and had to nerve to say look at me. And that is exactly what my grandmother did, before her mouth dropped. Then the dreaded phone call to my mother, "come see what your daughter has done". My grandmother chewed on me for what seemed like eternity. THEN…My mother came. By this point, I was too scared to leave my bedroom. She said, "come here, let me see what you have done". As my head dropped, I appeared within her vision. All I remember now is my mother's mouth dropped and she said, "what..." but the rest of her words are now blurred. Then it was, "well! you'll have to show your father". Great! that's just dandy. "What! as if the braids were not enough, you cut your hair" and so on and so on. Mom always sat in the kitchen chair next to the window, so when my father called for her, she said "No! you need to come upstairs and see what Javonna has done". My father gave a speech on what he called "tack heads".[8] Grandma gave the speech on styles like this being from slavery and my mother gave another rant. This was the only time, I got triple-teamed. Then came the dreaded punishment—"OK, you can let people play in your hair, play in your hair...so you're in the house for a month".

I must have cried like a baby! It would have been ridiculous to attempt some justification for my actions that would have dug me a deeper grave. After this, my actions tended to opt out of "black" aesthetics. I wonder now what they would have said, if I expressed this as a reaction to getting in touch with my roots or blackness. But I do know my hair has *never* been corn-rolled again. Even though there were times when being "yella" had it perks, this was one of the occasions where it did not.

[8] The girls with thick-textured hair frequently referred as nappy hair.

INDEPENDENT AND SHALLOW

My grandmother whole-heartedly believed that a woman should be independent. However, this was not in lieu of a man taking responsibility for the well-being of his wife and children. I was expected to act as a lady, but this did not imply weakness or possessing some lack endurance. It meant you were to act with class. I was well trained in the mechanics, shoulders back—chest out, walking in high heels with a book on my head to avoid walking sloppy or having your heels twist over and always remember to smooth your skirt and cross your legs when sitting. But as I have grown older, my experiences and dominant personality has left a lot to be said about sophistication.

When I was younger, I dressed to impress. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that my mother kept me in the finest shoes and clothes when I was young. She brought most of my dresses and coats from the Jewish boutique shops in the neighborhood. My mother would be in rags and twisted shoes, but somehow she always kept me in the best. And when she could not, my grandmother did. My mother was not always the softest woman, but she was always caring. On many occasions she went without, so I could have the name brand clothes, coats or shoes. By my latter teenage years, maturity helped me appreciate her sacrifices. In retrospect, it often baffled me trying to figure out how these two women managed, especially with all of the other problems and issues on their plate. Nevertheless, they did and for this—I am genuinely grateful.

As I grew older, weighing a cool 120 pounds, I spent most of my paychecks on fashion. There was a pair of shoes for every outfit in my repertoire. Despite the fashion sense, I was big on shoes and lipstick, but never cared much for matching purses. Yep, back then I dressed to impress- and always dressed with class. It was expected that I walk like a lady in high heels,

cross my legs when sitting and toss my hair. With people publicly waving and calling my name, I was the center of attention. My mother would tease "who do you think you are Miss America?"

LITTLE BLACK GIRLS ARE INVISIBLE—I WAS ONE OF THOSE GIRLS

When I was young, the only three "R's" referenced had to do with "reading, writing and arithmetic". These references to the three "R's" were etched in stone by the practitioners of the educational academy. The three R's were considered basic building blocks of development. Without these mandated, must do's there was little room for progression in the classroom. But sitting in the back of the classroom, the little black girls were invisible—I was one of those little girls. My pigtails dangled as my hand waved vigorously in the air. The teacher surveyed the student's hands, as if taking count. "Who can I call on, let me see"! As I raised my hand vigorously, ooh me, ooh me, all replied. Being called on was only by mere chance because sitting in the back, the little black girls were invisible. Cheer up, there was still next year or the year after, surely one cannot remain transparent forever.

In my earlier years, I was quite inquisitive— I just loved learning. I recall being excited about entering elementary school for the first time. On the first day of school, I was up early putting on my finest because this was going to be place I could excel. This was a new day, no more daycare and no more required naps; I was a big girl now. The daycare I had attended was in close proximity of the housing project. In fact, it was attached to the bottom right hand side. But the only entrance to the day care was from the back end of the project building. Taking the front entrance was equivalent to walking three sides of a square, so the most expedient way was the shortcut, exiting the dimly lit, urine infested back staircase and proceeding four flights down.

Reaching each floor, you had to turn the corner slowly because you never knew what was coming up and definitely be aware of any footsteps that were not your own. Sometimes the young roughnecks (thugs) would lurk by the staircase, waiting for a likely target to rob. Being careful was a must. I had to watch for these things much later in my life, since Grandma always

took me to school. Going to daycare had prepared me well, so I tested out of kindergarten and was placed directly in first grade.

By today's standards all of the clothes in my wardrobe were "clean cut". Mom was adamant about little girls not dressing in clothes made for adults—it was distasteful. So there I was, standing in a pleated navy blue plaid skirt that fell right above my knee. A navy blue turtleneck, with navy knee high (knit) socks rolled down a little at the top. Oh yeah, I cannot forget black or patent leather strapped shoes. Grandma, Grandma I'm ready, let's go! I wore pretty knee length coats usually with gold or silver buttons on both sides. My hair was parted down the middle with plaits on both sides, fastened by bows at the end. I was a young lady, so I was expected to look like one. The walk to school seemed endless that morning, but I arrived ready. Gave grandma a big hug and kiss, flashed a smile and scurried off to my assigned class line.

Back then, most teachers used last names for seating arrangements. Since my last name started with a "W" I was always seated in the back of the class. The only time I got to move was to have my desk connected to the teacher, a penalty for talking too much. Ok, I was chatty patty, but there were several times when I was accused of talking when it was someone else. Good old labeling theory at work. So there I was, seated in the back of a class. Didn't you know little "black" girls were invisible?—and I was one of those girls. The next few years were much of the same, but by then I had realized that only some little "black" girls were invisible—and I was still one of them.

Grandma picked me up from school every day, it was a ritual. After all, it was too dangerous for a young girl to walk home alone. She always asked about my day. How did it go? What happened in school? What did I learn? Was there anything new? Grandma knew my temperament like the back of her hand, so it was fruitless to attempt getting something past her. She had a way of pulling any story out of me and within a few moments I was on a rant. She only smiled and nodded as I informed her of the day's events. She usually asked for details, but

never showed any outrage even if she felt I was possibly being singled out. Believe me—if things got really out of hand, she was in the principal's office in a second. Going to school, there were two things I despised the most, (1) my mother always believed the teacher, and (2) I was never allowed to fight, not even to defend myself. Fights were vicious, even in elementary school and since it was common, my parents feared someone scratching my face would leave me permanently disfigured.[9]

I remember my mother visited the office a few times, but when she came, she was there to let them have it. In school news travelled fast, so it was not long before word got to me. Kids talked and by the end of the day, I had been well informed. By the time I exited third grade, I was still invisible—but no longer a singled out target. In the fourth and fifth grade, my existence was on the radar. I would like to believe that this was primarily due to having remarkable teachers. But in all honesty, everyone knew including the powers that be that my family would not tolerate injustice. They were reasonable, but when the occurrences seemed excessive, they would step to the plate.

As a little girl, I liked acting. I actually thought I would ultimately become an actress. At home I put on acting shows, which often entertained my grandmother. I made my hair into Shirley Temple curls and sing, ''it's a good ship lollipop'' but I don't remember the rest of the lyrics now. I begged my grandmother to allow me to attend Barbizon acting school. But this was no small feat. The school was quite expensive and meant travelling to Manhattan (another borough) on Saturday mornings, her day off. Nevertheless, she took me. It was no surprise that in the fourth grade, I auditioned for a major role in the school play, ''The Wizard of Oz''. The auditions were set up similar to the professionals. All of the students that planned on auditioning had memorized the script beforehand. I never sang well, so it was really a surprise when the role of Dorothy required singing, ''Over the Rainbow'' without music. Signs were posted everywhere and all students in the fourth grade were given fliers to take home so parents could

[9] Girls carried knives and razors and were notorious for either scratching or cutting a person's face.

attend. Back then, a lot of parents attended school events. Even though it was not the first school play, I remember it being the biggest. To my surprise! I got the role. Oh yeah! It was an accomplishment all those Barbizon lessons had paid off. The play was such an important event that we were excused from our last period class to practice, but we had to keep up with our school work.

Since Judy Garland had played the original role of Dorothy, I read her autobiography to get a background feel for the part. I was saddened to know her life ended so tragically. My mom bought a few yards of checkered red and white material, so Mrs. Gray (the neighborhood seamstress) could make my character's clothes. I was psyched. I wore Mom's silver glittered wedding shoes for the part (even though Dorothy's were red). The night of the play, the auditorium was packed. There was standing room only. Peeping out of the curtains, I feared forgetting my lines. But there was little time to worry, because the lights went dim and the play started.

The play was a smash, people shouted, whistled and clapped. At curtain call, as the individual cast members returned to the front stage, the audience went wild. Out came the scarecrow, the lion, the tin man, the wicked witch and finally the munchkins came out together. Toto and I were last, as we exited together the applause roared like thunder. As we all took a bow, we received a standing ovation. The play was talked about so much, we performed it again for the upper classes (fifth and sixth graders), then the lower classes (second and third) and finally for the little kids (kindergarten and first graders). There was even another encore presentation during the evening for parents that missed the first performance.

After that, the entire cast became school superstars. Lionel's performance brought Toto to life. As for me, everywhere I went kid's shouted "there's Dorothy". In school, after school, little kids shouted "Mom there's Dorothy, hi Dorothy". I played my role to the max, smiling and waving hello. My celebrity status was not short-lived; it lasted the next two years of elementary school. I was called Dorothy so much that people actually thought that was my name. The

following year, I performed in the school play again. The play was quite popular, but nothing matched the fourth grade performance. In the minds of all, I was still Dorothy.

In the fifth grade, I tested high enough to be skipped to junior high. I pleaded and pleaded, but my mother felt the sixth grade was an important step to entering junior high school. Even though my actions were not immature, she feared the children at that level were older and I would be out of my league. This time, Grandma did not overrule her decision, but I wish she had. My sixth grade teacher was the worst. As if sitting in the back of the classroom, where the little black girls were invisible had not been enough, this teacher was the new and improved model. I am not sure whether my popularity had anything to do with her resentment, but the all of my work turned in was never good enough.

Grandma always checked my work and I was never allowed to skimp on a task. Almost all of my schoolwork was returned with below average marks, my teacher was in their radar. Watching from the sidelines, every assignment or school project was reviewed and approved before I could submit it. But my projects and assignments were still returned with low marks. Outside of her class, my reading and math scores tested on an 8th and 9th grade level. But I guess the straw that broke the camel's back was my sixth grade graduation. The teacher had allocated awards to most of the average or underachievers. My mother had held her temper the whole school year. I am not sure of all the details of that evening since I caught the tale end. But words were exchanged, followed by a big commotion. Grandma grabbed me and whisked me out of the school, so it wasn't until later that I learned my mother had let the teacher have it. She as angry and still yelling as my father was persuading her out. The last thing I remember was the school principal (a male) coming out of the doors in an aggressive manner. My father put a stop to that quick and raised his briefcase. I was relieved that there was no need to return the following year. My mom probably regretted her decision at the end. I attended Catholic schools for the next few years, before transferring to a public high school. Throughout those

years, there were still occasions that the little "black" girls were invisible— but now I was partially one of those girls. But I will leave that saga for another book.[10]

TRADITIONAL SOUL IN THE KITCHEN
THE RITUAL OF HOLIDAY FOOD PREPARATION

Food preparation for the holidays was always a big deal in my family. On occasion a few distant family members would visit and partake in the festivities. While these occasions would possibly consist of four additional people, my grandmother always prepared holiday food as if she was feeding an army. Sometimes she would invite two or three outside people for holiday dinner, but it was rarely more than that. Since my immediate family was relatively small, it was strange that so much emphasis was placed on holiday cooking.[11] Nevertheless, it was.

For the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday, cooking preparation began several days ahead of time, since some dishes required more prep. There were the conversations over what dishes would be prepared, despite the fact that the same dishes were made each year. Then there was the endless day of shopping for every ingredient most of which had been in the kitchen cabinet from the previous year. There was no discussion of dieting, since the idea of watching your weight with the food being prepared was—utterly ridiculous. Aunt Mozelle, my grandmother's sister was a shapely woman. She took pride in her small waist line and proportionate figure, which she kept into her elderly years. My Aunt did not have any children, but her weight and slim figure was frequently a topic of discussion. Every holiday, Aunt Mozelle made reference to watching her weight. But it was mockingly suggested that she eat now and worry about keeping her streamlined figure next week.

So out came the humongous pots and bowls. The extra-large tin pans used for final dishes, which required bending and stacking in an already crammed refrigerator. Buying smaller pans always seemed more feasible, but this was never an option. Aside from the turkey,

[10] Many of the participant's narratives used in the subsequent subsections were very similar in responses.

[11] My parents were only children.

it was customary to have two meats. This was always accompanied by potato salad, macaroni and cheese, cornbread/bread stuffing, collard greens with pig tails or ham hocks, biscuits, crackling cornbread, string beans with salt pork, macaroni salad, rice with peas and candied yams. Don't forget the cranberry sauce and gravy. Then there was the separate task of preparing the desserts. The desserts were the items that mostly fluctuated on these occasions. The desserts included, sweet potato pie, pumpkin pie, bread pudding, pound cake, fruit cake, jello with fruit, upside down pineapple cake, chocolate layered cake, vanilla or lemon cake and banana pudding.

My grandmother also made homemade wine for the holidays. That nasty old fermented fruit jar sat on the kitchen counter by the sink for a whole year. For me, watching the rotted fruit throughout the year took away the appeal to sneak a taste. I was usually relieved that the holiday meant that icky jar would cease to exist, at least for a couple of months. The music blaring on the hi-fi or radio got the cooking ritual moving.

There was a certain etiquette required in my grandmother's kitchen, aside from basic cleanliness. Dishes were prepared in succession. The collard greens, macaroni and cheese and other dishes were usually made first. The turkey or other meats were last, since these cooked the longest. With three women cooking, we took turns in the kitchen to avoid crowding or getting in the way of the person prepping or cooking at the time. Sometimes my grandmother and mother worked together in the food prep, but each had a specialty and an assigned task. During the preparation of the food, careful attention was paid to the order in which certain ingredients were placed into the dish. An ingredient out of sequence was assumed to possibly alter the usual taste—a mistake that were rarely made again. My mother was quick to state that the dish was just thrown together if it was not prepared with care. Growing up, I considered my mother the kitchen drill sergeant—quite the methodical being. She liked things prepared a certain way and there was no negotiation in the process. You knew and respected it or you got out the kitchen.

My grandmother never measured anything. When I was uncertain of how much of an ingredient went into a dish, she would stand over me and say, "just pour, keep going and ok that's good". When it came to salt and other spices, it was put a pinch of this and a little of that. Her measurements were never off- each time the food was delicious. For the holidays, my grandmother inserted the additional (table) leaf and dressed with holiday cloth. Since there were so many prepared dishes, the countertop became the secondary food placement source. Soul food was everywhere. My grandfather or father never entered the kitchen during the holidays. The kitchen was the women's place and their presence was never expected. Surely, it would have thrown the kitchen completely off balance. Most often they sat in the living room, jabbering about the neighborhood, people, the football game or some other issues.

The kitchen was a place of power. Even for the soul food apprentice, the final dish *had* to pass the taste test. Soul food cooking was serious business—and I learned to take it as such. Your heart and soul was to go into every dish with the challenge that this prepared dish would be better than the product before. It was food for the soul, but so were all of the interactions that came with it. There was always a place set up for the hard liquor. Rarely, did the adults decline the opportunity to have a drink or a "nip' as it was often referred. One turned into two, then three and before you knew it the adult conversations lasted for hours. It was taboo to sit around adult conversations, so that was my cue that it was time to exit.

The end of holiday festivities meant food would not be prepared for last least a week. The bigger the turkey, the longer the turkey spiral time—there was left-over turkey for days. There was turkey and gravy, then fried turkey and finally turkey salad. By Christmas, the mere mention of turkey was not an appetizing thought. I was usually the forerunner in proposing some other meat for Christmas, but evading the turkey ritual was a rare occurrence.

My mother still preserves holiday cooking rituals, where those fantastic soul food dishes still fill the table. My mother's good old-fashioned soul food cooking has preserved the ritualistic practices as a culture in our family. A time will come when my children will

congregate to my home for the holiday, but until then I enjoy and take pride in having my mother as the foundation of the family's ritualistic cooking practices.

INDEPENDENT WOMEN: BLESSED ARE THOSE THAT HAVE THEIR OWN

In 1939, the legendary jazz vocalist, Billie Holiday performed her epic song "*God Bless the Child*". In a historical context, the struggles of Black-Americans were prudently captured in the song's lyrical message of self-reliance. The song's chorus lines were inspirational and empowering,

> "Mama may have, Papa may have,
> But God bless the child
> That's got his own! That's got his own"(Holiday, 1939). [12]

My grandmother frequently reiterated the chorus of the song. I presume that was the way she viewed the world and it certainly was the way she lived her life. There were no ''ands'' and ''buts'' about it and she expected me to follow suit. Most of my memories from childhood were relatively happy ones. However, as with many, I had my fair share of unpleasant moments. As the only child there were certain things that were precluded from my reality. There was never any sibling rivalry, no constant chatter or arguing over a toy. In fact, everything was mine! Make no qualms about it. Surely, some would classify me a spoiled brat, but the reality probably fell somewhere in the middle.

Undoubtedly, my grandmother's nurturing was principally goal-directed, her intended outcome was simple ''she expected me to become a success''. Her expectations were never such, that it was burdensome. They were expectations guided by hope—the hopes that I would make good decisions and avoid the obvious pitfalls in life. Yes! To be a woman was never easy, let alone a black woman, certain things just came with the woman's role and gender. I understood it, accepted it and lived with it. Throughout life, there are many ups and downs, but

[12] Billy Holiday, "God Bless the Child" video viewing www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IYTx60s07A. For the song's lyrics see Appendix.

some decisions can become crucial mistakes. Her hope was that any crucial mistakes be avoided from my personal experience. If I managed that, she would be proud.
Living in Brownsville, it was difficult to avoid observing the hopelessness in the eyes of many. Despite the senseless tragedies and misery, my grandmother made it clear that certain life choices could make me a victim, trapped in the surroundings. But with educational achievement and good-decision making, I could escape such a harsh reality and existence. Brownsville would *just* be my place of origin and not a self-deteriorating prison or ending place. Her lessons were intended to be lifelong tools, mechanisms used at my disposal to aid my climb up the social ladder. It was wishful thinking to say all of those lessons resonated early on.

Grandma was no fool and she understood life's minor setbacks. Nevertheless, she was there providing uplifting words of wisdom, messages of strength that made any existing problem bearable. In the distance, I can still hear her, "now remember, God bless the child, that's got its own, make sure to always have your own. Be independent and you will never need to wait on a man to do something for you". My response, "yes, grandma, I'll remember". I guess it had been her reality that men were less reliable in doing the right thing. To have your own was a must; it was her principle code of ethics. It was made clear that I was *never to* borrow, beg or steal; you were to do things on your own (independent of others). My actions always adhered to those principles, since the message was made crystal clear. Also, lying *was definitely* a characteristic low on her totem pole. She could not stand liars and thieves. However, she reasonably expected others in the neighborhood to borrow or beg and on most occasions she would oblige their request. But to be a thief or a liar was out of the question and those people were never allowed to even grace the doorway.

She was a tolerant individual, but any one of those two was a pet peeve and a severe violation of her principles, so I rarely lied about anything. On three occasions, I attempted to fabricate the truth, but my success was quite short-lived, all of thirty minutes at best. Since each of these three occasions rendered three strikes, it was obvious that I was a terrible liar. In

contemplating my punishment for lying, the outcome *always* far outweighed the effort. It seemed logical that if something was not working for me, I should try something else (like the truth). Already having three strikes against me, coupled with her disappointment— my lying phase was over. As for my mother, she was adamant that, "if you are grown enough to do something, you had better be grown enough to admit it". For the most part that philosophy helped me consider consequences of my actions, beforehand.

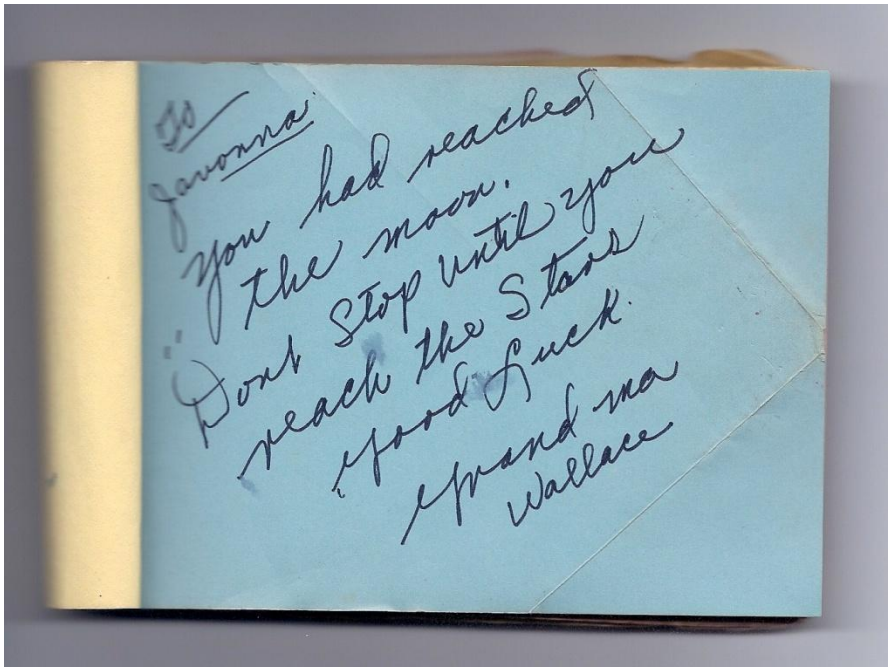
As a principle, I have never been one to use the commentary "I don't know" or come up with some ridiculous illogical argument in response to my actions. Whatever my actions, I knew any argument presented in defense *had better* be followed by some logical sequence of why I did it and above all *be well-worth* the aftermath. In that way, I could at least feel some vindication while on punishment. On these occasions, when sent to my room to reflect on my actions there was no resistance. This was not due to limited recourse, but from previously calculating my actions as worthy of any consequences that followed.

As an adult, I too am intolerant of those that lie. I don't care much for the overly sympathetic argument that "the person can't help themselves". Nor do I care much for those that request your truthfulness and cannot handle the response. I detest being pulled into someone else's mental chaos. For those finding justification in the above—go ahead and own it, but don't spread it as a single source of prevailing wisdom. Save it, it's not worth the air you are about to use. It is simple- if you don't want to hear the truth, don't ask.

My grandmother never vicariously lived any of her unfilled life endeavors through my life, except for one—becoming a college graduate. For her I *was* the future, the next cinderblock of the family and she poured her soul into my upbringing. Despite the obstacles confronted, I was to strive for success and never give up on myself or in life. Facing obstacles was life and learning to overcome the hurdles built character. But educational attainment was her primary focus and she firmly believed that with an education anything was possible, the sky was the limit. So to complete each grade level in school was a recognizable achievement. Upon

completing sixth grade elementary school, the excerpt she wrote in my autographical memory book was as follows, ''you have reached for the moon, don't stop until you reach the stars''.

ILLUSTRATION #1: 6TH GRADE GRADUATION AUTOGRAPH BOOK



*A rendition of my grandmother's words from 6th grade autograph book graduation

On another note, the few times I did get in trouble, any punishment rendered to me was required to be passed by my grandmother first or *hell would be paid*. I admit spankings as a method of corporal punishment were rarely handed down, but there were countless debates that challenged the leniency of punishment often received. Oh boy, in those heated family debates, the battle was on. Comments ranged in variation, but the most frequently referenced was ''to spare the rod, was to spoil the child'', one I am sure that many have heard. Other comments directed toward her leniency, was that it would *certainly* result in disaster later.

In my mom's view, females had to be watched and punished more than males, because otherwise they would come home ''with a belly full''. Males didn't come home with the babies, only the females (blah, blah, blah). Among the endless comments, the best one was ''MaryAnn, that girl is your J-E-S-U-S; someday she'll disappoint you and hurt your heart''. I recall thinking

I'm no Judas--- like most of you. Turning on a person at will, so who was the real Judas and where was the real point here. Grandma was relentless in her battles. She defended me when they double-teamed her, triple-teamed her, it did not matter; she was in the fight for the long haul. She was a strong woman that never wavered in battle and once she made a decision, it was final—that was that!

When in doubt, she would find quiet time to talk. Her goal was to inquire and gather more detail on my reasoning for the performance. As stated previously, since my actions were rarely sporadic or arbitrary, my explanation usually made a good sense. If punishment had not been determined in the first round of the family debate, my comments usually solidified her stance in round two. In retrospect, I am lucky that there was no such thing as majority rule and even in the minority position her decision was never over-ruled. Surely, that is how I escaped most spankings.

She was my champion in life, the one that stood by me through thick and thin, good and bad, even during times of indifference. How do you replace that in life? You can't, nor can you forget it! But I tell you what you can do, you can model it. Hold it in your heart; let it permeate the soul until its part of your self-consciousness. In fact, that is just what I did; it became the essence of who I am. Those ingrained code of ethics were merged to my spirit. As transmitted, it served as the basis for who I am and what principles I stand for. It was like a mirror reflecting into my soul, depicting my internal self. It delineated the three things one should know: (1) who/what am I, (2) what do I stand for, and (3) what strength/endurance do I possess. While I came to the table with certain qualities, in all honesty this was too a learning process.

In failing to follow some of grandma's lessons, there have been many struggles in my life. Most of which, she had hoped I would avoid. Hind sight is twenty-twenty and it was usually after the fact that recognizing some aspects in life could have been much easier had I just listened. After my grandmother died, I lost ground and became reckless. The pain of losing her was too great, I could not bear it—I tried, but I failed each time. I woke up with the pain, fell asleep with

the pain, as the hours in the day passed, there was nothing but pain. Coming back from her funeral, looking out the window of the limousine, I remember being angry that the world was still in motion. People were conducting life as usual, didn't they realize that a G-R-E-A-T woman was gone, that she was longer among us. I fully understood that with life came death, but I resented that fact and refused to accept it. In fact, I resented everything. My life had just abruptly come to an end. Didn't anyone care? Obviously not, people were still moving, but the time clock had stopped ticking me for. Yes, I was still breathing, but I was dead inside.

In expressing sympathy, people are often kind during bereavement. Anyone who knew my grandmother recognized how close we were. I was her shadow and discussions over how much she loved me, never went unmentioned. But I had already started to emotionally withdraw, to a place of numbness. Although their comments were appreciated, it seemingly meant nothing. As life resumed, I resumed without it. Basic living was tough, subway rides to and from work, shopping, cleaning house or any other aspect of basic living was merely mechanical. It was as if my spirit and zeal for life had detached and the only thing left was the empty shell of my body. I was watching myself operate mechanically from some other place. From an impenetrable bubble, where I was yelling "get it together", but the person in the body did not hear the voice. It was as if, my observations were of someone else's life.

At this point, I had two children to consider, but all rational thinking was far gone. Despite loving my children, death seemed a more palatable option than living. I had turned my back on God[13] because in some small way, I blamed him. Though I knew my grandmother would frown on this behavior, without her there was just no reason to live. From that point, most of my actions were a blur, so there is little recollection of a particular action or sequence of events that immediately followed. But I do know my grandmother's death was the catalyst of my decline. The next few years of my life were spent making poor judgments, many of them crucial.

[13] Some consider personal references to God as academically lacking. But to omit this in my personal narrative, would slant the encounters and tell only a part of the story.

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With each poor decision, another one followed becoming a domino effect, resulting in an endless cluster. I am sure, those actions unconsciously served as my way of self-destructing.

Sometime later, regaining my faculties my life was well beyond a reasonable mess. Unraveling all of my predicaments was nothing short of impossible. I was only twenty three, but looking in the mirror, problems had aged me well before my time. Questioning my own existence helped me ponder my predicament. In pondering, time was spent searching for positive solutions. But other times, pondering had a more depressing impact. Surely, my children were better off without me, since the very hopelessness I grew up observing in others could now be viewed in my own eyes. The fact that I was still here on earth, was self-equated as punishment for veering so far off the path. Where to start, how do I pick up the pieces of such a young shattered life? Everything my grandmother had wanted for my life, all of those life lessons had just become dust in the wind. I was disappointed in myself. But moreover, I was relieved that my grandmother was not here to see it—that would have killed her for sure.

Mentally, I wanted nothing more than to preserve her memory, but in actuality I had accomplished the very opposite. Instead of my grandmother's death just being in the physical, I had managed to put in question her raison d'être of living.[14] In the time spent thinking, memories of my grandmother would play back and forth like a motion picture. Most times, I pushed the memories away. But as time proceeded, I did not want to forget, but to remember. Painfully, my memories of her, played over and over. Where are you grandma? I know in spirit you are out there and I need your guidance so much! Even though my prayers were to no avail, I still hoped she would answer me from beyond the grave. As the weeks passed, my inward reflections would gain stronghold.

Then just as if I had never searched, the answer was right there. She had given me the tools, yet it was about my implementation. Even though, fulfilling her wishes seemed a tall order, I had to start somewhere—that somewhere took me back to the basics. My upward

[14] The term raison d'être means grounds, underlying principle, foundation or justification.

incline came in small increments and there were many times I grew tired of the uphill battle. But slowly, I rid myself of the things negatively impacting my life. My focus was improving my life chances for me and the children. Trying to raise two male children in the inner city of Brooklyn often resulted in disaster. It was hard enough for a female to succeed and make it out of the ghetto and nearly impossible for the Black male. If I did not make it out of the ghetto, it was extremely likely that my boys would not either. As with so many black males in my community, there would only be conversations of college, when in reality any investments would be in coffins.

On many occasions, I thought of God and even reconsidered my position of straying away from my religious teachings. But I never called on God, until he called for me. My immediate impulse was to avoid mentioning any pious accounts for those that found belief systems too individualistic. However, these accounts were too viable and spearheaded many of my life changes. So to leave them out would slant the reality of what transpired. It was once said to me that "God has a plan for me and it would reveal itself in time". I recalled hoping the message would come soon because my strength was warring. For every step forward, there were times when strife forced me two steps back. But I would learn that success was not built on how many times you were knocked down in life, but how many times you got up. The more I tried, the more obstacles were thrown my way. So many times, I wanted to give up and throw in the towel, but then my grandmother's words would come to mind, "Never lose faith in self and remember God bless the child that has its own".

On many occasions, my mother reiterated those very sentiments. We were women, forged from a lineage of strong black women. Enduring was just part of life, no matter how bad your life circumstances, we possessed the strength to make change. My mother helped me as much as possible, but ultimately my path was mine to determine. Mom felt I had made my bed, either lay in it or do something about it. But whatever I decided be sure to do with the best of my

ability and without a shadow of a doubt make sure to see it all the way through. While harsh, it was the reality.

Attending college with three children was tough. Reading, class transcriptions, studying, library time and research papers required a lot of time maintenance and restructuring. There were many conflicting moments of feeling spread too thin. Not to mention, the hour and fifteen minute subway ride to school. Coming home was even longer, since my last class ended at 9:15pm and the express train from Manhattan to Brooklyn stopped running at 9:00pm. It always seemed to work out that the class I needed either conflicted with another or was offered late in the evening. So I usually arrived home at 10:45pm; to start my homework exhausted. The subway walk only took ten minutes, but some days the walk seemed endless.

On one of those endless walking days to the subway, with my head down to the pavement in deep thought over my life, a woman bumped into my left shoulder in passing. I looked up for a split second to apologize, as she stared directly into my face and said, "I walk with God and so should you". Initially, I did not pay much attention to her comment, but as the words slowly processed in my mind, I abruptly stopped and ran back in the direction she was walking. Some of the blocks in this area were unusually long, but I looked to my right, then my left, around the corner. It was just impossible to walk that far out of sight so quickly. The only place to remotely disappear that quickly was if she entered the Bodega (store) across the street. I ran into the store, frantically searching each isle, she was nowhere in sight. I ran back to the street and again looked one way then the other, but the woman was gone almost as if she had vanished in mid-air. Stumped by the disappearance, her words slowly played back in my mind. Sometimes, I wonder if the woman was my grandmother in spirit, sent to provide wisdom in my time of despair.

After a series of unexplainable spiritual coincidences, life improved. Things were still tough, but serene. I seemed to deal with the unexpected with certain calmness. The irony was in the tranquil nature in which I dealt with matters and how similar it was to the way my

grandmother had taken life's hardships in stride. Today, my understanding of self has come full circle. Here I am fifteen years later in a very different place. There are still challenges, but different than the encounters of my past. Yet, my real success is attributed to my endurance. Despite the obstacles, continuing forward to change my once bleak existence. While I was fortunate to encounter, professors that pushed me to succeed, internalizing and implementing my grandmother's lessons helped me fulfill a promise made to her years ago.

Becoming a sociologist, the power of understanding the various aspects of culture has aided in my scholarly growth. The realization that I am a *carrier* of my grandmother's unconditional love, in possession of some intangible gene is retained within my being to inadvertently model my grandmother's grace in my own actions. Diligently, I have sought to instill this in my children, even though I question my effectiveness.[15] But as with many things, one day I will look back and be able to determine whether the goal was truly accomplished. If successful, it will serve as a pinnacle of my life coming full circle and while my grandmother's presence is long gone, I will know her legacy still lives on.

[15] Wallace, D. (2009) As my son once stated, "for children of the technological age, you don't instill things in your children, you install and download them". His point is well taken!

A PROMISE FULFILLED

Intelligence plus character that is the goal of true education – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As this dissertation comes to a close, so does a significant chapter of my life. The promise made to my grandmother over two decades ago was also coming to an end. Taking a glimpse back, much of my time was spent agonizing over my grandmother's death. But with agony came reflection and there I was absorbed in thought. As the hours passed, the memories of her face, the time shared and the unconditional love provided were snapshots that flooded my mind. All of her words of wisdom were like a tape recorder playing over and over in my mind. But it was her two verbalized wishes that grabbed hold of my being. These two wishes were relatively easy to remember— having one college graduate and the relationship with me and my mother be unified.

At the end, the cancer had spread through her body like a plague. While she had put up a good fight, the disease had left her incapacitated. On both breasts, the small deep-sized wombs were inflected, exposing raw meat. Despite any attempt to minimize the ghastly sight, of what had begun as small knots in her breasts were fruitless. The cancer had taken her body, but not her mind, so she was fully aware of the magnitude in which the disease had spread and the severity of her state. Having worked in the medical field, my mother was more apt at cleaning and bandaging the open wombs. But it took every ounce of my strength to model my mother's calm exposure. In fact, most times my attempts were unsuccessful and my inability to cope, forced me to run.

My grandmother was privy to the strained relationship between me and my mother that had further developed over her illness. Much of our bickering was centered on whose display of love was most genuine. These disputes brought my grandmother such anguish that she would breakdown and cry. While we both loved her deeply, our affection was displayed differently. When alone, my grandmother seized the opportunity to appeal to my softer side, emphasizing

the importance of a strong relationship with my mother bonded by love and support, because the time was drawing near where we would only have each other.

But I had failed her! All the love she gave me—and here was the result. How could this be that even her simplest requests had surpassed me in action? While she never expressed disappointment, my life had certainly produced an unpromising outcome. How could I have made her investment in my life so meaningless? Would I learn to live with the fact that I had returned her love with empty accomplishments? At that point, my life could be summed up as a walking ball of potential, quickly dwindling away, yet that was not my personality, nor my training. Her wishes played over and over in my mind, being a college graduate and showing my mother love, support and respect were things that she had instilled as an absolute.

If I had enough sense to recognize this, then adhering to it was clearly non-negotiable. Making my grandmother's wishes a reality was the least I could do to honor her memory. But first, I needed a plan of action. In my own way, my love and admiration for my mother was always omnipresent, so despite our stubborn streaks we were both forgiving individuals when it came to one another. It was just the implementation of those sentiments that needed to be unconditionally practiced. Simply put, I have always been proud of my mother because her life successes have been the epitome of strength and endurance. As mimicked in a popular song, it is without reservation or a shadow of doubt that "I'll always love my momma, she's my favorite girl".

Every time I closed my eyes, the image of my grandmother was there. Her presence was neither daunting, nor haunting. She was just there, as if figuratively reminding me of something. Struggling consciously to pull the fragmented pieces of my mind together, I recalled my grandmother stating that "I could accomplish anything in life, if I put my mind to it". My ability to frame a logical argument, rebutting an existing position made practicing law a reasonable profession. In New York City (NYC), one of the best places to earn a criminal justice degree was John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a school where most police and firemen received training.

To move forward, it was necessary to compartmentalize my emotions. I combined all my love, pain and admiration for my grandmother into a motivating force behind my drive. Even though, the pain never stopped it fueled my energy and I took off with a determination and speed never experienced before. But pursuing a degree of higher education would be no easy endeavor, especially with two children and one on the way.

As my class schedule solidified enrollment, my fears of failure set in. There was a proper order in which life events were to take place. The completion of high school, then college, followed by marriage and family, any further education was a distinguishing indication of parental success. Within my immediate and extended family, educational attainment was bragged upon. In this area, my grandmother was not exempt. Although she was one that factored in life's pitfalls, it did not limit her vivid enthusiasm and devout appreciation for educational completion.

My grandmother's older sister Emma had only one child, a daughter whom had done well in this area, having obtained a M.S. Degree. Her son and daughter had also pursued higher education. I could not help but feel that both, me and mom were the "black sheep" having the pursuit or life experiences that involved everything else—but higher education.
I was never sure of all the details, but my grandmother's impression was that Aunt Emma's daughter held, what she exclaimed was "the highest degree in the land". It was likely that my grandmother was unfamiliar with the associated acronyms, (B.S., M.S., PhD, etc.) since she never referenced a degree in accordance to its' respective academic tier. Nevertheless, she was elated by the accomplishment and it remained a topic of conversation until her death.

Moving forward through the educational process, I had equated "the highest degree in the land" as a PhD. Several years later, after my grandmother's death it would be clarified that Aunt Emma's daughter held life credits that could be used toward a doctoral degree. Although the opportunity had passed to tell my grandmother in person, it was my promise made to her in death. Since it was her wish to have one college graduate, then she would have one. With the

excitement she had shown over the "highest degree in the land" nothing less than one designated as such, would suffice.

To this day, all of my degrees, certificates and honors attained over the years, are in its' original mailed packaging and tucked in a bag at the top of the bookshelf. I suppose the attainment of each degree was intrinsically gratifying, so there was never a desire to publically display them as a means of accomplishment. For me, each earned degree placed me one step closer to fulfilling a promise. In retrospect, I now smile at that uninformed young lady that embarked on a journey with nothing more than my grandmother's dream and the zeal to make it a reality.

Here's to you my dearest beloved grandma! Wherever your soul rests, may this PhD. be a validation of your wishes acknowledged. To conclude this journey, quoting the most famous man that ever lived, "It is finished"—Jesus Christ, (John 19:30)

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

My initial introduction to this dissertation topic began years ago as an intern for the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, Bureau of Chronic Disease. My primary role was to assist with the asthma program, but my position allowed me the opportunity to semi-assist with other health-related issues; such as obesity, hypertension and diabetes. While my knowledge regarding these topics were quite limited, but obesity was quickly becoming an epidemic in the United States and a buzz word for those interested in research. A colleague suggested that it may be fruitful to explore obesity in minority populations as a research interest.

Importantly, where my dissertation topic began is not where it ultimately ended, but the development and changes occurred over several years. As a doctoral student in the Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia it was inscribed in my thought processes that one should maintain an open mind when confronted with a fundable research topic. Although I shared an interest in the topic of obesity, it would be false to leave the impression that there was exuberance over the possibility of studying this pathology long term. But to my chagrin, the social problem of obesity in black women proved quite interesting. To understand why Black women had higher levels of obesity than any other ethnic group was certainly grounds for re-evaluation.

To explore the topic of obesity, one would certainly have to consider food preparation and intake. In the past, it was not uncommon for the interaction of women to take place in the kitchen. The kitchen was the domain of food ritualism where the soul of these women where often expressed. Furthermore, there was irony in the fact that this was a gendered domain, a place men entered with caution. Taking a step back, the traditional cultural habits of food preparation among Black-Americans became a key factor.

Even though my interest in the topic had peaked, my sentiments were still a mélange of emotion. As an obese Black woman the topic was close to home and my own physical

appearance became the center of consciousness. While I had very little doubt over whether it was possible for me to conduct the research project being value-free, there were many moments of reflectivity. Over the days to follow, I conceptualized potential contributors of obesity in Black-American women and my ability to conduct this research topic with objectivity became of less concern. After carefully considering various aspects, I determined it was equally possible that my appearance (being obese myself) if anything, could also ensure the success of such a project. Drawing from first-hand knowledge, incorporating additional themes not considered in existing research were possible. As my topic continued to take shape, it was evident that my own personal experience would provide an inside perspective to explore obesity in Black-American women.

Food preparation and intake, especially without adequate expenditure was directly associated with obesity, but cultural constructs were the driving force behind how food was prepared, not to mention the interaction surrounding it. Additionally, the symbolic meaning of food when placed in question is multifaceted, but magnified when ascertained as an identifier related to self and identity.

As I grappled with the direction of my research, my concern weighed heavily on the synthesis of these issues. Black cultural food, often referred to as "soul food" if prepared correctly was certainly hearty, but often contained ingredients that by the standards of today are classified as unhealthy. In addition, the ideology of eating until full only exasperates the problem of obesity without adequate exercise.

This research project explores the perceptions of Black-American women on food habits, obesity, black culture, soul food, and body image in Columbia, Missouri. Moreover, it integrates the symbolic nature of food habits and preparation, related to Black-American identity.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Obesity as a growing epidemic in the United States occurs in higher rates for Black-American populations. Since the burden of obesity is more observable in Black females, this dissertation focuses on Black women's perceptions of black culture, food habits, body image and obesity in Columbia, Missouri. The purpose of this study is to document the perceptions of Black-American women through narration. For Black-American women, cultural experiences were passed by narratives, dance, food preparation etc., as part of lived experiences. Using a narrative approach allows Black-American women a voice to dictate their own reality and determine whether culture is tangibly linked their perceptions and ethnic identity.

This research triangulates the history, biography and culture of Black-Americans as a framework for identifying Black-American women's perceptions on cultural constructions pertaining to food habits, body image, identity and obesity. The heterogeneity within the Black-American culture is considered an ambiguous concept premised on individualized experiences that cannot be generalized. This research has the potential of furthering epistemological claims that empirically identify unique characteristics of "Black culture" of in-group identity and collectivity.

Considerable research has focused on unhealthy eating practices, lack of exercise, sedentary lifestyles, differential access to nutritious food and lack of adequate healthcare as contributors of obesity in Black-American women. These studies are narrowed in approach, lack the uniqueness of cultural constructions premised on the history and biography, specifically associated to the ethnic group. This dissertation, theoretically rooted in the classical tradition of the symbolic interactionist perspective, specifically explores the symbolic meaning of food habits and traditions as unique cultural constructs derived within the Black culture. Moreover, food habits and cooking practices are symbolic manifestations directly linked to the development of self, identity and ethnic group affiliation.

The goal of this study is to isolate unique characteristics associated to black culture through a multifaceted approach. This will allow for the integration of culture, often perceived as individualized constructions. By understanding ethnic -specific norms, the relationship of food practices for Black-American women, can establish valuable data related to intergenerational practices associated with identity, food traditions, obesity and body image and in-group affiliation.

For years social scientists have grappled with the ambiguous nature of culture. Results indicate black women's perceptions of self, identity, food habits, obesity and body image are socio-cultural constructions of reality that must be viewed holistically, as rich interpretations of one's life experiences and interactions within the group's cultural milieu.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

As an ethnic group, the heterogeneity among Black-Americans presents inherent intra-group complexities. For other ethnic groups with more homogeneity, it is less difficult to identify or generalize cultural normative, beliefs and practices. Their relationships are usually tied to a unified homeland, language, religious beliefs or unique food serve and traditions. However, within the Black-American community a collective identity or unique characteristics are not as easily defined or identified.

The previous studies that focus on the perceptions of Black-American women are often singularly linear in nature. While the research in these areas is useful, each often indicate minute relationships that are not fully inclusive of the Black-American culture. The academic discourse on Black-American culture has been narrow in scope and somewhat dogmatic. Gathering empirical data on the patterns associated within the culture may aid in isolating characteristics establishing some generalizability on cultural collectivity. The rationale of the study provides a context for further research, through empirical analysis on ethnic-specific cultural constructs may move us one step closer to indexing cultural in-group characteristics.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The preface includes a narrative on the writer that is intended to provide the background and motivation for this research project. Chapter one provides an introduction to how this dissertation project originated, the purpose and rationale of the study and the changes that refined the overall direction of the study. The rationale of the study provides a context for further research or scholarly work in this area, concluding with an overview of chapters.

In Chapter two, the literature review begins with broad definitions of culture as a basis for this dissertation. Since culture is an ambiguous term, the chapter seeks to narrow the framework using ethnic specific cultural constructions as a basis for understanding food preparation, socialization patterns, ethnic habits and the construction of identity. Theoretically, symbolic interactionist perspective was best suited for micro-level analysis and additionally had a body of literature that already presented a wealth of past work on cultural constructions. In selecting symbolic interactionist perspective as a theoretical foundation, the definitions of culture lead to socialized norms encompassing ethnic affiliation.

The chapter further establishes a more direct link between culture and Black-Americans in considering culture and society, as synonymous entities that include the history and biography of a group. For Black-American culture, the historical signifies a deeper meaning outside of the dominant ideology and the slavery lexicon from which "culture/racial" identity is manifested. By outlining the historical and structural contexts as a foundation from which Black-Americans emerge the attempt for Black-Americans to preserve many traditions, particularly food habits and preparation are lucid forms of "identity" that operate within, yet separate from that of mainstream ideology. The communicative patterns used in transmitting culture and ethnicity are symbolic in nature and has practical application in examining the perceptions of Black-American women in relation to food habits and preparation.

Finally, the chapter revisits the social construction of Black-American self- identification, providing a discussion of why the problems encountered in the black community was relatively complex. Recognizably, all ethnic groups are heterogeneous, but the association of commonalities and cultural beliefs are seemingly less difficult to identify in other cultures, except the Black-American culture. As social scientists, we must build off the past work on culture and be careful not to replicate the mistakes of the past.

Chapter three describes the methodological approach used in this research. The construction and deconstruction of the project is incorporated in the design and pilot of the study. The sampling procedures, participant selection process are also detailed. The chapter integrates the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionist perspective in context to culture with the methodological approach of *Interpretative Interactionism.* Although the methodological section relies heavily on the work of Norman Denzin, *Interpretative Interactionism,* (1989), it also provides the intersectionality between the cultural, symbolic and interpretative setting the stage for understanding the socio-cultural perceptions of food habits, preparation and body image for a sample of Black-American women.

Following the guidelines of "thick description" this chapter discusses the importance of using narratives and storytelling to gather richness in this research. Using narratives in this research assured a voice to the Black-American women in this study, which was once limited in academic research. Also this approach ensured their history, biography and culture illuminate through their narrations, preserving the richness of their socially constructed realities. The chapter concludes with the rationale for the research design.

Chapter four provides a brief discussion on the history of West African kingdoms and empires. Archeologically, the cooking tools found on Southern plantations indicated cross-cultural similarities in West African and Black American traditions. Also discussed were the traditional West-African food dishes diffused into the cooking practices of enslaved Black women, which later established the foundation of what uniquely become known as "soul food".

These enslaved Black women used the traditions past down from their African ancestors' respective homelands to create dishes of sustenance that often tasted good. Despite the fact that some foods from West Africa were not available in the New World, the recreation of these cooking practices served as culture in action.

Chapter five discusses the unique characteristics of Black-American women, discussing the different gender roles among white and black women on southern plantations. The amalgam of these African and southern cooking traditions were often passed down to enslaved Black women through oral narrations, observations or practice, concluding with the importance of storytelling as the process from which cultural cooking traditions and practices were preserved. The chapter integrates the Black woman's life under a system of slavery, from which popular archetypes and images of the Black Mammy were formulated. As these images became institutionalized in American culture, the ideological representations that became pervasive in defining Black women lead to the formation of the Black matriarch.

In Chapter six ritualistic food habits and preparation of food is explored as a socio-cultural practice. Although Black-Americans are fully entrenched into the Americanized fast food culture, these old food practices and dishes are still unique to the ethnic group. To divorce oneself from the traditions of the past is to lose part of the unique history and culture of Black American people. The historical nature of the food practices and traditions embedded in "Black-American Culture" are core characteristics in defining the ethnic group. Food habits and traditions as a direct link to cultural identity and a sense of self were rooted in food traditions that encompass the Black experience. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the difference between soul food and southern cuisine and concludes with contemporary notions of the black experience. In contemporary American society, the cooking of "soul food" is a ritualistic practice.

In chapter seven, the results of this study are provided. The chapter includes basic demographical information on the participants. Also, it includes charts and tables that illustrate the perceptions of the black female respondents on food habits and tradition, soul food and body image.

Chapter eight concludes summarizes the research findings, the sociological implications of this study and suggestions for conducting this research project differently. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further study

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the discussion of the sociology of culture is premised on interpretative thought within the symbolic interaction tradition. As an extension of anthropological approaches to culture, perceptions and action are reflexive interpretations of self, in relation to the institutions in which its' embedded. In sociology, culture has been debated from either interpretative or institutional constructs. The interpretative has sought meaning, while the institutional focused on the social structures impact on the individual.

Theoretically, the symbolic interactionist perspective of culture has the greatest relevance to understanding cultural perceptions of food habits (symbolic meaning of food), identity (black-culture) and body image (obesity). The objective of this chapter was to build off the interpretative work of classical writers as foundations forming socio-cultural perspectives, specifically related to the black experience.

Cultural constructions are essential in comparing and contrasting common ideologies and behavior, as a construction of reality within the ethnic groups. The heterogeneity within Black-American culture requires both the interpretative and contextual paradigms in symbolic interactionist perspective be integrated for a more precise presentation of black ideological thought and patterns. The construction of a "black" ethnic identity and culture is deeply rooted in the institutional slavery lexicon. It is from the intersection of history, biography and environment that the central themes of food habits, identity and body image are better illustrated within gendered (female) cultural constructions. Therefore, to adequately understand the perceptions of black women it is necessary to take a more holistic approach to culture, viewing the construction of reality as impacted by the history and biography of the ethnic group.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is an ambiguous term, often observable, but lacking a definition of uniformity. In fact, ''…culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action'' (Benedict, 1934, p. 46).From its early beginnings, culture has been emphasized as a triangulation of historical, psychological and environmental factors (Kaplan & Manners, 1972, p. 71). Culture is a historical configuration of various elements from different sources ''growing together'' (Sill, 1968, p. 530).Historical experiences are ethnic specific, establishing a unique biography of reference for that ethnic group.

As early as the 1800s, a basis for defining culture as the ''….knowledge; belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society''(Tylor, [1871, 1924] 1903, p. 1). Cultural constructs shape common ideas, habits and standards within ethnic groups. Ruth Benedict indicated, ''what really binds men together is their culture, the ideas and the standards they have in common'' (Benedict,1934, p. 16). As outlined by Kroeber, ''cultures are products of human societies operating under the influence of cultures handed down to them from earlier societies'' (Kroeber,[1948, 1963] 1948, p. 256 & 267).As defined culture,

> …. would include speech, knowledge, beliefs, customs, arts and technologies, ideals and rules. That, in short, is what we learn from other men. From our elders or the past, plus what we may add to it (Kroeber, [1923, 1948, 1963] 1963, pp. 60-61).

For humans groups, culture provides a contextual foundation, in understanding behavioral characteristics, including cognitive and emotional patterns. It is through traditional and institutionalized processes that norms and patterns of the ethnic group are reaffirmed. Thus, culture is a means of examining the variations in transmitted or patterned human behavior that could not be explained biologically (Benedict, 1934, p. 14; Kaplan & Manners, 1972, p. 3). Therefore, cultures are individualized products of unique historical processes and circumstances (Kaplan & Manners, 1972, p. 72).

In support, Krober and Kluckhohn state,

> culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historical derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on one hand be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (Alfred L. Kroeber & Kluckhohn, [Originally published in 1952]by Harvard University Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology Papers, Vol. 47, No. 1, Massachusetts: Cambridge, 1963, p. 357).

Without considering history of a group, one cannot adequately discuss behavioral patterns of an ethnic group. To understand the *nature of culture*, it is best to adhere to the forms in which culture may take shape and how it operates, rather than mere definition (Kroeber, [1923, 1948, 1963] 1963, p. 60). As stated previously, by empirically understanding culturally-specific patterns within the ethnic group-behavior, ideology, practices and habits could be better understood.

It is equally important to recognize,"….human beings are connected by a complex network of social relations" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940, p. 2). The impact of the social structure on individual actions are"…. served by society's institutions, customary practices and beliefs, *and* how the psychology of those individuals might lead them to generate change" (NNDB, 2008, p. 3).In other words, "….while institutions are orderly sets of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system…. the social constituted a separate "level" of reality distinct from those of biological forms and inorganic matter (Edwards & Neutzling, 2008, p. 2). While the social structure operates autonomously, it is a cultural"….network of actually existing relations" that directly impacts the social placement and constructed reality of an ethnic group (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940, pp. 2-3).

Cultural constructions are then, the "….transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior and the artifacts produced through behavior" (Kroeber & Parsons, 1958, p. 583). Overall, "….cultures and subcultures are organically related to the structured social groups and subgroups that carry them, which has been axiomatic in sociology at least since the days of Sumner (Murdock, 1965, pp. 21-22).

THE SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

Sociologically, "culture as a conception, whether defined by custom, tradition, norm, value, rules or such like, is clearly derived from what people do" (Blumer, 1969, p. 6). Cultural constructs, "….consists of all that is produced by human collectivities, that is, all of social life" (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992, p. 405). Since there is heterogeneity in all cultures, cultural constructions also produce "…. a distinctive identity for a society, socializing members for greater internal homogeneity and identifying outsiders" (Borgatta & Montgomery, 2000, pp. 563-564). Equally so, culture can isolate habits that are ethnically-specific, separating the smaller culture from that of the larger society. Even though the concepts of culture can range from the family (simplest) to social organizations (complex), the most simplified definition of culture still creates a complex matrix of overlapping concepts. However, the consensus is "…. that for something to count as culture it has to be shared by some group of people" (Brumann, 2002, p. 509).

As with culture, ethnic-specific patterns are "…the body of learned beliefs, traditions, and guides for behavior that are shared among members of that group" that is *learned*(Barrett, 1984, p. 54). "The terms 'social inheritance' or 'tradition' put emphasis on how culture is acquired rather than on what it consists of" it is still a guide to normative behavior (Kroeber, [1923, 1948, 1963] 1963, p. 61). Therefore, ethnicity is also"….the customary behavior that distinguishes one human society from another is behavior that the members have acquired by observation, by imitation, or by instruction at the hands of other members of that group" (Barrett, 1984, p. 54).

The individual has power in constructing their own reality, but the 'self' operates within the confines of existing institutional influences that shape reality. It is the understanding of life, social placement and socially inherited group norms that establishes a sense of self in relation to

larger paradigms. It is from inferring the ideas, beliefs and values of human behavior that insights and explanations of behavior can be provided (Brumann, 2002, p. 509).

It is the contention of this research that the conundrum of dichotomous interpretations of generalizability of fact, can be dealt with by combining the cultural interpretative and institutional approaches. This will allow for the "…richness of nuance into cultural phenomena" that does "….not encourage generalizations or testing" with more scientific institutional approaches of collective action that "…make causal claims that can be tested and generalized to other cultural data" (Griswold, 1987, p. 3). By using "….both, epistemological and an ontological construct" culture can be interpreted by smaller units of analysis, acquiring data that would not otherwise be evaluated (Arditi, 1994, p. 604). "However defined, the concept of culture helps the ethnographer search for a logical, cohesive pattern in the myriad, often ritualistic behaviors and ideas that characterize a group" (Fetterman, 1998] 1989, p. 27). To "…. evaluate specific, contingent generalizations on empirical grounds" is a good starting point of interpreting ethnic-specific perceptions and behaviors as a glimpse into the reality of Black culture (DiMaggio, 1996, p. 120).

As outlined throughout this chapter "….culture as a concept lacks a suitably rigorous definition" (Crane, 1994, p. 2). Currently, cultural constructs are "….not only transit, but also health, education, housing, waste and social needs….it must coordinate all shared systems for maximum effect" (Mau & Leonard, 2004, p. 2:11). In short, our technologically advanced society in the new millennium has brought more complexities to understanding culture. Our social system of operation is an advanced network of autonomous entities, but despite its' complexities, our system of stratification still has ethnic variation. It is through culturally-specific references to culture that one can "….explain the similarities and differences among them" (Harris, 1971, p. 136). While culture is "….currently defined through an extensive variety of perspectives" it still provides a snapshot relative to viewing individual aspects of culture as a shared network, in which future research can build (Borgatta & Montgomery, 2000, pp. 563-564).

Granted, in our American post-industrialized society, it is becoming increasingly difficult to isolate cultural distinctions, specific to ethnic groups. But culture is a universal with strata's of variation that help in understanding and interpreting human behavior. Therefore, we must remain mindful that "….what man is, whence and how he sprang, what he did in his past….how he works, thinks, and feels, speaks and sings, fashioning objects or reshaping the world with his hands" is directly associated with his history and biography (de Laguna, 1968, p. 469). Most ethnic groups have a unique history and biography, in which their culture becomes a form of expression, serving as a key component in interpreting ethnic in-group behavior.

THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

This section incorporates the symbolic interactionist perspective, as a framework for investigating aspects of symbolic culture. It begins with a broad discussion of the self as part of the ethnic group and then narrows in scope to the individualized 'self'. Through the process of socialization, cultural traditions are transmitted establishing a unique sense of ethnic identity. The self, then becomes a primary mechanism for absorbing culturally derived patterns of association.

The symbolic interactionist perspective is well-suited for examining how the 'self' is developed and constructed by the particular norms, values and beliefs of the group. Within the symbolic interactionist perspective, food habits are culturally constructed deductions of ideas, beliefs, patterns and standards shared in common from which meaning is derived. "The great strength of the symbolic interaction approach to meaning is that it is empirical" (Becker & McCall, 1990, p. 5). In such, the empirical world are concrete forms of lived experience to which theoretical propositions are integrated (Blumer, 1969, p. 1 & 151). History as a pathway to group biography includes the institutional and interpretative aspects of in-group social experiences.

This research, premised in the interpretative tradition is built around strands of general similarity of thought, patterns and practices among individuals of the ethnic group. Within this theoretical approach, cultural traditions directly impact individualized and group constructions of identity, in relation to the larger social world. In other words, human beings are actors constantly engaged in interactions that construct and reshape perceptions of reality. Despite institutional constraints the actor constructs one's own reality by electing to acknowledge, designate, negotiate, alter and reject meanings according to the situation. The individual's existence operates within the confines of institutional influences that dictate the social placement and life chances of the ethnic group.

Much of what is learned by the individual is socially inherited. Symbolic culture is socially defined and transmitted through forms of interaction. All human communication is socially interpreted and reinterpreted though forms of interaction. Thus, language, food habits, traditions and customs as actions, are symbolic conveyors of culture. Although in-group traditions take shape in various forms that are embedded in cultural constructs. It is within ethnic groups, that in-group ideologies are shared ways of being, altered or reified by personal life experiences.

Within the interpretation tradition,"….a full understanding of the self begins with the Meadian notion of reflexivity" (Callero, 2003, p. 120). The genesis of the 'self' is a cognitive process initiated by contact with primary members. "The self is something which has a development; it is not an initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole (Mead, 2007, p. 25). The development of self is a reflexive process in which the 'self' and 'society' is engaged in a reciprocal process of interaction. The self is a characterized as a social object that evolves from interaction and social experience, from which self-consciousness is formed. The self- absorbed traditions within the ethnic group, which is then reified by the individual's perceptions and social placement in the world. In this, ethnic affiliation is culturally communicated. Since the self is embedded in the individual's social experience,

> the self and self-consciousness have first to arise, and then these experiences can be identified peculiarly with the self, or appropriated by the self; to enter, so to speak, into this heritage of experience, the self has first to develop within the social process in which this heritage is involved (Ibid, [1962] 1934, p. 172).

The history, culture and environmental influences are stimuli imposing on the self as a reflexive process. Individuals become conscious of the "self" through reflexivity and existing structural, historical and cultural influences. "Reflexivity is not a biological given but rather emerges from social experience (Callero, 2003, pp. 118; Mead, 1934, pp.1136 & 1137). Symbolic interactionists view meaning as social products that arise from the process of interpretation and interaction between people. It is through interpretation of oneself that meaning is derived and behavior is formed. Meanings are often modified and re-modified by the ones interpretation.

For Blumer, the formation of meaning is important for understanding behavior, often centered on the experiences of the actor in the empirical world. These experiences through social interaction become the basis from which individualized perceptions of self and the social world develop. As outlined by Blumer,

> (a) ….that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
>
> (b) ….that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.
>
> (c) ….that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with things he encounters (Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

Each habitus has rules of engagement for which members learn, adopt or adapt. The kitchen, as a habitus has an etiquette of which culturally appropriate conduct is expected. Rules of engagement are especially observed during, what Goffman refers to as ceremonial rituals. Food habits and preparation are symbolic inferences of in-group expression. For the most part, traditional food habits and practices (preparing soul food) within the black community has become a ceremonial ritual. Ceremonial rituals, symbolic in action "….subject to a rule of conduct is, then, a communication, for it represents a way in which selves are confirmed—both the self for which the rule is an obligation and the self for which it is an expectation" (Goffman, [1959, 1961, 1981, 2005] 1967, p. 51). These rules establish principles governed by a set of principles.

Rules of engagement are implicit in these culturally derived rituals as rites of passage, which as an active process creates meaning in human action and the presentation of self. Most compartmentalizations are individualistic, cognitive absorptions of expectations derived from internalizations that reaffirm a sense of belonging and membership. While our actions and reactions may differ considerably for a variety of reasons, the acceptance within an ethnic group is powerful in the cognitive development of self and identity. Then, culture is symbolically connected to food habits and preparation, as a form of interaction has deeply rooted implications associated with the cultural construction of self, ethnic affiliation and identity.

CULTURAL SOCIALIZATION & ENCULTURATION
ETHNICITY, IDENTITY AND IN-GROUP AFFILIATION

In the previous sections, the symbolic interactionist perspective of culture that impacts the 'self' by interpretative and institutional constructions has been discussed. Through socialization, ethnic affiliation and identity is fused to the individualized 'self'. The absorption of ethnic characteristics through *"cultural osmosis"* is interpretative. It is the meaningful symbolic communication that the individual begins to interpret "self" and the world.

The origins of the self is developed and nurtured through the process of socialization through interaction with primary groups and others that intimate association. In essence, socialization serves as a channel through which culture is transmitted. From birth, the individual enters a process of socialization where values and beliefs learned in the home. These ways of being, learned in the home are re-interpreted by interactions within the broader society.

Individuals are taught how to appropriately engage in societal rules and expectations for normative behavior. Distinct cultural patterns within the ethnic groups include both cultural norms, but also the norms of the overarching society. "A society not only has a culture expected to be learned by all, but also distinctive groups with their own subcultures. By his interactions within these groups, the child learns their subcultures at the same time as he learns the general culture" (Rose, 1962, p. 16).

In most societies, "human beings must learn highly specific things from members of a previously enculturated generation if they are to become viable members of any society" (Barrett, 1984, p. 60). By enculturation the individual learns and gradually grasp the unique particulars of the ethnic group. Therefore, the individual learns group membership from its' primary actors. The amalgamation of complex experiences and a series of ingrained socialized patterns, which serve as a guide to enculturation. It is rudimentary to the construction of self and the beginning of understanding that which we are.

Historical reference and life lessons are articulated through narration or action. These beliefs are later meshed with personal life experiences, shaping individual perception of social positioning in the world. Thus, the roles acquired require different forms of communication in the presentation of self. In this, the self is a fluid entity, socially defined and symbolic in nature.

Human communication is socially driven, but culturally defined. While the"…. social group (shared-culture group) is one type of cultural phenomena and the cultural individual is another type of cultural phenomena" the two have boundless ties of association (Blumenthal, 1936, p. 888). In-group communication is first expressed within the scope of ethnicity, then that of the larger society. Communication and action that is ethnically driven, is also symbolic in nature. These socialized and shared forms of communication convey meaning in relation to the ethnic group, from which action, inaction, or reaction to life events occur. It is the shared culture within the group that ethnic affiliation is prompted, leading to identity.

BLACK-AMERICAN CULTURE AND EXPERIENCE: RACE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

As discussed in the previous section, socialization and enculturation provides a framework for understanding how ethnic culture is transmitted to future generations of Black-Americans. Common experiences form a sense of collectivity, establishing a sense of ethnic identity and in-group affiliation. This section examines the Black-American experience. Most of the common experiences for Black-Americans have been forged out of struggle and inequality, impacting perceptions of self, food habits, social placement and overall life chances.

Within the Black culture, history shapes the traditions or a way of life within the group. The phrase '*to know where you are going, you must know where you came from'* is a form of reflexivity of the ethnic culture. The historical experiences of enslaved people of African descent in the New World were also impacted by oppressive institutional constraints, which shaped a unique reality, ideology, traditions, and practices for Black-Americans which was handed down generation to generation.

Black Americans have individualized cultural norms and values that represent group membership and identity. Through socialization the individual is exposed to the expectations and normative behavior within the black experience. It is the shared experiences and commonalities of interpretation that affirm and re-affirm black membership that is an expression of self. Initially, the significant other transfers normative beliefs of the ethnic group. While, primary groups are characterized by " intimate face-to-face association and cooperation….for it is in these human groupings that separate entities fuse into a whole and give the individual a sense of 'weness' " (Cooley, 1964, p. 23). Likewise, the "…. social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called the generalized other" (Mead, [1962] 1934, p. 154).In terms of identity the generalized other serves as a mediator of cultural ethnic group characteristics and associations. Once internalized, the perceptions of the generalized other are common representations of those participating in common activity.

For Black-Americans ''weness'' is observed in ethnic patterns of behavior, perceptions of lived experience and similarities of practice. Cultural identity is the reflection of common history and biography of Black-Americans. It is within those experiences that ethnic affiliation is formed. By viewing the Black-American experience a unique group identity is established. Black-Americans share a unique history of struggle and inequality in the New World. In the book, Identity and Difference, Stuart Hall's essay ''*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*'' finds,

> .... at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provide us, as 'one people' with the stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history (Hall, 1997, p. 51).

Historically, the enslavement era left vestiges of prejudice ideologies and subjugation embedded in Black-American culture. The exposure to racial inequality and unfair practices are part of the Black-American heritage and lived experience. Racial biases and exclusion are mitigating factors that cognitively impact the self, which was further legitimatized with its legalization in social, political and economic institutions. The institutionalization of discriminatory practices ingrained in the social system, form deeply held perceptions in the psyche of Black-Americans as a part of group membership.

This social reality would set precedence and be reconstructed in the stories, folklore and narratives of older members. Customarily, these insightful commendations were words of wisdom, a source of guidance or a glimpse of the past through the eyes of those that recalled the experience. Although the time would change and decades passed, many young Black-Americans would quickly learn that the rules in American society were still separate for whites, than for blacks.

As a subordinated class, Black-Americans endured years of dehumanization, struggle for recognition and equality. The harsh reality of enslavement labeled Black-Americans as mere chattel, savaged heathens that were necessary workers. The social construction ''blackness''

was no one other than evil and dark. In the book, Frederick Douglass: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, references black slaves as

> capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being– needing nothing but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race—by the law of the land, by the voice of the people, by the terms of the slave code, he was only a piece of property, a beast of burden, a chattel personal, nevertheless (Douglass, [1845, 1968, 2001] 2002, p. 10).

Their second-class citizenry was a constant reminder that their social positioning in society was relegated to the bottom of the American social ladder. Black-Americans were subjected to a social system that rejected them as viable members, demeaned their existence, classifying them as social pariahs. In The Souls of Black Folks, by W.E.B. DuBois provides a compelling depiction of the reality of Black-Americans as

> the Negro is a sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, --- a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others….One ever feels his twoness---an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife---this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self (Du Bois, [1903, 1989] 1990, p. 3).

Black-American social placement was reinforced by separate doctrines and laws that reified "the black existence" as arbitrary and capricious. Prejudice and discriminative practices were solidified by laws that were created and interpreted by the powerful.

In the book, *Black Like Me (1959),* the author discussed the different perceptions of reality between White and Black Americans regarding skin color. "Most white Americans denied any taint racism and really believed that in this land we judged every man by his qualities as a human individual" (Griffin, [1962, 1992] 1962, p. 161). Griffin masked in "dark" pigmentation

> …learned within a very few hours that no one was judging me by my quantities as a human individual and everyone was judging me by my pigment. As soon as white men or women saw me, they automatically assumed I possessed a whole set of false characteristics (false not only to me but to all black men). They could not see me or any other black man as a human individual because they buried us under the garbage of their stereotyped view of us. They saw us as "different" from themselves in fundamental ways: we were intellectually limited; we had a God- given sense of rhythm; we were lazy and happy-go-lucky; we loved watermelon and fried chicken....Always, in every encounter even with "good whites," we had the feeling that the white person was not talking with us but with his image of us (Griffin, [1962, 1992] 1962, p. 162).

The widely held beliefs in a system of meritocracy can be considered an oxymoron, when the social climate preferred the Black-American play patsy to the stereotype— of the grinning, yes sir, submissive role of the "good negro". The socially constructed reality of black vs. white Americans were diametrically opposed in practice. Black-Americans were psychologically isolated by their "blackness" imprinting a sense of anomie. In essence, relationship between "blackness" and invisibility was an analogous manifestation, which was hard to escape.

In the book, Invisible Man (1981), Ellison sense of invisibility is a reflective interpretation of his interactions or observations of others that, "occurs because a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact" (Ellison, [1952, 1965, 1991] 1981, p. 3). But the mirrors of the self are not only reflective of others' reactions, but also self-actualized. While one may search for reality externally, the internal is equally important. Ellison states, "I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer" (Ellison, [1952, 1965, 1991] 1981, p. 15). As previously stated, "this self-identical reality stands, therefore in relation solely to itself….in other words, that very self-identity is internal distinction (Hegel, [1807, 1967, 2003] 2004, p. 157). As Ellison also finds, black and white realities are inextricably linked, each impacting the other.

For Black-Americans, cultural commonalities rose out of exclusion, invisibility, oppression or similarities in less than opportune life chances. Fanon found,

> The Negro, never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultured person, comes to realize that history points out a well-defined path to him: he must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists (Fanon, 1963, p. 212).

Black-Americans were trapped within an American system that on one hand embraced them as economic necessities (workers), while on the other hand marginalized them as unviable entities. Since culture dictates perceptions, so does cultural differences. Black-American culture is not only a subculture of mainstream American culture, but is an amalgam of African and European cultures. Considering Hegel's "dialectic" process is recursively patterned as the

thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The dialectic triad is considered the logical progression of two opposites in conflict merging, "a progression in which each successive movement emerges as a solution to the contradictions inherent in the preceding movement" of which something new emerges (Raapana & Friedrich, 2002, p. 1). "The dialectic pits A against B….which eventually creates an outcome that may or may not have any resemblance to A and B" (Age-of-the-sage.org, 2008, p. 4). In this case, the dialectic being African culture (*thesis)* and European culture (*antithesis),* from which derived the emerging synthesis of a newly formed group. That emerging synthesis is Black-American culture.

REVISITING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK-AMERICAN SELF-IDENTIFICATION

The foundation of American society implicitly outlined equality as an unalienable right of all men. As the American colonies fought for freedom and independence from Great Britain, they upheld the institution of slavery, denying Blacks the very freedom or equality in which they strived to obtain. On July 4th, 1776, the Fathers of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed, "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (Klein & Morse, [1979, 1986, 1999] 1996, p. 24).For Black-Americans, these rights would come to the forefront of debate during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In 1963, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech envisioned,

> …. I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal (King, 1986, p. 219).

The 1960s struggle of Black-Americans was to self-identify and to be proud of their biological characteristics and heritage came full circle. The upheavals of the sixties proved advantageous and opened doors of opportunity. However, the struggle for equality, upward mobility, political advancement and cultural identification would evolve well into the new millennium. However, Black-Americans continued to adapt and move upward, understanding the inconsistency and difference of prescribed roles within the dominant mainstream and ethnic culture. According to Rose, "the culture, especially our culture, is often internally inconsistent, and one may move from one culture or subculture to another, so that there are conflicting cultural expectations for an individual" (Rose,1962, p. 14). Since "macro relations are simply an extension of micro relations and vice versa", ethnic culture is a continuum of the dominant overarching culture (Gilmore,1990, p. 149).

The history of Black-Americans socially constructed a sense of ethnic identification. But the transformation of identity is also fluid and subject to the influences and social conditions of which it is embedded. Even though culture is complex within the Black-American community, it still helps explain the marginalization, oppression and inequality as experiences that have formed an in-group consciousness and unique cultural identity. In Stuart Hall's essay, "*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*" Hall argues,

> cultural identity…is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past….identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hooks, 1992, p. 5).

Although our society has made strides of progress in the area of race relations these changes have been relatively slow. Black-Americans are continually impacted by the residuals of the enslavement era, thus affected by the racial and political hegemony that remains a stronghold. It may be argued that today, Black-Americans are conditioned to a multi-consciousness made up of an array of socially defined roles, struggles of identity, normative exceptions and behavior. Since *Black-American Culture* is purely interpretative, to vigilantly learn how to self-identify, one must self-actualize, despite imposing forces that are no longer overtly noticeable in our present society.

Unfortunately, the ideologies of the past as to whether Black-Americans have a distinct culture are also remnants still present in modern day academic thought. Proponents of this view often use the mass integration of various cultures as justification that a collective in-group consciousness is too vague, thus establishing gross generalizations. However, by exploring the relevance of culture within an ethnic group context *is* using the sociological imagination. Moreover, this does not negate the significance and power of in-group commonality and serves as a rebuttal to the notion of sweeping generalizations, thus limiting a myopic restrictive view of the Black culture.

The research in sociology tends to focus on the internal heterogeneity within a group, as opposed to the equally important similarities and commonalities within a group. As with any culture, Black-American culture has variance and is not an anomaly and "a major share of responsibility for the general view that blacks have no distinctive culture must be carried by social scientists who, barring a few exceptions, have promoted the view that African culture was all but destroyed by slavery" (Kochman, 1981 p. 8). Even for the well-intended, "….the absence of black cultural frame of reference still resulted only in social explanations of black behavior, which, because they are exclusively social, were often also incomplete" (Ibid, 1981, p. 8 & 9). Undoubtedly, "blacks have also been hurt by the failure to recognize distinctive black racial attributes" (Ibid, 1981, p. 10).In fact,

> ….that pseudoscientific sociological concept which held that most Afro-American difficulties sprang from our 'high visibility'; a phrase as double-dealing and insidious as its more recent oxymoronic cousins, 'benign neglect' and 'reverse discrimination,' both of which translate 'Keep those Negroes running—but in their same old place' (Ellison, [1952, 1965, 1991] 1981, p. xv).

In every effort to amicably compensate for evils of the past ills, we have increasingly become a politically correct society. Even though, there is duplicity in understanding the ambiguousness of "ethnicity and culture" these constructs often masks what ultimately leads back to the issue of race or class-once the veneers are stripped away. Is it possible that we have become lost in our own societal progressiveness, where

> black and white cultural differences are generally ignored when attempts are made to understand how and why black and white communication fails….the chief reason cultural differences are ignored is that blacks and whites assume they are operating according to identical speech and cultural conventions and that these are conventions the socially dominant white group has established as standard. This assumption—besides adding to the disruptive capacity of cultural differences—speaks to the general public failure to recognize black norms and conventions in these areas differ from those of whites (Kochman, 1981, p. 7 & 8).

In this, we have found new ways to mask old problems, as opposed to actually finding remedies. In essence, our noble efforts to strip away the hideous nature of racial bias are only a camouflage. Yes, a camouflaging Band-Aid resulting in a conjured web, creating a more complex matrix that well surpasses just the color line.

As a contribution to the field of sociology, it is time to reassess our former assertions, by building off past assumptions, yet being careful to not replicate past mistakes. In this, we can certainly further the discipline with innovative approaches that represent cultural constructions, rather than hiding aimlessly in our own rhetoric. The history and biography of Black-Americans directly impact cultural constructions, as well as perceptions. We must re-examine past sociological discourse on Black-American culture, specifically perceptions of Black-American women seldom allowed a voice in interpreting their own reality. While Black-Americans share a unique history, the biography of black women has distinctiveness, separate from her male counterpart.

Despite the heterogeneity within the Black-American culture, without bridging history, biography and culture our presumptions are not holistic, but narrowed in scope. With this in mind, surely it is difficult to know where you are going, without looking at where you came from. Therefore, to further ignore gender or cultural differences as stereotypical, unviable constructs is a blatant faux pas.

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapter, cultural constructions provided a context for understanding ethnically derived patterns of behavior among Black-American culture related to food habits and preparation. This chapter builds off *Interpretative Interactionism* as a methodological approach in helping understand the development and re-construction process used in this study. Interpretative Interactionism follows the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionist perspective and is best suited for micro-level, socio-cultural analysis. This chapter discusses the the research design, instrument, pilot study, sampling procedures, participant selection and the process by which the information was gathered. The in-depth interviews were conducted using auto-ethnographic techniques as part of the reflection process.

As stated above, this chapter relies heavily on the work of Norman Denzin's book, *Interpretative Interactionism* (1989), which links the intersectionality of the cultural, symbolic and interpretative as forms of interactionism. The use of this methodological approach structured the research initiative that aided in observing, capturing and understanding the Black-American women under study. Since the primary focus of this research was determine characteristics related to black cultural food habits and preparation, uncovering ethnic-specific habits symbolically linked to cultural practices were imperative intricacies in the social construction of identity and body image.

Subsequently, in researching the socio-cultural perceptions of Black-American women's relationship with food habits, obesity and body image a series of subsections emerged as relevant (Greene, 2006).[16] These topics are included subsections in the area of culture, identity, soul food, restaurant/supermarket preference, socialization, physical activity, food/beverage intake and social capital, but only the most relevant areas were included in this research.

[16] See conceptual mapping of dissertation in appendix.

DESIGNING AND PILOTING THE INSTRUMENT

This section includes a brief discussion of the development and re-construction of the research instrument used in the study. I have outlined the initial piloted instrument and the final changes to the design. From the offset of the project a pilot study was conducted to locate any problematic areas in the survey, such as question significance, clarity, word phrasing and redundancy in responses. The goals of the preliminary study are determined as follows: (1) estimated time of each interview, (2) similarities/differences in responses, (3) areas that could be eliminated or additional themes for consideration and (4) determine whether the instrument captured relevant empirical data. Additionally, the pilot was used to reveal any additional aspects needed or not addressed in the survey.

The questions were numbered for easy reference and the color-coded under particular themes corresponding to the conceptual mapping. From the pilot, certain questions were revised for clarity and others were changed from a range to an open-ended response that could be grouped later. The pilot also allowed the ability to practice recording information, such as responsive exclamations, gestures, and other pertinent material that required documenting for recording accuracy.

The development and design of the in-depth questionnaire used in this research was labor intensive. The questionnaire began with basic demographics such as, age, education, employment, marital status, children, others that reside with the interviewee, religious affiliation, family origins, civic and social engagements. Questions developed around themes included cooking traditions, restaurant preferences, ceremonial food habits and preparation, culture, soul/southern food, food/beverage selection, consumption, gender, physical activity, dietary programs, knowledge of healthy foods, social networks, supermarket preferences and body image/perceptions of beauty. The survey concluded with demographic information often considered sensitive, such as income, social class, financial situation/stress, height and weight.

Initially, the instrument was framed as a bricolage that included silhouettes and themes from pre-existing studies.[17] The body image models and silhouettes were adopted from Devendra Singh were based on waist-to-hip ratio (WHR).[18]Some of the body image models were replicated, while the WHR model altered the hair, in an attempt to simulate a closer imagery to an ethnic depiction. Underneath each model, the same three questions were asked regarding perceptions for cross-comparison.

Although the targeted sample for this project was Black-American women, the pilot consisted of 10 in-depth interviews with women from four different ethnic classifications, six were Black-American, one Hispanic, one African, and two European. Provided this research targeted Black-American women, participants from other ethnic backgrounds were included as a means of revealing structural and perceptional flaws in the design. By including a few participants outside of the targeted group, ideological and substantive constructs were compared and re-considered in the final design. At first sight, including a small number of participants outside of the targeted sample seemed to blur the lines of my research. But in fact, these interviews reified the important topic areas and introduced an outside perspective on possible strengths within the black culture.

The results of the pilot indicated the need to eliminate or add various questions in the final survey instrument. Questions of interpretative difficulty were revised based on the responses; some of the demographic questions were reworded to open-ended format for more accuracy. The question regarding children was restructured to read dependent children under the age of eighteen. The questions on how many times the participants eat particular foods were changed from a categorical selection to open-ended. Overall, the pilot interviews solidified the motifs of survey and the information gathered supported assumptions of data richness.

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[17]Silhouette found in article by Anderson, L.A. etal. (1997) ,"Diabetes in Urban African Americans. Body Image, Satisfaction with Size, and Weight Change Attempts". The Diabetes Educator, Vol. 21, No., 1, pp. 301-308.

[18]Singh, D. & Young R.K. (1995), "Body Weight, Waist-to-Hip Ratio, Breasts, and Hips: Role in Judgments of female Attractiveness and Desirability for Relationships". Ethology and Sociobiology, 16: 483-507.

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING PROCEDURES

The study used in-depth, face-to-face interviews from a sample of 15 Black-American women residing in Columbia, Missouri. The requirements of the study were, (1) all participants classify themselves as an Black-American females, (2) 18 years of age or older, (3) a resident of Columbia for at least two years. The participants in the study varied in weight, age and educational attainment.

General data was gathered on prospective participants in two phases, each phase taking two months. In most cases, special permission was required and had to be granted before entering particular establishments to recruit subjects. In the first phase, subjects were recruited from Columbia Family Health Center and predominant Black churches. In phase two prospective participants were included from beauty salons and word of mouth referrals.

In phase one, general information was gathered using a one page informational sheet designed for recording basic information on a potential subject. This included age, education, employment/student status, children under the age of 18 living at home, willingness to participate in the study and any reason for declining to participate. Below, basic contact information was requested, such as name, address, telephone number, cell number and the best time to make contact. A place was allocated at the bottom of the form for my approximation of weight and any additional notes and observations needed for reference. [19]

After completing the informational sheet, each potential subject was provided a brief overview of the project. My advisors contact information at the University of Missouri-Columbia and my personal cell phone number. All personal observations and notes made from the discussion were recorded privately at the bottom of the form and the approximate weight of the individual was noted. As each form was collected, a number was allocated with the date and location positioned at the top right hand corner. All forms were typed and entered into a binder.

[19] Information Sheet in appendix

In sampling, the forms of prospective participants that were typed and entered into a binder totaled a (n=45). Of those recruited as potential subjects, the (n = 45), fifteen were selected to be contacted for an interview. Using Microsoft Excel Formula Auditing = RANDBETWEEN (1, 45) allowed numbers to be randomly selected. Any duplication of numbers was immediately detected and the numbers re-generated. The generated RANDBETWEEN numbers were cross-compared with the forms in the binder and those individuals were contacted for an interview.

The randomly selected participants were contacted several times before the actual interview to confirm time and location. Approximately 85% percent of the respondents initially selected were contacted and still showed an interest in the project. A few auto-generated subjects had telephone numbers listed on the form that was no longer in service and were not able to be contacted. These were eliminated from the numerical list and random numbers were again selected.

Before each interview, participants were again provided with an overview of the study, the procedure, confidentiality, potential risks, benefits and their right to end the session or omit a question at any time. Upon acceptance of the terms, each participant signed a consent form, of which a copy was provided for their records. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was provided a fictitious name (nicknames were not permitted) that was not linked to their identity. A spreadsheet with identifiable information, including participant's name, interview number, fictitious name and interview date was kept in a locked file.

Participants were asked to discuss their cooking practices, perceptions of soul/southern food, black culture, body image, supermarket/restaurant preference, and exercise habits. Each interview took approximately 4-6 hours each and was divided into two sessions. Interviews were taped and notes were taken to ensure accurate documentation of transcriptions. At the end of the interview, respondent's weight was taken using a bioelectrical impedance analysis (BIA)

instrument, the Tanita BF-350 Body Composition Analyzer. Some participants expressed concern in having their weight measured, so in lieu of missing data these were allowed to self-report.

At the end of each interview, participants were provided a fifteen dollar gift card to Target, Barnes and Noble, Chiles, Applebee's or Wal-Mart as a token of appreciation. Initially, several participants declined accepting a gift card, citing the project was interesting and felt it unnecessary to be compensated for the time allocated to the project. In almost all of the cases, the participant's comments suggested the interview process was not what they expected. In fact, it seemed as if they were just having a conversation with a friend, rather than holding an actual interview. However, the token of appreciation was carefully phrased as part of the research agenda. Again, some participants inquired as to whether the funding was out-of-pocket and if so, there was no need to compensate them for their time. But to limit further resistance to accepting the gift card, my responses were again centered on this as part of the research agenda. Although with hesitation, eventually all accepted.

INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS IN THIS STUDY

In this section, the research participants used in this study are briefly introduced to provide the reader background information. Each overview is designed to provide relevant information that contributes to helping understand a context from which the interviewed responses were provided. For example, the age and geographical origins of certain participants shaped their responses. To protect the participant's privacy, each are introduced and referenced according to the fictitious names provided in the study. Their comments on various issues pertaining to ritualistic food habits, soul food, body image, etc.. are incorporated in particular subsections, including the results at the end of this research study.

SASHA JONES: Sasha is twenty eight years old, currently working in temp positions as a LPN. She is attending college and is a single parent, raising three children. Her childhood memories of food habits and practices are experiences with her father.

SHANEQUA WASHINGTON: Shanequa Washington is thirty four years old. She was born in Columbia and has resided here all of her life. She is married and has three children living at home, but has helped raise children of other family members. Shanequa recently obtained her Associates of Arts degree and now attends Columbia College. In her depiction, holiday rituals are impacted by religious affiliation, but the similarities of food habits (although described in everyday occurrences) are still evident in her narrative.

SHANANA JONES: Shanana Jones is twenty four years old. She is originally from the South Central part of Los Angeles, California. She has a college degree and is a single parent of two children. Shanana's reference discussed cooking traditions as daily habits, rather than ritualistic cooking.

ANNA LOUIS: Anna Louis is a thirty two years old. She was born in Columbia and is a single parent with two children residing at home. Anna's family origins are from the South, having migrated from Mississippi to Columbia with tons of other relatives. Leaving behind the "potato patch" the family moved here to find better jobs. Anna completed her Associate of Arts at Moberly Area Community College and contemplates whether she will pursue a higher degree. Anna's description of family holidays included rituals for Easter.

TINA DAVIS: Tina Davis is twenty four years old. She is a graduate of the University of Missouri-Columbia. She holds a B.A. in Literature and a M.S. in English. She classifies her family origins are from the Deep South. Having been born in Natchez, Mississippi she relocated to Columbia to attend school. Most of her family still resides in Mississippi, so she frequently returns home for visits.

LISA HARRIS: Lisa Harris is twenty seven years old. She was born in Columbia, but her family originates from Fayette, Missouri. Lisa has a B.A. in Criminal Justice, worked part-time while attending school and is a single parent of one son. Lisa has a fairly large extended family, many of which reside in Columbia, Missouri or surrounding areas. Her family seems relatively close-knit and maintains interaction outside of traditional ritualistic holidays. As long standing residents, Lisa discussed some of her memories of the traumatic experiences she recalled during her childhood involving racial discrimination. These memories as illustrated in her narrative are still, as she called it "nightmares" that has had a lasting psychological impact on her social purview. In Lisa's narrative she combines food habits and tradition.

UME NO: Ume No a middle aged female and works full time in the University setting. She does not have any children, but has a host of nieces and nephews. She was born in Columbia, Missouri and was the youngest of eight children. However, she did not grow up with most of her siblings because they were predominantly older and many had moved away. She considers religion important, but did not consider herself an overly religious zealot. Her description of soul food incorporated the history of enslavement

LAURIE JONES: Laurie Jones is forty years old. She has a M.S. in Education and works full-time. She is single and does not have any children. However, she is very active in several civic and social clubs. Her family roots are also deeply Southern. Her family is originally from Alabama and Mississippi, but she was born in Tuskegee, Alabama.

ROSEMARY SPICE: Rosemary Spice is sixty-seven years old. Her family origins are from the South. She was born in Keatchie, Louisiana. Rosemary is currently married, but her children are grown. She holds a graduate degree in Human Nutrition. She remains very active in civic and social clubs, such as her church and sorority. Her narrative discusses traditional ritualistic holiday practices and her memories of a segregated society.

SWIRL PUDDING: Swirl Pudding is fifty years old. She was born in Columbia, Missouri and has six siblings, several still reside in Columbia. Her family has strong roots in Columbia, many of which are leaders in the Black-American community. She has attended Moberly Area Community College, but has been forced to take interim breaks due to health conditions. She is divorced and has been a single parent, but most of her children are now adults. However, she still has two teenagers living at home. She finds fulfillment in working with children and is very dedicated to provided ventures where they have the potential to academically grow. She considers herself extremely religious and incorporates various aspects of her religious beliefs in her everyday life. In my interview with Swirl Pudding, she placed an emphasis on family, in specific Black-American family gatherings and interaction

SISTER BERTHA JONES: Sister Bertha Jones is seventy one years old. She is married and has adult children that no longer reside at home. Although born in Columbia, she grew up in the rural area of Callaway County.[20] She has a B.A. in Education and has made prominent strides in the black community of Columbia. In her narrative, holiday rituals and practices convey a part of tradition at the heart of rural life.

BEYONCE HINTON: Beyonce Hinton is fifty five years old and has lived in Columbia for nine years. She never attended college, but has worked all of her life. She was an only child, born and raised in an urban environment. She is now widowed and has one adult child. Prior to her relocation, she was a resident of Brooklyn, New York City. Beyonce Hinton also describes food traditions during the holidays, but expressed these occasions as an opportunity to meet distant relatives.

LYDIA COMETS: Lydia Comets is forty nine years old and resides in Columbia. She was born in Queens, New York and has a B.A. in Finance and a Specialist Degree in Educational Technology. She is widowed and has one daughter. Lydia Comets works part-time and is completing her doctoral work at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Lydia's description of ritualistic holiday behaviors brings in socio-economic class and expectations of formal etiquette.

[20] Currently, "Callaway County is located in the central part the State. It is one of the largest counties in Missouri with a land area of 539,000 acres" Retrieved from.(http://callaway.county.missouri.org/Courthouse.html) on May 25, 2010.

TINA JAMES: Tina James is sixty one years old. She is currently retired, but works part-time. She has a degree in Human Development and Family Studies and is still very active in her church and other social and civic clubs. She was born in the Bootheel area in Missouri. Her family is originally from Mississippi and Arkansas, roots that are deeply Southern.

GRACE ELLEN: Grace Ellen grew up in Fayette, Missouri. Although her mother still lives in Fayette, she currently resides in Columbia, Missouri. She is a single parent of a seventeen year old daughter and her son is twenty one. She currently works with disadvantaged children in one of the Columbia Public Schools. She enjoys her job considerably and has an interest of returning to school to obtain a degree. She feels this will help her advance and open more doors of opportunity so that she can have a bigger impact on the children she teaches.

SYMBOLIC & INTERPRETATIVE INTERACTIONISM

In the nature of symbolic interactionism, this study used a qualitative design rooted in interpretative interactionism. The design follows the micro-analytical perspective, which is commonly associated with the study of face-to face interaction (Garfinkel, 1967; E. Goffman, [1959, 1961, 1981, 2005] 1967). Within qualitative design, the essence of interpretative interactionism is to "….capture the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied," which is predicated on the significance of life experiences that shape meaning for those derived (Ibid, 1989, [2004], p. 10) ."The province of qualitative research, accordingly, is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 12). The crux of the interpretative view is to understand and interpret key aspects of social life. Within the symbolic interactionist tradition, this is important because "in social life, there is only interpretation….everyday life revolves around persons interpreting and making judgments about their own and others' behaviors and experiences" (Denzin, 1989, [2004], p. 11).

As with all individuals, Black-Americans navigate through a life course, in which the use of language, symbols and gestures establish meaning. How we situate meaning is through the interpretation of action and reactions in which perceptions are derived. How can one define a situation as real or have perceptions about things that have no ideological meaning? Clearly, people do act in everyday situations without adequate knowledge or understanding, but there is often some construct for their course of action. Even impulsive behavior is predicated on meaning, even if the justification is irrational or illogical. Action before thought does not render a person mindless.

The concept of mindlessness defies the underlying assumptions of the symbolic interactionist perspective, which views humans as actors that "….create the worlds of experiences they live in. They do this by acting on things in terms of the meaning things have for them" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Individuals are, "far from ordinary people being 'cultural dopes'

simply acting out the dictates of society, they, by their interpretations, actions and accounts, are actually 'creating' it'' (Slattery, 2003, p. 105 & 106). ''These meanings come from interaction, and they are shaped by the self-reflections persons bring to their situations'' (Denzin, 1992, p. 25). Furthermore, ''...the situations encountered by people in a given society are defined or ''structured'' by them in the same way. Through previous interaction they develop and acquire common understandings or definitions of how to act in this or that situation'' (Blumer, 1969, p. 86).Therefore, human interaction is a symbolic disposition.

In this research, the unique essence in which interpretative interactionism is used, (1) it includes the history and biography of Black-Americans as context to understanding in-group perceptions and culture. It is here, as in the work of Mills, Goffman and Garfinkel, this research also has ''....connected the micro world of interaction to the larger macro structures of society'' (Denzin,1989, [2004], p. 20). Furthermore, (2) it explores the symbolic meaning derived from ritualized food habits and preparation embedded in cultural constructs, which in turn constructs and reifies identity. The perceptions and experiences of Black-American women were clearly biographical. This research has given consideration to the four problematic areas of interpretative interactionism outlined by Denzin. These problems are:

> First it is nonbiographical and ahistorical. It does not locate interactional texts within the larger, historical social structure. Second, it seldom addresses existentially meaningful, or relevant, interactional experiences. Third, it inserts externally derived conceptual schemes into the reading of the interaction text. Fourth, it typically reads interaction texts in terms of broader structural and ritual issues. It's seldom deals with the problem-at-hand, as these issues problems are addressed by the interactants in question (Denzin,1989, [2004], p. 20).

Similarly, C.W. Mills acknowledges that individuals are, ''seldom aware of the intricate connection between patterns of their own lives and the course of world history'' (Mills, 1959, [2004], p. 3 & 4). It is imperative to ''....possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world (Ibid,1959, [2004], p. 4). In this a more holistic approach to understanding interaction is possible. In relation to Mills, Denzin states, ''troubles are always biographical. Public issues are always historical and

structural. Biography and history thus join in the interpretative process. This process connects an individual life and its' troubles to a public historical structure''(Denzin,1989, [2004], p. 14).

It would be extremely difficult to discuss perceptions of Black-American women without shaping a contextual basis from which it is derived. ''To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination'' (Mills,1959, [2004], p. 10 & 11). By including history and biography of Black-American women a more well-rounded approach to understanding the symbolic nature of food habits and preparation within a cultural context becomes plausible.

We are all individuals governed by our passions, often moved by emotions. Women are especially at the hull of emotional practices as part of their everyday social patterns in life. Food preparation being a primary source in which love and emotion is centered. In the same vein, ritualized food habits and preparation are emotional practices filled with meaning. According to Kemper, ''emotional practices are gender specific, and are molded by ideological structures of domination and gender stratification of society'' (Kemper, 1990, p. 89). It is through these emotional practices that lived experience takes shape.

> Emotional practices structure lived emotion. Emotional practices are embodied, embedded action (i.e., drinking, watching a film, working, lovemaking, eating, cooking, playing, exercising). Emotional practices are connected to, and produce, sensible feelings, feeling of the lived body, intentional value-feelings, and feeling of the moral person (Ibid, 1990, p. 89).

It is important to keep in mind that ''the self of persons connected in part to their identities, is a multilayered phenomenon and comes in several forms'' (Denzin, 1992, p. 26). For Black-American women in particular, food habits and preparation were once a symbolism of their essence for being, other than childbirth. How food was food prepared and served was one of the most meaningful displays of love.

INTERPRETATIVE BIOGRAPHICAL METHOD: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES &NARRATIVE

As outlined in the previous section, the importance of history and biography are essential in providing a context to understand individual and in-group behavior. In using qualitative design, personal narratives are an effective way to gather the personal experiences of those being studied. It is through narratives, that the researcher has the ability to gather descriptive information that captures actions, meanings, normative behavior and feelings that are part of the interpretative interactional experience (Geertz, 1973, p. 20; Denzin, 1989, p. 101). Narratives are descriptive interpretations in which meaningful events can be recorded. "It provides the grounds for the researcher's (and the reader's) interpretations of the events and meanings that have been captured" (Denzin,1989, [2004], p. 101).

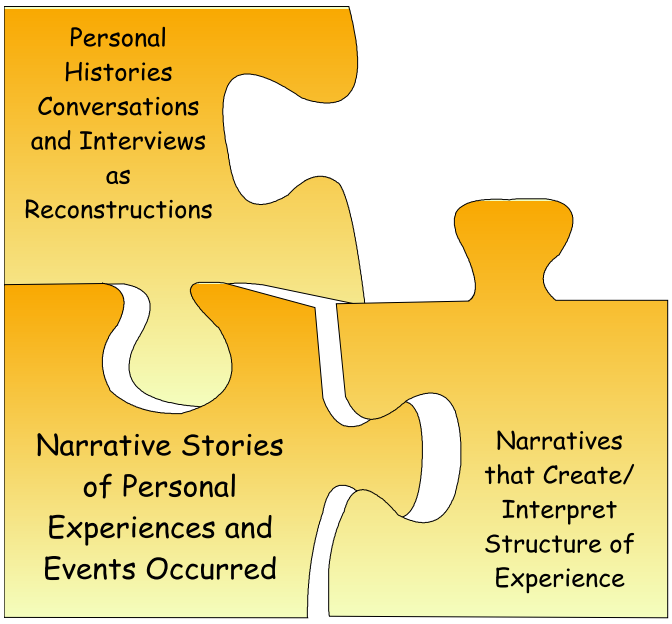
In using the interpretative biographical method, the triangulation of culture, biography and history is used to grasp individual experiences in connection to the larger social structure. Using what Denzin refers to as "thick description" establishes an amalgam of the historical, biographical, contextual and interactional accounts of lived experience among Black-American women. The goal of narration is that the text "….permits a willing reader to share vicariously in the experiences that have been captured" (Ibid, 1989, [2004], p. 83). With this in mind, "thick description involves capturing, and if possible determining, the meanings a particular action or sequence of actions has for the individuals in question", which is the crux of interpretation studies (Ibid, 1989, [2004], p. 101).

Similarly, the theoretical approach of symbolic interactionist tradition also seeks to understand meaning derived from small scale interaction. Methodologically, biographical interactionism centers the "….conditions for thick interpretation, which….constructs a system of analysis and understanding that is meaningful within the worlds of lived experience" (Ibid, 1989, [2004], p. 101). "Thick description is biographical and interactional. It connects self-stories and personal histories to specific interactional experiences" (Ibid, 1989, [2004], p. 101). In doing so,

narratives are placed in context of the situation and reality and are powerful representations of personal experiences.

This dissertation compiles a collection of narratives rooted in the black experience, serving as cultural constructions combining narratives, histories and stories into powerful representations of meaningful action. Solidifying this approach is that "a good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us to the heart of what is being interpreted" (Geertz, 1973a, p. 18). In this respect, "meaning is anchored in the stories persons tell about themselves" (Denzin, 1989, [2004], p. 62). In this dissertation, the narratives of Black-American women are formed using the interpretative biographical method in a triadic approach. This includes, (1) personal histories as reconstructions of life experiences based on conversations and interviews, (2) personal experience stories as narratives relating the self to a set of significant personal experiences that had occurred (Dolby-Stahl, 1985 & Titon, 1980). Finally, (3) a self-story, "…a narrative that creates and interprets a structure of experience as it is being told" (Denzin, 1989, [2004], p. 38).

TRIADIC APPROACH: INTERPRETATIVE BIOGRAPHICAL BRICOLAGE



A biographical bricolage situates patterned relationships of thought and action. Often these patterns comprise intricacies of everyday interaction that often go unnoticed. For Denzin, narratives are relational accounts embedded in everyday routines or in ritualistic types of behavior. Often the "every day and problematic interaction exhibit a situated, constraining structuredness based on ritual, routine, and taken-for-granted meanings (Denzin, 1992 p. 27). Consider the bricolage as puzzle pieces reflecting on and about the personal experiences of others, as well as a reflection of self. Therefore, narratives, as pieces of interpretation provide a snapshot of reality, relative to the story-teller.

As a Black-American female, studying the perceptions of Black-American women, my identity was already established within the social group. With this in place, establishing a rapport with the participants in this study allowed me an inside perspective-an exchange rooted in commonality. As demonstrated in the participants responses, it is through shared experience that meaning and understanding become relationships of reciprocity. Since shared experience, "…requires that one person enter into the experience of another….that shared and sharable emotionality lie at the center of the process of understanding" (Denzin, 1989, [2004], p. 126). "Understanding is the process of interpreting, knowing, and comprehending the meaning that is felt, intended and expressed by another"(Ibid, 1989, [2004], p. 126). In my case, the mode of communication as a shared experience was relatively natural and therefore, effortless.

Self-interpreted narratives represent and include the individuals' perceptions of self. For Black-American women, their real experiences were embedded in cultural behavior patterns. Although these cultural patterns were filled with heterogeneity, so were reflections of unique commonalities within their lived experiences. Granted perceptions of reality are relative constructions, but this is everything to the believer.

The interpretative bricolage is the symbolism of the interactive process weaving aspects of relevance together. It is a means of telling a story, linking the intricate patchwork pieces of the research into a comprehensive whole. Further stated, the importance of the

> … Interpretative bricoleur understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting. The gendered, narrative bricoleur also knows that researchers all tell stories about the world they have studied. The product of the interpretative bricoleur's labor is a complex, quiltlike bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage—a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations. This interpretative structure is like a quilt, a performance text, a sequence of representations connecting the parts to the whole (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 9).

In respect to Black-American women, their definition of situation is within the context of culture, history and biography, which shapes, if not governs certain aspects and perceptions of their reality. These "….concrete acts are dependent on the definition of situation, but gradually a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual himself follow from a series of such definitions"(Thomas, 1923, p. 42). Borrowing from Thomas' Theorem, it is also true that "when women define situations as real, they are real in their consequences".

THE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF THE METHODOLIGICAL APPROACH: A RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH DESIGN

As stated in the introduction, my appointment as asthma intern for the Missouri Department of Health: Chronic Disease Unit, provided me the access and opportunity to learn, how obesity and other chronic illnesses were plaguing the Black-American community. Although much of this information was gathered before the actual dissertation project started, it did provide a basis from which this research began.

Obesity, as a growing epidemic within the United States was especially prevalent in minority women. Over 100 million Americans in the United States are considered either overweight or obese and "approximately, 280,000 adult deaths in the United States are attributable to obesity"(NIDDK, 1996, p. 6). However, overweight/obesity prevalence rates are higher among Black-Americans than any other ethnic group, with Hispanics trailing slightly behind. Black-American women from the lower socio-economic strata had the highest prevalence rate of obesity than any other subgroup and were disproportionately more likely to be overweight and suffer from chronic illnesses and disorders that are exacerbated by excessive weight gain (CDC, 2003; NIH, 2005, p. 1).

Nationwide, the statistics on health disparities for overweight/obese Black-Americans are indicators of increased burden of illness, risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, asthma and morbidity (National Cancer Institute, 2002; Missouri Nutritional Health & Services, 2002; CDC, 2003). Furthermore, the "disparities in the burden of death and illness experienced by Black-Americans, as compared with the U.S. population as a whole" is significant (Office of Minority Health, 2002, pp. 1-2). Missouri ranking high in the nation for overweight/obesity prevalence, particularly among minority women, increased the likelihood or susceptibility for the onset of additional chronic illnesses (Office of Minority Health, 2002; Missouri Nutritional Health & Services, 2002).

Past research indicated obesity had serious health implications directly linked to increased risk of chronic disease and morbidity (Kolata, 1985, p. 1019). Among health professionals, the consensus was "excess body weight is recognized as a risk factor" (Pamuk, 1992, p. 686). With chronic illnesses accounting for several deaths in Missouri, obesity was quickly becoming a risk factor worthy of notice (Hoffarth, 1993, p. 279). Overall, obesity increased the susceptibility to risk factors exacerbating the burden of illness, leading to morbidity (Mokded, 2001, p. 4).

For this research, the initial compilation of existing information pertaining to Black-American /Black women and obesity was vast, yet limited. Several studies emphasized various factors as contributors of obesity in ethnic minorities such as, sedentary lifestyles, unhealthy eating practices, access to healthy foods, and lack of exercise. However, increased physical activity with low caloric intake has been the center focus for losing weight, but exercise alone was not as effective for weight loss in women as opposed to men. Women have smaller body frames, differences in body fat distribution and lower aerobic capacity that make "exercise… ineffective as a weight loss modality in women"(Gleim, 1993, p. 363). Physical activity alone, as an isolated method for weight loss "should not be counted on to produce desired weight reductions unless the women is committed to many hours of exercise a day" (Ibid, 1993, p. 366).

Although cultural factors related to obesity and food intake were reasonably found, but the extensive literature search proved fruitless in locating food habits and preparation of soul food as part of the culture, history and biography of Black-Americans as possible attributors to obesity. As the research evolved, continuous deconstruction of the topic uncovered latent concepts associated to obesity. The construction of my initial themes as indicators of obesity in Black-American women gave way to culture, which slowly weaved other indicators together. Food habits and preparation are symbolic displays of culture, which continually emerged as key elements in this research, but most studies overlooked these patterns of eating associated to the cultural identity of Black-Americans.

CHAPTER FOUR
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: THE GREAT KINGDOMS & EMPIRES OF AFRICA

The great kingdoms of Africa, while relatively new in the strata of civilizations have a rich legendary history. Some of the earliest African civilizations date back to the postclassical period (c3000 B.C.E), where Kingdoms were vast in size and territory. During this period, iron-working and agriculture were predominant throughout the continent. Through the mid 700 C.E. -1400s the great kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, Ife, Benin, and Songhay were formed into existence.[21] Religion played an integral part in the reorganization of these kingdoms, but most were divided geographically within one of the six larger territories outlines as the Western Sudan, Ethiopia and Northeastern Africa, West African Forest Kingdoms, East Africa (Swahili City) or Central and Southern Africa.

Culturally, some African kingdoms would become major centers of education, culture and art, but the internal wars for territorial conquest would create strife and division among the continent. "By the fifth century C.E., a second center of active trade and state building was developing in West Africa" (Hamdum & King, 1975, p. 27). Many African societies with kings or hierarchal governments kept slaves for domestic purposes as indication of wealth and power. These slaves were often soldiers, advisors or cultivators that were assimilated into the master's group of kinship and considered an extended part of the family. Although most slaves within African societies were treated well, the European exploration in Africa would later change the nature of African slave ownership. The African kingdoms engaging in the slave trade found it to be a lucrative business, even though slave raiding was always violent. The Europeans and Arabs encouraged warfare in West Africa, ensuring them a steady supply of prison captives to transport to the Americas. [22] With the growing slave trade systematic annual slave raids arose.

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[21] Referenced above the term B.C.E (Before Current Era) and C.E. (Current Era) are used instead of BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini, meaning in the Year of Our Lord).

[22] *Slave Caravans on the Road* text describes Arab involvement with the slave trade in the town of Mombasa, a port on Africa's east coast.

Those captured in battle, kidnapped or punished were sold into slavery for debt or profit. The more profitable slave trading became, the more sophisticated the networks and alliances were for gathering captives. As European influence gained a stronghold in Africa, all appeals and efforts to resist aiding in the slave trade was unsuccessful. [23]

Even though a considerable number of Africans were enslaved from the western coastal regions, the kingdom of Kongo in Central Africa was also a central force in the trading network. The bartering of gold, silver, ivory and slaves were exchanged for weapons, textiles and craftsmen. The standardization of gold fueled trade, becoming a primary source of barter between Africans and Europeans. But the thrust of capitalism and the need for cheap labor commodified the human body and many Africans were sold into slavery. Before being stowed away in the hold, branding irons were used on captives, "so that slaves could be identified, they were branded. The mark was usually burned into different parts of the body" (Svalesen, 2000, p. 99). In transport, slaves were chained together and crammed into small places areas to lay in their own urine and vomit. Captive slaves were,

> ....chained together at wrist and ankle and loaded into a low compartment, perhaps three feet high, crammed with hundreds of other men....they would spend the next six to eight weeks in the hold, rank with the smell of seasickness and the overflowing "necessary tubs", subsisting on rice and thin gruel, unappetizing fare but adequate to sustain life(Campbell, 2006, pp. 3-4).

For four hundred years, over 15 million African captives, "....were loaded onto slave ships and carried through a "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic to hundreds of delivery points that stretched over thousands of miles" (Rediker, 2007, p. 5). "For most, transportation across the Atlantic was a journey of no return" (Campbell, 2006, p. 1).

> Along the dreadful way, 1.8 million of them died, their bodies cast overboard to the sharks that followed the ships. Most of the 10.6 million who survived were thrown into the bloody maw of a killing plantation system....a million and a half, would expire during the first year of laboring life in the New World. From stage to stage—expropriation in Africa, the Middle Passage, initial exploitation in America—roughly 5 million men, women, and children died (Rediker, 2007, p. 5).

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[23] Alfonso I, Letters to the King of Portugal, See Appendix pg. 219.

THE ENSLAVEMENT ERA & THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY

Over six centuries ago, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade transported more than sixteen million West Africans to Brazil, the West Indies and to the eastern coast of the New World. The triangular trade system would enslave Africans from various regions, establishing great heterogeneity among those journeying through the Middle Passage. The survivors of the voyages would form new bonds and kinship from the shared experience of bondage, humiliation and antithetical treatment experienced on slave ships.

Many of the African traditions, rituals and customs were retained by those initially surviving the journey through the Middle Passage. In preserving aspects of African tradition, a cultural antithesis would emerge, resulting in the Black-American culture and cooking practices. These traditions would later mesh with westernized practices in a system of racially-based servitude. Under an institutionalized system of bondage, many African customs would become overshadowed by the dominant mainstream ideology, but the roots of these traditions were still practiced among many enslaved women, either in secret or integrated into their everyday practices. The triadic amalgamate of (western, southern and African) these cultural cooking practices were passed down as an "in group tradition" to future generations, would later become recognized as soul food.

As the system of slavery became full-fledged in American colonies, African captives were used to cultivate rice, hemp, corn, cotton, tobacco or sugar cane. Although a distinction between Maryland and Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia or northern slavery, most slaves suffered under antithetical conditions and cruelty. "While life on plantations varied significantly in different regions, slave codes in every state deprived African Americans of their basic human rights and gave slave masters the power to control them ruthlessly" (UNESCO-ASPnet, 2008, p. 2). "The whole machinery of slavery was so constructed as to cause labour, as a rule, to be looked upon as a badge of degradation, of inferiority" (Carroll & Washington, 2006, p. 17).

THE DIFFUSION AND CROSS-CULTURAL CONNECTION BETWEEN NATIVE WESTAFRICAN FOODS AND THE "SOUL FOOD" COOKING TRADITIONS OF BLACK-AMERICANS

The West Africans surviving the voyage to the New World became entrenched into a foreign culture that was an antithesis of their native customs and practices, yet many retained vestiges of their native African homeland. Several African characteristics have been appreciated and absorbed into American culture. Cross culturally as Mason defines, "…. characteristics that have been retained by African Americans in the New World as Africanisms: elements of African culture that permeate all Black-American life, whether religious or secular" (Mason 1992, p. 49). These characteristics included material and non-material culture; such as bowls, artifacts, language, music, art and of course, food. In fact, "a number of the foods we think of today as standard American faire are rooted in the foodways of African slaves. This is seen in both the style of cooking and the foods eaten" (Arduini, Cogar, &*etal*, 2002, p. 1).

Upon arrival, slaves were forced to learn the customs and language imposed by Euro-Americans. Several scholars contend African traditions survived the restrictions, harsh punishment and brutality of the Enslavement era (Mason, 1992). Many slaves encountered hunger and undernourishment based on the small weekly rations and scraps allocated. For enslaved Africans, plantation life would have a detrimental impact on their psyche and sense of self, but "despite the horrific conditions that millions were forced to endure, they were able to create ways of coping with their situations that gave expression to their humanity, and maintained their African heritage and identity (UNESCO- & ASPnet., 2008, p. 3). So despite the severity of punishment many Africans found ways of including their native customs into the newfound ways imposed in the New World. However, in most cases, fearing reprimand slaves did not outwardly practice traditions of their native African homeland. According to Mason,

> when Blacks were forcibly brought to the United States, they were Africans. They were a foreign people whose whole culture was a complete antithesis of the culture they encountered in the New World. Just because they learned to speak English, however, does not mean that all traces of Africa were erased from their minds (Mason, 1992, p. 49 & 50).

The African slaves sent to plantations in the Deep South were exposed to some of the harshest conditions. Amidst the exploitation, malnourishment, poor housing and excessive workload on these southern plantations many slaves included traditional aspects of their native African cultures in daily life. Africans were able to use their knowledge from their native homeland to supplement the scanty portions provided on the plantation. Many African food traditions were retained by the future generations of Black-Americans, as well as integrated into the American culture. In fact, ''many common American foods are indigenous to Africa'' (T.M. & ©Fox, 2008, p. 1). Although, many of these food habits and practices originated out of necessity, a way of doing things and the ideology of ''taking nothing and making something'' became a distinctive part of the Black-American heritage.

Slaves on the rice plantations, ''…in colonial South Carolina not only built miles of earthen banks to support rice agriculture, and cultivated, harvested, and processed the crop, they also built their own houses'' in addition to incorporating African culture in the preparation of food (L. G. Ferguson, 2005, p. 1). Presumably, slaves on South Carolina's rice plantations had

> …an unintended benefit for the slaves was that they were largely housed among themselves in one family dwellings, living in virtual villages, so that they were able to develop some sense of community and maintain certain aspects of their African culture, including culinary traditions (Hess & Stoney, 1992, p. 7).

Black-Americans are not a black slates or sole products of European conquest, devoid of African customs. Although the direct connections with West African traditions were severed with the enslavement system, many slaves did pass their customs and traditions to future generations, especially as it related to food habits and practices. Arguably, Black-American cooking practices are continuums of West African traditions, which have also impacted American cuisine. Moreover, these Black-American cooking habits ''soul food'' serve as symbolic representations of a rich culture irrefutably influenced by the Black slave experience. According to Garces & Sutherland, the distinct contribution of Black-American culture in American society is that,

> this small percentage of the populace has had a significant influence on American cuisine, not only because Black-American food is diverse and flavorful, but also because of its historical beginnings. Despite their cultural, political, economic, and racial struggles, African Americans have retained a strong sense of their culture, which is, in part, reflected in their food.

> ….Black-American food has a distinctive culinary heritage with diverse flavors, as it includes traditions drawn from the African continent, the West Indies, and from North America. While the European nations were busy establishing new societies, they did not realize that the African and West Indian slaves who worked for them brought their own vibrant and rich culture—a culture that would withstand and adapt to the harsh centuries of slavery (Garces & Sutherland, 2008, p. 1).

Cross-comparatively West African and Black-American food traditions had great similarity, but the terminology describing the food was different. Nevertheless, the foods prepared in the New World by Black-Americans were in part an amalgam of West African traditions. In addition, although seldom recognized, ''African speech, customs, art, and music were changed by the American experience into American forms, but the Africanisms survived'' (Mason, 1992, p. 51).

WEST AFRICAN FOODS

In Africa, diets were high in fiber, including various types of vegetables with little or no meat. The diet in Africa was based primarily on agricultural or pastoral foodways. Most plant cultivation produced legumes, starchy grains and roots. Rice, sorghum, wheat and millet considered ''….grainstuffs were made into pancakes, fritters, breads, thick porridges, and assorted puddings served with a variety of sauces'' (Mitchell, 1993, p. 2). Foods such as, rice

> …grains, legumes, yams, sorghum, watermelon, pumpkin, okra, and leafy greens could be found as early as 4000 BC on the African continent. Eggplant, cucumber, onion and garlic are believed to be African in origin, while only a small number of fruits are grown on the continent: wild lemons, oranges, dates and figs (T.M. & ©Fox, 2008, p. 1).

In ancient West Africa, sheep, goats, vegetables, fruits and poultry provided a reliable source of food for sedentary populations. For the pastoralists, hunted meats and fish were especially important to their diet. Originating on the Niger River and the techniques used by the Diola of Guinea-Bissau ''….of dyking, desalinating, ridging, and transplanting antedate all European influence'' (Katz & Weaver, 2002, p. 1). These ''…techniques developed for crop cultivation of fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices were indigenous to Africa'' (Ibid, 2002, p. 1).

Other common foods essential to African diets were cucumbers, squashes, gourds, pumpkins and beans. Likewise, so were the vast arrays of fruits native to Africa. Before mass colonialization of West Africa, the indigenous food crops to the subregions

> …. the cereals - millet, sorghum, rice and fonio (acha) in the northern parts of the subregion, while root crops and legumes -yams, fabourama (tumulku), rizga (Kaffir potato), cowpea, bambara groundnut, geocarpa bean, African breadfruit and the African yam bean dominated the southern zone. These are the major truly indigenous food crops of the West African subregion (Inikori, 1976, p. 3).

Also predating the arrival of Europeans, various types of beans were a significant part of African diet such as kidney beans, pink beans, red beans, black beans, pinto beans and lima beans (also called butter beans). Chick peas (garbanzos) and cowpeas,

> although called *black-eyed peas* is some parts of the world, these are indeed beans, and one of the most frequently used beans in African, Latin, and Black American cooking….It is traditional among Black Americans to eat black-eyed peas for good luck on New Year's Day (Harris, 1989, p. 4).

All of these beans in some variation can be found in Black-American dishes. On average, ''the African and Amerindian diets contained far more vegetables and legumes than the Europeans consumed'' (Opie, 2008, p. 2). Much of the food consumed by inhabitants of West Africa, were based on the regions climate. In most Western African communities, millet, sorghum, cassava, cereal grains, rice, greens, plantains, peanuts, hot peppers, citrus fruits, green peas, yams, cowpeas, fish and various oils can be found.

In several West African subregions, "one of the most important foods of the African culture was the yam….introduced into Africa in the 16thcentury along with maize (*corn*)'' (Arduini & Cogar, etal, 2002, p. 1). In certain areas, yams held social and cultural significance or served as an important status symbol.

> Yams can grow as large as one hundred pounds. Cassava, cocoyams, kola nuts, and many vegetables are cultivated. Tropical fruits and wild game are abundant. Further north in the true savannah the country is drier, and millet or sorghum are grown in place of yams. Ground nuts are an important crop in this region (Jackson, 1999, p. 8).

Kola nuts, also pertinent was ''an item used in Africa from antiquity…indigenous to the forest zone of West Africa'' is a stimulant used as an energizer (Spivey, 2003, p. 2).

The Kola nut ‘‘had a huge religious/cultural meaning to it and symbolically used in weddings’’ (Mwaikinda, 2009). In Africa, Kola nuts had such popularity that

> over forty species of kola are grown in the region between Sierra Leone and the Congo, with several varieties existing in Ghana alone. From ancient times, West Africans have also used different parts of the kola plant for treating swellings and fresh wounds. Ghanaians use it to reduce labor pain during childbirth and for treating guinea worm(Ibid, 2003, p. 2).

As indicated in a personal interview Rita states, the

> kola nut is one of my favorite African food crops….it was used ceremonially as a gesture of peace, friendship, and hospitality, especially since one of the ceremonies for the Kola Nut was used when welcoming a person into your house. It was also used in other ceremonies such as weddings and feasts, whereby the host or a guest of honor would break the Kola Nut, and pray over it, then pass the nut around, before the food, drinks and festivities began.
>
> The tradition in which the kola Nut was broken (called breaking of Kola-*Iwa Oji)* was very particular and had rules that had to be followed. These traditions surrounding the Kola Nut were so important that if they were broken, the “breaker” of the rules would sometimes be subject to penalization by the village elders. This, along with the fact that in Western Africa the Kola Nut could sometimes even be used as a form of currency, lends to the notion that the Kola Nut was one of the most precious indigenous foodstuffs in Africa (Ibid, 2009).

In ancient Mali, yams were ritualistically offered as a sacrifice to ensure crop fertility. But among the Yoruba and Ibo tribes of Nigeria yams were a symbol of human fertility. In the northern central region of Africa an intraregional exchange of ".... yam cultivation and consumption was practiced amongst the Mandingoes who occupied lands south west of Mali, the Wolofs in the Gambia as well as the Katabs of northern Nigeria" (Smith, 1995, p. 6).On slave ports "....yams were frequently put on slave ships as provisions for slaves during the Middle passage, particularly when the involuntary African passengers were known to have come from yam-eating societies" (Hall, 2007b, p. 21). While rice and maize had a strong culture in regions of West Africa, yam cultivation and consumption was the most important.

Many African regions ‘‘absorbed and utilized new crops to support or to replace the basic diet’’ (July, 1975, p. 66). However, in the West African subregions indigenous foods were prepared in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, the adoption of these food commodities greatly influenced African foodways. Overtime African cooking practices were the adaptation of

blending of various cultures.[24] Benin, home of the Fon and Ibo situated on the northern coast the Gulf of Guinea the soil is moist, producing an array of succulent vegetables along with plantains, yams, cassava, peanuts and potatoes. Fruits such as, papayas, guavas, oranges, pineapples and mangoes are seasonal.

Iberian cuisine was primarily based on the cultural dietary exchanges of food habits and commodities(de Castro, 2003, p. 1). Acquired from the Arabian spice trade, "...Moorish cooks used cinnamon, cumin, turmeric, paprika, sesame seed, black pepper, cloves, and coriander seeds (Opie, 2008, p. 2). As African groups moved, food habits and patterns became integrated with the cooking practices in other subregions.

The Grain Coast known for the cultivation of grains "....embraces about two hundred miles of seacoast. It is also known as the pepper coast, and Malaguetta ,in consequence of the long pod pepper and the grain of paradise with which it abounds" (Boyle, 1831, p. 303). The Grain Coast known for the "*melegueta pepper"* was a major export item in the 15th century. The most commonly cultivated grains were barley, rice, millet, wheat sorghum and oats. The food dishes in Africa are often considered well-seasoned and known for its hot-spicy taste, whereby

> .... were usually mixed with a sauce of meat or fish or with palm oil, product of an indigenous African plant and a constant and widely sought element in many traditional African cuisines. Once survivors of the Middle Passage reached plantation America, the meals they consumed in the fields commonly consisted of boiled yams, eddoes (or taros), okra, callaloo, and plantain, all seasoned generously with cayenne pepper and salt (Hall, 2007, p. 20).

As with yams, rice and maize would later become an important staple for enslaved Africans. These would later become "the cheapest, most common cereals purchased for slave ships, as provisions for captives crossing the Middle Passage (Carney, 2001; Hall, 2007 & Littlefield, 1991). "Among staples commonly cultivated in Africa, maize….is exceeded only by wheat and sorghum….it outranks rice, plantains and manioc (cassava) on practically every scale" (Littlefield, 1991, p. 17). These imports included fundamental crops as maize and sweet

[24]Yam cultivation had religious and political reasons.

potatoes'' (Klein, 1999, p. 105). Although Amerindian origin, maize, and ''….was transportable, divisible for taxation, and resistant to the pre-harvest bird damage that plagued sorghum, millet, and rice'' (McCann, 2001, p. 254). It ''adapted to the tropics, easily produced, storable, and cheaply transportable, maize became in indelibly associated with slavery in Africa as well as on New World plantations'' (Carney, 2001, p. 73). In Gambia, other foods consumed during the slave trade era, were ''rice, palm oil and small fowls at their common meals. Other times they have wild deer, monkeys, elephants, alligators, and several kinds of fish and birds (Owen, 1930 & Ransford, 1971, p. 17).[25] Therefore, despite the engaged intraregional food exchanges in various regions of West Africa, cereals, energy crops and legumes varied in popularity for native groups.

[25] Owen, N. (1930). Journal of a Slave-Dealer: A Living History of the Slave Trade [cited in Oliver Ransford, The Slave Trade: The Story of Transatlantic Slavery], London: Routledge (Ransford,1971, p. 17).

ARCHEOLOGICAL FINDINGS INTEGRATING AFRICAN/ BLACK-AMERICAN TRADITIONS

As previously stated, several West African foods can be found in many of the dishes prepared in the Black-American tradition. Similarly, common food habits were also traced through archaeological reports indicating evidence of a cross connection in the types of cast iron pots, bowls and other earthenware used by Africans and enslaved Black-Americans. These archaeological findings contribute to understanding Black-American plantation life and the relation to their West African ancestors. According to Leland Ferguson, slaves were pioneers that contributed greatly to the building of this nation, but many

> …archeologists failed to perceive that African Americans had a viable material culture that, at least in part, was a product of the New World. They had assumed that, if distinctive earthenware was found in the New World, it must be native American in origin (Moore, 1992, p. 709).

Ferguson's archaeological research on the Colono Ware ceramics at Middleburg Plantation in South Carolina indicated, ''….African Americans combined African legacy with American culture, and along the way they left stories in the ground. …these included small plain bowls and jars common in West Africa'' (Ferguson, 2005, p. 1). The evidence of African connections were based on the similarity of marking found on the Colono Ware, serving as "....depictions of the cosmos found among certain African groups'' (Moore, 1992, p. 709). according to Moore, these ''....bowls may have had a special, possibly ceremonial, function in Africa'' (Ibid, 1992, p. 709).Characteristically, the undecorated, low-fired Colono Ware was hand built and found in large quantities in several "....urban and rural sites in South Carolina and in smaller quantities in Virginia'' illustrating cultural significance (Pogue, 1993, p. 113).

Archaeological research supports the connection between the material cultures of Black-American slaves to their native African origins. "West Africa has been a major contributor to world cuisine in terms of migration of its indigenous crops, methods of production of those crops, and culinary customs" (Spivey, 2003, p. 45). The use of earthenware has opened a broader social milieu for understanding the cross connection between African and Black-American traditions. In addition, it serves as support ''….that blacks were able to maintain

significant elements of their native culture in the face of white domination and oppression'' (Pogue, 1993, p. 113). The creation and cross-connection between the use of earthenware illustrates an historical ideology of African Americans, while simultaneously providing a glance at ''….the legacy of America's black pioneers'' (Ferguson, 1992, p. 121).

In West African culture, ''….the most common rural African meal consists of a starchy main course, boiled or simmered in an earthenware or iron pot and served in a large ceramic bowl'' (Ferguson, 1992 & Ferguson, 2005, p. 1)."Furthermore, because people from widely different areas in West Africa came together only in America, there developed in the slave culinary experience a fusion cuisine, a creolization based on the influences from a variety of tribal traditions in Africa" (Whit, 2007, p. 50). Cross-culturally the food habits indigenous of West Africans brought to the New World can be found in the food dishes made by generations of Black Americans. "The survival of African cookery depended on the region of the Americas where enslaved Africans disembarked" (Opie, 2008, p. 30).

The cross-connection between West African and Black-American food habits has been documented in the slave culture. While many literary works have failed to demonstrate any cross-connection between African/Black-American cuisines as a continuum of practiced traditions in Africa, some have begun to challenge these previous assumptions in their current writings (Joyner, 1985; Mintz, 2007; William-Forson, 2006; Hall, 2007 & Whit, 2007). "A number of scholars assert that the cultural identity of West African food culture has been maintained as much in the preparation practices as in the particular ingredients of these dishes" (Whit, 2007, p. 52).Others believe "West Africa has been perceived as the recipient, not the provider, of cuisine and culture" (Spivey, 2003, p. 44). However, it has been

> those foodstuffs slave cooks applied an African culinary grammar— methods of cooking and spicing, remembered recipes, ancestral tastes. They added the soul ingredients. Thus food—creolized as soul food—became one of the symbols of group identity in the slave community (Joyner, 1985, p. 91).

As portrayed in Africa, ‘‘part of the tradition of a woman’s worth and beauty was her ability to cook. This was *very* important. Creativity was a must and was passed down in rituals from female ancestors/generations’’ (Mwaikinda, 2009). This was equally so is Black American culture.

Symbolically, the traditions "....the foodways of the African Americans began to take on a unique patterning because of their slave status" (Baer & Jones, 1992, p. 103). As in other ethnic groups, the preserved food habits and traditions illustrate the unique amalgamation of Black-American food practices attached to group identity. Although the cooking habits and traditions of Black-American slaves were based on nourishment, "the manner of cooking, the combination of ingredients, and the presentation all give evidence of cultural creativity" (Whit, 2007, p. 50). According to Mintz, "....our cuisine, too, is heavily influenced by African practices. Deep-fat frying, gumbos, and fricassees stem from West and Central Africa’’ (Mintz, 2007c). These traditional practices of West Africa were methods ".... of preparation that has continued as part of soul food is frying, the fastest manner of cooking available to slaves" (Mendes, 1971, p. 35).

There is little dissent on the argument that "soul food" is a synthesis of Native -American, European- American and African ingredients primarily cultivated in the South, since a disproportionately large number of slaves lived in southern towns and plantations. As outlined in Charles Joyner's book, Down by the Riverside, Whitehead states,

> food played a role in slave culture beyond mere sustenance. It had an immense cultural an ideological significance: the choice of particular foods and particular means of preparation involved issues of crucial importance to the slaves’ sense of identity. Slave cooks not only maintained cultural continuity with West African cuisine but also adapted the African tradition creatively to the necessities and opportunities of a new culinary environment(Joyner, 1985, p. 106).

It is believed that the "....ingredients and preparation techniques resulted in certain traditional African American dishes that are now generally subsumed under the name *"soul food"* (Whit, 2007, p. 52).

According to Van Deburg's depiction, the origins of soul food is best described by,

> The inexact nature of soul food preparation was held to be a byproduct of the black American's slave heritage. Lacking both literacy and appropriate measuring devices, the southern bondsmen somehow managed to transform cast-off ingredients—hog maws, neck bones, ham hocks, chitterlings—into "a gourmet delight." But to the modern day descendants of these ingenious slave chefs, *soul cooking most definitely was not southern or regional*. Although collard greens, black- eye peace, hush puppies, deep-fried chicken, and catfish may have appeared on both white and black tables in the antebellum South, it seemed to take a black hand and in the kitchen before any recipe could be considered "soulful." Authentic dishes were distinguished from the "thin, white man's parody" by a strong diasporan element. *It was held that the soul style in cooking was developed but did not originate to the white-ruled South. It began in Africa.* There, prior to Euro-American contact, the slaves' forebears used hot peppers to make the unique sauces (Van Deburg, 1992, p. 203).

Other cross-connections of native African captives that became ingrained within the Black-American culture were their ability of adaptation. The transfer of agricultural cultivation of rice and other food commodities in the New World demonstrated the resourcefulness of modifying the cooking of greens, yams and other vegetables into hearty, good tasting meals. The cross-cultural connections between African/Black-American traditions are also viewed in ceremonial food habits and the transfer of cooking practices.

> In the African cooking tradition, techniques of food preparation were passed on in a manner involving close sensory contact. Slaves used smell and taste, touch, sight, and sound in order to cook. Those techniques were rarely written down but communicated within the oral tradition (Whit, 2007, p. 52).

This triadic amalgamate of (western, southern and African) cooking practices, would later become recognized as soul food. Despite the varied definitions, soul food is a depiction of the cross-cultural connection between West African and Black-American cooking traditions, from which culture, identity and community is attached to underlying meaning.

> The term "soul food," for example, signifies on one level a type of food (such as okra and yams) that is nourishment for the body that houses the soul. Okra (used in soups and gumbo) and yams are African foods that were introduced to the New World along with other African crops by slave owners to augment their own food. The word "gumbo" itself is said to come from the African *kingumbo*, which was what the African-American slaves called okra when it was first introduced into this country in New Orleans. Okra, on the other hand, is the Akan (African) name for the person who is the embodiment of the ruler's soul or spirit (Mason, 1992, p. 51).

However, despite history ''today, in America, the term "soul food" simply means Black-American cuisine'' (TM & Fox, 2008, p. 1).

ORAL TRADITIONS: STRICTLY A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

Fundamentally, symbolic interaction perspective is interested in how meaning is derived and diffused, from which interpretation, relation and behavior are transposed. Oral narratives are an important methodological approach to understanding individual history, biography and society, in which they are culturally embedded. This subsection illustrates a synthesis between the methodological, theoretical and cultural chapters to show why this research style was the best-suited dissertation approach.

What makes oral narratives the best-suited approach for this research? As stated above, this approach synthesizes theory, methods and culture while allowing Black women a voice to unabatedly express their life, perspectives and social experiences. "Oral narrative is both a process and product that mediates the boundaries between history, language and literature. It is a collaborative transaction that reconstructs a life once lived...." (Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. xii).

Personal and autobiographical narratives were used in the study to integrate the common practices, experiences and perspectives of the respondents interviewed. Moreover, it was imperative to capture the authentic voices of these women. With this in mind, "oral narrative, sometimes referred to as oral history, is a dynamic, interactive methodology that preserves an individual's own words and perspectives in a particular authentic way" (Ibid, 1993, p. xii). Both theoretically and methodologically, "oral narrative offers an intimate perspective of a *narrator's interpretation and understanding* of her/his own life unabridged" (Ibid, 1993, p. xii). Since "experience is meaningful and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness...the study of human behavior needs to include an exploration of the meaning systems that form human experience" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1).

The personal and autobiographical narratives combine "story-ing" as a means of structuring human experiences. Stories are often told in first person, but can include or combine fables, myths, tales, legends or folklore. Therefore, stories as a narrative scheme "...provide

cohesion to shared beliefs and transmit values at a cultural level. Stories also provide a means of preserving the common characteristics of a culture and passing them on to subsequent generations" (JoAnne Banks-Wallace, 1999, p. 2). Thus, relaying individualized cultural patterns. "Individual cultures also maintain collections of typical narrative meaning in their myths, histories, folklore, and fairy tales. Storytelling is used in this capacity to share or validate cultural values and customs" (Ibid, 1999, p. 2).

In relation to Interpretative Interactionism, the "....narrative is a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18). Storytelling reflects the values, attitudes and beliefs of the person telling the story. The description of events are in context to their articulated meaning, which "....establishes a common experience between the teller and listener, or "storytaker" creating a connection between them" (JoAnne Banks-Wallace, 1999, p. 2).

In building connections that focus on the Black women's perceptions through narratives we create a basis of viewing concrete experiences through the insights and views articulated by the beholder, thus allowing us to take these broad ambiguous concepts and narrow them into a more tangible expressive representation of those under study (in this case Black women's perspectives). For the social sciences, relating "....instrumental needs to expressive needs....social theory and social practice can be treated as special genres of narrative situated within other narratives of modern (or postmodern) society" (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004, p. 6).

The "oral narrative as autobiography is as complex and it is controversial" because cultural perceptions can vary by conflicting interpretations (Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. xvi). "By consistently representing clashing cultural perceptions of the natural world, Morrison emphasizes that any human perception of nature is a culturally mediated one rather than an inherent truth about the world" (Armbruster & Wallace, 2001, p. 213). But given the fact that narratives are culture specific, the use of individualized narratives may unfold unique

characteristics of culture that would otherwise be difficult to extract. This does not imply that we can get at the truth, but narratives do allow us to obtain the relative truth as the individual perceives it. The "social sciences can therefore focus on how these narratives of theory and practice are constructed, used and misused" (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004, p. 6).

Storytelling provides "*contextual grounding* ...which is the use of words and storied as a means of locating one's self—a method of clarifying the perspective of lens one uses to look out at the world" (Banks-Wallace, 1998, p. 18). As a foundation, contextual grounding, "....influences not only how we see ourselves and others, but also the choices we make and the way we behave" (Ibid, 1998, p. 18). In other words, "contextual grounding, in turn, affects how people view themselves and others as well as the choices they make or the way they respond to a given situation" (Banks-Wallace, 1999, p. 4). In West Africa, storytelling encompasses stories of history and genealogy. "In West African storytelling, the griots are the keepers of the culture, as their amazing memories and storytelling abilities allow them to keep alive the culture, history, and genealogies of their people" (The Cultural Heritage Initiative for Community Outreach, 2001, p. 1). Griots, as historians, oral interpreters, keepers and articulators were "....responsible for maintaining the connection between the cultural or historical past and the present" (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 412).

Language, folklore, narratives and other oral traditions are culturally important in West Africa. In traditional West African societies, "people organize their pattern of existence according to cultural beliefs passed to them by their ancestors" which included, "....religion, modes of dressing, respect, and customs" (Ogunjimi & Naallah, 2003, pp. 13-14). While "many West African traditions were passed from generation to generation through a rich oral tradition consisting of folktales, songs and stories", some are extremely complex systems (Knowledge Unlimited, 1994, p. 16). Within these systems, "....distinctions are made between a number of different kinds of storytelling" (Abrahams, 1983, p. 25).

Oral tradition in African heritage was extremely important to enslaved Africans in the New World because the"...African values, traditions, and rituals survived the Middle Passage and continue to flourish in African American folklore and storytelling" (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 412). The "...folktale assumes the shape of its teller" it is a form of expression that has unique cultural identification (Lester, 1992, p. xi). But overall, "folklore and storytelling reflect the dominant mores, customs, themes, and language of everyday life contexts in which they are created or shared" (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 412). Historically, for African Americans oral narratives and

> storytelling provided an opportunity for enslaved people to commit to memory the language, sights, sounds, smells, and textures of their homeland....the multitude of traditions and values transported from Africa was woven together with those that emerged from the daily realities of living in the United States to form a new African American culture (Ibid, 2002, p. 412 & 413).

In closing, oral narratives are an effective means of gathering the richness of culturally-specific individualized perspectives. Despite the fact, that narratives may be argued to be relative only to those articulating them, it does allow for the methodological investigation of culture. Even though, this methodological approach/technique is "far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Collins, 1998, p. 38). This is exceptionally important to the reality of African American women. According to Etter-Lewis,

> the study and interpretation of African American women's lives typically has been subsumed under African American issues and women's issues. The assumption is that norms of the larger groups are suitable for t the smaller group, African American women. However, their unique experiences in history, language and culture suggest otherwise. Membership in two oppressed groups alone sets African American women apart because they experience double discrimination as a result of their duel status. So what is true for African American men and white women is not invariably true for African American women....This denial of alternate realities/experiences effectively maintains the status quo and excludes knowledge essential to the well-being of society as a whole(Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. xvi & xvii).

CHAPTER FIVE
BLACK-AMERICAN COOKING PRACTICES ON SOUTHERN PLANTATIONS

On many Southern plantations, black women were core to the everyday operations. "Slavery as a social system shaped the experience of all its women, for slavery influenced the nature of the whole society...."(Fox-Genovese, 1988, p. 38).Work for "....black women under slavery was in every respect more arduous, difficult and restricted than that of the men. Their work and duties were the same as that of the men, while childbearing and rearing fell upon them as an added burden "(Lerner, 1992, p. 15). Some black women worked in the fields, while few where assigned tasks in the "Big House".

In most cases, the Southern "....plantation kitchen was separate from the house, just another outbuilding along with the dairy, the stable, and the outhouse" (Civitello, 2004, p. 211). Accordingly, as with the slave quarters the "kitchen house" was a small building, "....separate from the main house used strictly for cooking" (Marsh, [1989], 1991, p. 6). The kitchen house held the kettles, pots and other important devices used for cooking. "So important were the kitchen equipment and the recipes that they were often kept under lock, with the mistress of the plantation guarding the only keys!" (Ibid, [1989], 1991, p. 6).

On most southern plantations, cooking was established from the labor of Black enslaved women. These cooking practices and preparation were labor intensive. For Negroes, it was presumed the "one outstanding characteristic was a seemingly innate ability to prepare food well" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 1). In *Harper's Magazine (1880), Charles Gayarre* states, "the Negro is a born cook. He could neither read nor write, and therefore he could not learn from books. He was simply inspired; the god of the spit and the saucepan had breathed into him; that was enough" (Ibid, 2008, p. 1).[26] "Cooks worked long hours beginning before sunrise and extending into early evening, and their work was physically demanding.... when the master of the household or his dinner guests praised the meal, the mistress took credit" (Gibbs, 2004, p. 1).

[26] From Patricia Mitchell's article, "The African Influence on Southern Cuisine".

In many cases, "slave cooks—almost all female—usually learned from doing, often a daughter at her mother's side, using recipes and methods passed on orally and hands-on from earlier generations" (Civitello, 2004, p. 211). "The black female cook and her female assistants worked in the kitchen outbuilding, and young slave boys served as runners to carry hot food between the house and the kitchen"(Ferris, 2007, p. 2).[27]

> The food was cooked over an open fire in the kitchen and carried by slaves to a small room near the dining room in the main house before being put on plates and served. Slaves carrying the pots into the main house were required to "whistle" to prove they weren't eating any of the food (Dyer, 2009 p. 2).[28]

In the kitchen, black women "blended two cultures, and their knowledge and use of spices and herbs added a distinctive flavor to the foods" (Wagner, 2007, p. 43). Even though the ingredients and taste varied according to geographical region, "the slaves from Africa had very different tastes than the immigrants who arrived in the South from Germany and Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century" (Stouffer, 2007, p. 4). The kitchen was an important venue for female interaction and provided an opportune setting to transmit cooking traditions and behavior that had been handed down from generations. In fact, it is in the kitchen that women used their imaginations to create meals filled with love.

During the Enslavement Era, the mammy/plantation cook served as powerful entities in both white and black culture. The Mammy was,

> in almost every Southern home of importance, 'Mammy' was a most important figure. She, and generally and old butler, reigned supreme in their respective positions....Mammy, next to mother, was the children's best friend. In her strong arms every white child was laid at birth, with certainty that it would be given the most skillful and devoted care (Wickham, 1936, p. 412).

In many cases, "the cook/mammy was often treasured for her culinary skills" and held a special place of acceptance by plantation masters (Mitchell, 2006, p. 10). Characteristically such reverence was influenced by her culinary skills or nurturing qualities, which won favor in the slave master's heart. Whether the Mammy was considered cook or servant, "...., she was doubly

[27] Referencing the Shirley Plantation in Virginia

[28] Dyer's article is part of a photo essay of plantations on the Old River Road in Louisiana, site of the 1811 Slave Revolt led by Charles Deslondes. The Laura Plantation and The Oak Alley Plantation were photographed. These Illustrations of Creole Plantations were titled "Rolling Down the River".

revered" (Ibid, 2006, p. 9). Aside from cooking, the fondness for the Mammy was her servitude as the "great functionary of the house"(Allen, 1897, p. 858).Frederick Douglass provides an excerpt of admiration,

> Aunt Katy....had a strong hold on old master-she was considered a first rate cook, and she really was very industrious. She was, therefore, greatly favored by old master, and as one mark of his favor, she was the only mother who was permitted to retain her children around her (Douglass, 1857, p. 74).

For black woman, the role of cook or Mammy carried stature on the plantation and while she won favor in one area, the reality of "....forcing Black woman to work in the field or "wet nurse" white children, slave-owners effectively tied the controlling images of Jezebel and Mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery" (Collins, 1998, p. 352). In essence, the "mammy.....projected a woman who suckled and reared white masters" (Fox-Genovese, 1988, p. 292).

Cooking traditions, as with other creations were things that Black slave women passed down to future generations. Growing up on plantations, Black enslaved women learned how to stretch every meal or made something out of nothing. Since cooking preparation and practices were labor intensive, it was passed down to the younger women apprentices from watching and doing. This cultural transmission "....offered a clear picture of the ways in which slave women trained the younger women of their community" (Ibid, 1988, pp. 167-168). In the book, Within the Plantation Household, by Fox-Genovese, the case of Sally Brown provides a vivid illustration of this socially constructed reality.

> Sally, "....had a deep, warm feeling for the "we" of the slave community from whom she learned everything, from how to ease pain by putting a rusty piece of tin or an axe under a straw tick, to cooking fresh vegetables in a pot placed over hot coals on an iron rack; to making yeast hops; to baking light bread on a wood fire. The older slave women taught her how to work (Ibid, 1988, p. 168).

Unlike contemporary methods of measurements used today, slave women used a smidgeon of this and a dab of that as a means of measurement. Therefore, it is of little surprise that, "....when it came to hogs, poor people had to learn how to use everything 'from the rooter [its snout] to the tooter [its tail]'" (Angelou, 1997, p. 25).

In contemporary American society, there is little variation in the idea that soul food cooking practices are labor-intensive. These Black-American cooking methods are now a nostalgic, ritualistic practice. Despite this, when it came to cooking, southern black women knew how to "throw down". Cooking was not a practice to be taken lightly and in these gatherings many black women displayed the magic of their culinary creations.

As depicted by Maya Angelou, large gatherings were additional places where Black women showed off. "….they selected and cooked their favorite dessert dishes and brought them to the gathering….all the women were in hot competition over whose culinary masterpiece was the finest" (Angelou, [2004], 2007, p. 11). Culturally, there is no greater compliment to the Black cook than the blissful acknowledgment that the food was prepared to perfection. With each bite your eyes rolled back, chewing grew slower, prompting exclamations, "Ooh! Who put their foot in this" as the person savored the taste.

For Black- Americans, ethnic foods were the focal point of tradition and the occasions that brought family and kin together. Occasions ingrained cultural "ways of being" binding each to a shared history. Throughout history, soul food has always been at the crux of the black family. The sharing of food was the sharing of love and inter-connectedness. Even though many of the old cooking traditions have given way to Americanized practices, food, family and festivity are still important features within the black community and while some foundations have changed, others have remained the same.

THE DIFFERENT GENDER ROLES OF WHITE AND BLACK WOMEN ON SOUTHERN PLANTATIONS

Under the southern plantation system, much of Black-American life was modeled after the European patriarchal system, which reinforced male dominance. In most literary accounts, the gendered roles of women are grouped together under the same plight. However, this egregious misconception classifying white and black women as equals, were well established as a falsehood, solidified and institutionalized under the system of slavery.

The institution of slavery did not hold white women to the same harsh reality as it did for black women. In this regard, white women were equally products of the negative perceptions shaped and held under enslavement, an institution unbound by moral restraint. Black women were subordinate to all other individuals, while expected to be dominant in managing the affairs of the plantation mistresses and masters. As established under enslavement,

> white women were subject to white men, but black women had to subordinate themselves to all whites, men, women, and children alike. The whites demanded always that their need come first, before those of black women's own families. For the enslave female her work and life "....were thus complicated by conflicting obligations that inflicted burdens upon them far beyond those borne by most whites" (Norton, 1980, p. 33).

On southern plantations, "slaves were not only valuable in and of themselves, but this human capital would generate income and ensure financial security. Southern women, like men, explicitly and openly viewed slaves as chattel and commonly associated blacks with their dollar value" (Clinton, 1982a, p. 185). Even the children of black female slaves often products of rape, were considered chattel that were bought and sold. The "mistresses, of course, blamed black woman who drew the attention of their husbands or sons and hated the children they fathered" (Weiner, 1997, p. 141). ‘‘These white woman, unable to acknowledge the responsibility of white men, assumed black woman were complicit in their own sexual abuse and so blamed them as much, if not more, than the men whose power and control it represented’’ (Ibid, 1997, p. 141). Black women were referred to as "....'slave wench' and associated stereotypes demeaned black women by equating them with animal sexuality" (Clinton, 1982a, p. 222).

Several books provide narrations of the good natured plantation mistresses, but equally so were those that administered more cruelty and inhumane treatment of black female slaves than the overseer. In the book, Six Women's Slave Narratives, the History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, provides an account of the ill treatment dispensed by her mistress,

> the next morning my mistress set about instructing me in my tasks. She taught me to do all sorts of household work; to wash and bake, pick cotton and wool, and wash floors, and cook. And she taught me(how can I ever forget it) more things than these; she caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of a rope, a cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand. And there was scarcely any punishment more dreadful than the blows I received to my face and head from her hard heavy fist. She was a fearful woman, and a savage mistress to her slaves (*Six Women's Slave Narratives [Introduction by William L. Andrews]*, 1988, p. 6).

On one hand, "the white plantation mistress gave instructions but did not cook, so the black woman slave cook reigned supreme in the Southern kitchen" (Civitello, 2004, p. 211). On the other hand, while most black female slave cooks had an elevated status on the plantation, it rendered very little advantage, other than the opportunity to skim off small rations of food. The socially constructed reality and

> ...role of the white “southern lady” stressed a woman’s constant devotion to her family. Meals served to both family and guests reflected this devotion and were a means for the white plantation master to demonstrate both his status and his financial success (Ferris, 2007, p. 2).

Furthermore, contrary to the reality of white southern females, enslaved black women "....had to contend with contradictory demands placed upon them by their plantation tasks and the needs of their own husbands and children" (Norton, 1980, p. 31). For the female slave, "even on prosperous plantations, women’s seasonal fieldwork was essential" (Revels, 2009, p. 1). "No slaveholder refrained, out of respect for female delicacy, from letting a slave women exercise her full strength, and as "full hands" women participated in the most demanding labor of the planting cycle" (Fox-Genovese, 1988, p. 172). Nevertheless, in spite of the slave woman's laboring, it was

> the plantation owner's family ate meat from "high on the hog—ribs, roasts, hams. The slaves ate the outer limits—ears, snout, tail, feet or "trotters"—or the inner wasteland— the small intestines, called chitterlings or "chitlins." Chitlins were sometimes used by the whites, but as casings for sausage, not alone as food. Slave cooks prepared the meat from high on the hog but weren't allowed to eat it. They were also not allowed to eat beef, lamb, mutton, chicken, turkey, and geese, which were reserved for the plantation house (Civitello, 2004, p. 211).

As argued in the article, "*Gender and Food*", "....all southern women worked hard to produce meals for white and black families in the South" (Ferris, 2007, pp. 2-3). But the disparity among white and black women were equally recognized,

> although Reconstruction-era tales of the Old South depicted plantations in which white women were gracious hostesses who spent their days in leisure and black mammies were good-natured cooks and loyal family retainers, in reality all southern women worked hard to produce meals for white and black families in the plantation South. White mistresses supervised slaves, oversaw the purchase of food supplies, directed seasonal preservation of food, planned menus, and directed dairy and poultry operations. Black cooks and house servants planted and harvested gardens, cooked three meals a day for the plantation community, cleaned the house, did the laundry, and waited upon guests who frequently visited for extended stays. Slaves were also charged with textile production, sewing, and mending (Ibid, 2007, pp. 2-3).

The role of the black women was dichotomous, by nature she was physically inferior to the male, yet socially she was consistently required to exceed the tasks and duties of all other individuals. The enslaved black woman was expected to be multitalented and versatile, even if these roles fell beyond the guise of femininity or womanhood, but this was rarely the reality of her white female counterpart. For the black woman, even her femininity in relation to childbearing was commodified and bartered. "The fertility of female slaves was a calculation planters did not ignore, and some children of slaves recalled that their mothers were purchased as 'breeders'"(Revels, 2009, p. 1). But "fewer sources have dwelt on the system of rape and forced "breeding" that was part of the black woman's experience"(Doherty, 1986, p. 2).

The subordinate status of black women, as illustrated in literacy, was equally far from the gender parity of her white female counterpart. While some black female slaves learned to read and write, either in secret or from the help of their mistresses, an overwhelming majority remained illiterate. During the Civil War, "unlike their mistresses who publicly demonstrated their loyalty to the Confederacy or confided their thoughts to letters and diaries, slave women are historically mute" (Revels, 2009, p. 1). The viability of black women were posited in

> .... the preparation of food that African Americans made the greatest contribution according to the accounts of early southern foodways. During the antebellum period, the slave cook was the primary food preparer for both the African American slaves and the European American planter families (Whitehead, 1992, pp. 103-104).

In the book, Race, Ethnicity and Gender: Selected Readings, the authors elaborate on the black woman's reality based on sex and race in stating,

> the black woman's position at the nexus of America's sex and race mythology has made it most difficult for her to escape the mythology. ...White women, as part of the dominant racial group, have to defy the myth of woman, a difficult, though not impossible task. The impossible task confronts the black woman. If she is rescued from the myth of the Negro, the myth of woman traps her. If she escapes the myth of woman, the myth of the Negro still ensnares her. Since the myth of woman and the myth of the Negro are so similar, to extract her from one gives the appearance of freeing her from both. She thus gains none of the deference and approbation that accrue from being perceived as weak and submissive, and she gains none of the advantages that come with being a white male. To be so "free", in fact, has at times made her appear to be a superwoman, and she has attracted the envy of black males and white females. Being thus exposed to their envy she has often become their victim (Healey & O'Brien, 2007, p. 125).

As stated previously, the gender issues among white and black women are usually housed under one plight. But the history and biography of the Black-American woman is unique. Even with all the arguable gendered commonalties, the reality of black women far more exceeded the similarities and were inescapable--even history dictates that.

THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED ARCHETYPE AND IMAGES OF THE "BLACK" MAMMY, UNCLE TOM AND SAMBO

The social and historical constructions of the "Black" Mammy, Uncle Tom and Sambo established caricatures, which were partially ridiculed, yet displaying acceptable characteristics subservient to White Americans. The archetype and images of the ‘‘Black’’ Mammy, Uncle Tom or Sambo became socially embedded, constructing an identity in which many Black-Americans could not escape. These archetypes, deeply ingrained in Black-American culture impacted the psyche and served as constant reminders of Black inferiority. These negative depictions further exploited the subordinate status of Black-Americans and fostered a set of ideological beliefs that were considered a representation of ‘‘*black”* existence.

For many slave holders, the institution of slavery was an economically efficient means to an end. Through antithetical conditions and cruelty, plantation owners economically reaped the benefits of southern slave labor. ‘‘The whole machinery of slavery was so constructed as to cause labour, as a rule, to be looked upon as a badge of degradation, of inferiority’’ (Carroll & Washington, 2006, p. 17). For"...slavery was always slavery in the sense if defining and selling human beings as salable property; privileges of any sort could and often did disappear as fast as a flash of lightening" aided in their prosperity (Davis, 2006, p. 124). On the plantation, the Mammy's role as cook and nurturer commanded a sort of reverence. The Mammy was,

> in almost every Southern home of importance, 'Mammy' was a most important figure. She, and generally and old butler, reigned supreme in their respective positions.... Mammy, next to mother, was the children's best friend. In her strong arms every white child was laid at birth, with certainty that it would be given the most skillful and devoted care (Wickham, 1936, p. 412).

By the 1600s, blackface would become a popular form of entertainment in American minstrelsy. These white theatrical portrayals mimicked the lives of black characters. White entertainers ‘‘.... put on blackface and "imitated" or "caricatured" slaves in the South and ex-slaves in the North’’(Blackface Minstrelsy, 2008, "Blackface Minstrelsy," p. 1). The caricatures of

the *"Black"* Mammy and Sambo archetypes mocked the personality, speech, cultural and biological characteristics of men and women alike. These blackface performances included a mélange of instruments for musically dancing and singing, impersonating the plantation life of Black-Americans. As a form of parody, the satirical imitation of stock characters, found popularity among the dominant culture, fostering false depictions of Black-Americans under the system of slavery. Although these shows were made up of a variety of acts, skits, dancing and music, blackface characterizations found popularity in music and in the novels of Mark Twain. [29] While these depictions were not true representations of black sentiments, it did serve as a perpetuation reflecting the love-hate relationship that whites shared with blacks and the "dual nature of black existence".

Thomas Dartmouth Rice, (1830) introduced the earliest slave archetype to the stage in his blackface performance of "Jump Jim Crow". Rice's characterization of Jim Crow was portrayed as a shiftless lazy buffoon, the ever happy jumping, dancing and singing simpleton. [30] "Rice, and his imitators, by their stereotypical depictions of Blacks, helped to popularize the belief that Blacks were lazy, stupid, inherently less human, and unworthy of integration" (Pilgram, 2000, p. 2). In short, the rendition of plantation sketches mimicked slave characterizations, mocking the imposed degradation and consequences of slave life on a stage.

As these caricatures became part of popular American culture, the illustrations of the slave archetype also expanded. The archetype of the *Mammy* or her counterpart the *Old Uncle* was an idyllic representation of the black family. Both characters were considered favorably due to their subdued subjugation or devotion to the plantation life. Conversely, the *Dandy*, otherwise referred to as Zip Coon represented the uppity, well-spoken northerner that imitated whites, providing the perception of prominence. The archetype of the "Coon" was classified as

[29] Blackface illustration and text could be found in Mark Twain's books, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, (1876) and Huckleberry Finn, (1884).

[30] Thomas Dartmouth Rice "Illustration of Jim Crow". Retrieved from http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/who.htm on May 20th, 2008,. See Appendix, pg. 215.

unreliable and lazy, the "Buck" was displayed as bad, rebellious and over-sexed whose desire was to deflower the purity of the white woman.

One of the more popular illustrations of the legacy of slavery is delineated in the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe's, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The archetype of *Uncle Tom* was a pious genteel submissive servant that frequently responded "yassuh" even at the expense of his own pride and dignity (Morgan, 2007, p. 21). As with most of the of slave archetypes, "the most profound effect Uncle Tom's Cabin has had on American culture may be the way the black characters have become familiar stereotypes" (Morgan, 2007, p. 5).

These popularized archetypes directly influenced the commercialization and marketing used to market food products. As a trademark, the images of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima were stereotypical variants used to sell rice and pancake mix well into the new millennium. In 1943, Uncle Ben's parboiled rice made its' debut, marketed by the company Converted Rice, Inc. Uncle Ben, depicted as an elderly black male dressed in a bow tie is said to impersonate an African American rice grower in Texas, named Uncle Ben who was known for the quality of his harvested rice. However, the origins of rice production in South Carolina were cultivated by the enslaved people of African descent, ultimately becoming a cash crop for plantation owners. Today, the trademark image of Uncle Ben is still used as a means of preserving the standard of quality set decades ago. The Mars Inc. website indicates,

> Our namesake, Uncle Ben, was an Black-American rice grower who harvested his rice with such care that he reaped honors for the full-kernel yields and quality. In fact, his rice was of such excellent quality that it came to represent the standard by which all other rice was judged. As the story goes, the proudest boast a rice grower could make was to claim his rice to be "as good as Uncle Ben's" (Mars Incorporated, 2005, p. 1).[31]

The chronicles of Uncle Ben, written in first person depicts an actual beneficiary and entrepreneur of the product. At current the website includes a nifty interactive display of Ben's office where the observer can tour, read the history, latest news and secret recipes of the product.

[31] The Uncle Ben's trademark and slogan located on Mars Inc. website. Retrieved on May 22nd 2008 from http://web.archive.org/web/20060427094526/http://www.unclebens.com/about.aspx. See Appendix, pg. 215.

Socially constructed, the slave archetype of the ‘‘Black Mammy’’ was epitomized as an acceptable enactment of loyalty and deference expected by whites during the antebellum period, which was popularized by southerners in many ways. During the antebellum period, ‘‘southern house slaves were called ‘Mammy’ or ‘Aunt’ ’’ (Morgan, 1995, p. 89). The ‘‘Mammy’’ was considered as the one who nursed the children, while ‘‘Aunt’’ was used as an endearing term often referencing the slave woman who had been with the family for an extended period of time (Morgan, 1995, p. 89).

‘‘The role of the ‘‘Mammy’’ in the plantation household grew out of the role of the Negro slaves on the plantation’’(Parkhurst, 1938, p. 350). The Mammy supervised the household servants and served as liaison to the mistress of the house. She was next to the mistress in authority and ‘‘bossed’’ everyone and everything in the household’’ (Ibid, 1938, p. 351).Her direct contact with the plantation family was often reflected in her ideals establishing some sense of belonging. ‘‘In the plantation household the ‘‘Black Mammy’’ was considered as much a part of the family as the blood members were’’ (Ibid, 1938, p. 352).

The images of the Black Mammy portrayed her as a burly woman that served as maid and cook in the plantation kitchen. She was often described as a middle-aged maternally over protective domestic worker, an obsequious woman, primarily fulfilling the interests of whites. In Phil Patton’s powerful article, ‘‘Mammy: Her Life and Times’’ the Mammy is referenced as,

> Nurturing and protective, self-sacrificing, long suffering, wise, often world weary but never bitter, Mammy mixed kindness with sternness and wreathed her own identity inside the weight of heartiness, her own sexuality inside her role as surrogate mother, teacher and cook. Her outside life--especially her love life--is almost always problematic. If she has children, they tend to be treated more brusquely than the white children in her charge. And she never escapes her sense of the limitations of being black (Patton, 1993, p. 1).

One of the earliest images of the Mammy figure depicted in *The Mythification of the Mammy,* (1852) was of Aunt Chloe in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* The character of Aunt Chloe was perceived as ‘‘….was nurturing and protective of "her" white family….the prototypical fictional mammy: self-sacrificing, white-identified, fat, asexual, good-humored, a loyal cook, housekeeper and quasi-family member’’ (Pilgrim, 2000a, p. 3). ‘‘Aunt Chloe, whose

'whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under her well-starched checked turban,' is a take-charge caregiver who assumes an authoritative tone with her mistress'' (Morgan, 1995, p. 91).According to Patton, the

> *Mammy was usually depicted as behaving more kindly to the white children in her* care than to her own… On the plantation, Mammy bore a special relationship to the Mistress. As a surrogate form other, she grew to share many of her idealized qualities—not least because the limits to the role of white women echoed those of black women in the quarters (Patton, 1993, p. 1& 2).

While the legendary image of the Mammy was a response to those that criticized slavery. The ''….Mammy was the woman who could do anything, and do it better than anyone else'' (Gray-White, 1985, p. 47). ''She was idealized by the defenders of slavery and then segregation as evidence of the humanity of the system'' an image would become popularized in music, films and commercialized products (Patton, 1993, p. 1).[32] ''Mammies became fixtures on trade cards, product labels, and song sheet covers—almost anywhere advertisers could exploit the former slaves' well honed domestic skills to attract buyers'' (Morgan, 1995, p. 87).

Although the Black Mammy, was a servant, she was given specific duties to perform, which were often linked to the care of the master's children, "....thus relieving the mistress of all the drudgery work connected with child care''(Parkhurst, 1938, p. 351). "The Mammy and Uncle Tom were reliable ''faithful souls'' (Bogle, [1973, 1989, 1994, 2001, p. 14 & 15). Her loyalty to the slave owner and the family seemingly established some sense of membership in which her ''… sphere of influence widened with the years of her service'' (Parkhurst, 1938, p. 351). Often depicted, ''the death of beloved mammies, respected ''old family servants,'' drivers of long service, and even favorites among the field hands brought out strong sentimental efforts by the more patriarchal masters'' (Genovese, [1930, 1976] 1974, p. 195).

Some consider the role of the ''Black Mammy'' a fictionalized characterization of actual accounts. In Catherine Clinton's book, The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South, the role of the ''Black Mammy'' was a fictionalized character that served as the ''right hand'' to

[32] Patton, P. (1993). Mammy: Her Life and Times provides Stephen Vincent Benét epic poem John Brown's Body (1927) about the Civil War referenced the Mammy archetype. Appendix pg. 221

the mistress, but this was "…only a handful of such examples" (Clinton, 1982, p. 201 & 202).As argued, prior to the Civil War, the wealthy class could only afford, "utilizing the (black) women as house servants rather than field hands" (Turner, [1994, 2004, p. 44). The Mammy was not this powerful entity allotted the freedom to punish the slave master's children and "I take issue with those who declare the black Mammy did have equal authority in the punishment of refractory children (Cocke-Johnson, 1971, p. 11). Contrarily, "while the Mammy tradition is usually associated with upper-class whites, black women also served in less wealthy households, though they were not as numerous, and they sometimes doubled as field workers" (Gray-White, 1985, p. 49).

In the popular depictions, "the image of mammy is the antithesis of femininity and the American conception of womanhood….portrayed as an obese black woman, possessing masculine characteristics, wearing plain, unattractive clothing, and usually with her hair covered with a scarf" (Jewell, 1976, p. 10). The portrayals of the Black Mammy"....undermined her very femaleness by giving her broad shoulders, strong arms. and firmly planted large feet to support a wide stance" (Morgan, 1995, p. 106). The image of the "… Mammy is darker. She is representative of the all-black woman, overweight, middle-aged and so dark, so thoroughly black, that it is preposterous even to suggest that she be a sex object. Instead she was desexed" (Bogle, [1973, 1989, 1994, 2001, p. 15). Any ".... potential attractiveness of the buxom African-American woman was negated by picturing her uncorseted and wearing unstylish clothes"(Morgan, 1995 p. 106). By degrading the black female, "Euro-American men were thus able to define the Euro-American woman as delicate and dependent by counterposing her against the commanding presence of the husky, mannish African-American woman" (Ibid, 1995, p. 106).

Despite, the unattractive image of the Black Mammy, she would later be replicated as the commercialized icon, Aunt Jemima. Aunt Jemima, the counterpart of Uncle Ben, would be modified several times. The trademark depiction of "Aunt Jemima" as a smiling, plump,

kerchief wearing African American woman was indicative of the common slave archetype and stereotypical characterization of the Mammy. Aunt Jemima modeled from the image of the "Black Mammy" became an institutionalized characterization of black womanhood. "In popular art the two are almost indistinguishable from each other. Aunt Jemima, for instance, looks like a mammy, or nursemaid" (Morgan, 1995, p. 89).

Illustration #1: Traditional Aunt Jemima

Illustration #1: Contemporary Aunt Jemima

In 1889, Nancy Green, born a slave was hired as a physical archetype of Aunt Jemima's pancake flour. Chris L. Rutt of the Pearl Milling Company modeled the image after the blackface minstrelsy (by Baker and Farrell) characterizing the archetype wearing a kerchief and apron. Green operated a pancake cooking display and continued to play the part of Jemima until her death in 1923 (Morgan, 1995; Patton, 1993). The image of Aunt Jemima would later be culturally altered fitting the changing social climate. Her kerchief, corn rolled hair and rugged appearance were modified and replaced with more refined physical characteristics.[33]

Nevertheless, the institutionalization of the caricatures of the Black Mammy, Sambo and Coon were depictions of a genetically inferior, hedonistic group that was better off in a place of servitude. These archetypes only reinforced the status quo, serving as a constant reminder of

[33] Illustration #1 retrieved on June 2009, from www.swarthmore.edu. Illustration #1 retrieved on June 2009, from meta.uncyclomedia.org and i5.photobucket.com/.../aunt_jemima.jpg.

inferiority and the ''black place'' in American society. Nevertheless, ''for the ''mammy,'' in discourse and in life, remained the inferior and menial cook, servant, and wet-nurse in spite of her veneration in the South''(Okafor, 2005, p. 8). The oppositional relationship of slave and master was inherently different and reified in the existence of each archetype.

While her transformation is culturally sensitive, the slave images reinforced the negative exploitations of the black experience. These images were a confining harness, institutionally reified--outlining acceptable behavioral characteristics, of the black woman that was encouraged and reflected her entire being. The Black Mammy, is the personification of the southern earth mother, source of nutrition, wisdom, comfort and discipline, cook, advisor, mediator....she remains in myth and memory, the most positive and yet most dangerous of all racist stereotypes'' (Patton, 1993a, p. 1).

> BORN IN SLAVERY AND RAISED IN ITS PAINFUL AFTERMATH TO BECOME ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL AMERICAN ICONS, SHE HAS BEEN MADE TO ENCOMPASS LOVE AND GUILT AND RIDICULE AND WORSHIP —AND STILL SHE LIVES ON (Patton, 1993a, p. 1).

The commercialized slave archetype of the ''Black Mammy'' proved to be a profitable icon for white enterprise. The Mammy has remained a timeless figure, representing the submissive Black woman. Presently, outside of Natchez, Mississippi, on Highway 61,*Mammy's Cupboard,* is still a landmark. The restaurant is a thirty foot high concrete figure of a black woman holding a tray, wearing a pillbox cap and horseshoe earrings. The arched windows beneath Mammy's red brick skirt serves as a monument to the American icon.

> Consider the fact that three centuries of white people have loved black cooking so much that hardly any image is planted deeper in the American mind. Aunt Jemima, beaming and black—used by the white man—has sold billions of pancakes. Her counterpart Uncle Ben has sold shiploads of rice—for the white man. Where is the black money pooled into an industry hiring blacks in the total processing of frozen black Southern cooking....here is this nation's black-owned chains of black-cooking restaurants? In the fall of 1963, Aunt Jemima moved from boxed pancake flour to a nation spanning restaurant franchise.....Guess who franchises the chain of Aunt Jemima restaurants? (Patton, 1993a, p. 3).[34]

[34] "The text included a chapter titled "The Negro," which was mysteriously omitted from the published text. Here, as reported in The New York Observer of April 19, 1993, is what Malcolm X thought of the power of the ubiquitous icon" (Patton, 1993, p. 3). For Mammy's Cupboard, see Appendix pg. 217.

Sociologically this depiction, viewed through a multi-dimensional lens falls at intersectionality of race, class and gender. Today, the Black Mammy is a depiction of white hegemony. By "portraying Black-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression" (Collins, 2000, p. 69). These oppressive ideologies of domination, foster social injustice and reifies the Black woman's experience as subordinate. Unlike her white female counterpart, the black woman has had to grapple with negative institutionalized self-images and stereotypes that have shaped perceptions of her identity.

Today, the socially ingrained depictions of the black woman have found yet another place in reality, a reality that has a detrimental impact on the Black culture. The negative images and stereotypes have only been transposed, relabeled and marketed under urbanized themes. For Black women the search for a separate identity, a unique sense of self has yet to be rectified. Therefore, in reality the negative images of Black-American women have only been re-marketed from the subservient mammy to the booty shaking hot "hoochie" mama. In essence, the image of the black woman is socially organized on a continuum of extremes, from the desexualization of the "Black Mammy" to the overly sexualized "hoochie" mama. Black-Americans have spent decades struggling to self-identify and overcome ingrained prejudice practices. Yet the negative images once presumed as derogatory, is now rather endearing.

Culturally, Black-Americans have reached another tier of cultural chaos. The struggles of Black Americans are seemingly dated shadows long forgotten. The advancements superficial, accompanied by values that have actually "widened the cultural gap and exposed themselves to even harder blows from a white nation that could neither understand their behavior nor respect its moral foundations (Genovese, [1930, 1976] 1974, p. 294). "Unless we transform images of blackness, of black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation" (Hooks, 1992, p. 7).

THE COMPLEXITIES AND UNIQUENESS OF BLACK-AMERICAN WOMEN

This chapter provides a basis for understanding the *unique characteristics* of Black women. Despite the intergroup heterogeneity among black women, there are many commonalities in their life experiences and plight. Often misunderstood, her strong presence has preserved the family structure. But often she is isolated in her own womanhood, but for those black women that share in her reality there is an undeniable bond of sisterhood.

The life experiences and circumstances of Black Americans in the New World are unique in nature. "The American Negro is a unique creation; he has no counterpart anywhere and no predecessors" (Baldwin, [1962, 1963], 1993, p. 84). The black experience is set within a series of complex circumstances, filled with unique consequences that *are not* and *have never* been the same in other ethnic groups. This does not negate the challenges of other ethnic groups, but for Black-Americans many of these unique experiences still have consequence today. As Frederick Douglass stated, 'the Negro be not judged by the heights to which he has risen, but by the depths from which he has climbed.' Judged on that basis, the Negro woman embodies one of the modern miracles of the New World" (Carroll & Torricelli, 2000 p. 105).

Only few Black Americans have been lucky enough to escape the experiences of inequality and while some may be exempt from this reality, the vast majority has been destined to confront some aspect of social injustice throughout the course of their lifetime. Although these occurrences are differently experienced, the impact on the individual was often the same—that there is a difference, a difference in color meant a difference in treatment. As a way of life, very few amendments made to whites, would be equally granted to those of color. In America, the progress of Black-Americans has not been a small task. For the Black woman her uniqueness is embedded in her life experiences, which has been separate from her protégés. These differences can be traced back to enslavement.

During the Enslavement era, the black woman pleaded, protected, preserved and negotiated for her family against the harsh realities of slavery. Yet, she preserved whatever dignity and self-respect for her family possibly marshaled within the system of slavery. "The special plight and the role of black women is not something that just happened three years ago. We've had a special plight for 350 years....they started unloading the slave ships of Africa, that's when they started" (Hamer, 1971, p. 1). Confronted with a system of subjugation, she carried the burden and served as a source of strength to hold the family together. Although she was not always successful,

> ...it's been the Negro woman in the South who has had to shoulder the burden of strength and dignity in the colored family....and it is usually the Negro mother who had to keep a certain dignity in the family to offset the inferiority the white man inflicted on her husband (Jackson & Wylie, 1966, pp. 100-101).

In the New World, the degradation of Black women has been entrenched in unique circumstances, separating her from her white counterpart. Black women "during slavery we were chattel, breeders and often times at the mercy of the slave owners. That was a form of sexual exploitation that affects us even today" (Ferguson, 1970, p. A18).In "the Special Plight and the Role of Black Woman", Fannie Lou Hamer states,

> ....you thought that you was *more* because you was a woman, and especially a white woman, you had this kind of angel feeling that you were untouchable....there's nothing under the sun that made you believe that you was just like me, that under this white pigment of skin is red blood, just like under this black skin of mine (Hamer, 1971, p. 1).

Despite the economic gain for plantation owners, the enslavement era thrust Black women into a system of sexual exploitation. Set up for the purpose of internal trade, slave markets were a"...dehumanizing aspect of slavery....the enslaved were treated like animals, they were handled, pinched, hit, inspected and intimate examinations were undertaken in public" (Sadler, 2009, p. 19). Her servitude as slave, clad naked at auction blocks was a dehumanizing assault on her body. Her body objectified, bound by a structure in which reproductively served as a means that increased the wealth of plantation masters. "Slave owners could see no reason why they should not abuse these women either physically or sexually, as they were their

property to do with as they pleased" (Ibid, 2009, p. 23). This "power over the black woman's body in its productive capacity as an asexual labor machine was thus, combined with sexual power to control both production and reproduction on slave plantations" (Gaspar & Hine, 1996, p. 194).

> For centuries we tended, and nursed, often at our breasts, the children of people that despised us. We had cooked the food of a nation of racists, and despite the many opportunities, there were few stories of black servants poisoning white families. If that didn't show mercy, then I misunderstood the word (Angelou, 1997, p. 204).

The enslavement era would also provide depictions of the black woman as an ugly hedonistic overly sexualized entity. Popularized in American culture, the archetype of the Black Mammy, was depicted as a "....loyal slave character from the fabled Old South"(Morgan, 1995, p. 87). The Black Mammy was "a kind looking old woman" with "philoprogenitiveness well developed" that was favored by the master for keeping everything under control(Olmsted, 1856, p. 425). These stereotypes only justified the maltreatment of black women, making her an easy target for sexual exploitation.

It is often erroneously perceived that the struggle of women in general has equilibrium. While there is small grounding in the commonality of gender issues, the reality for Black women is that race has continuously superseded gender. The reality of "blackness" was institutionalized and reified as a constant reminder of the status difference between black and white women. Therefore, "despite the common interests of Negro and white women, however, the dichotomy of the segregated society has prevented them from cementing a natural alliance" (Keetley & Pettegrew, 2005, pp. 57-60). "Negro women have had to fight against the stereotypes of 'female dominance' on the one hand loose morals on the other hand, both growing out of the roles forced upon them during the slavery experience and aftermath" (Ibid, 2005, pp. 57-60). Simply spoken, "to be a woman of the Negro race in America, and to be able to grasp the deep significance of the possibilities of the crisis, is to have a heritage, it seems to me, unique in the ages" (Cooper, 1988, p. 145).

Even though decades have passed, the sexual exploitation of Black women is still pervasive in American society. ‘‘The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country....She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both" (Cooper, 1988, p. 134). While

> white women are rebelling against advertising that insults women and magazines that depict women as nonthinking, bosomy bundles of sexiness placed on earth for the benefit of the Playboy Magazine centerfold and the prurient interests of men. To black women, the term sexual exploitation has a completely different meaning (Ferguson, 1970, p. A18).

Unlike her white female counterpart, the black woman has been reviled, brutalized, demeaned and personified in a "dual reality" making her an invisible outcast. "The black woman has had to struggle against being a person of great strength. She has had to demonstrate the skill to cope with what has happened to the whole black family" (Ibid, 1970 p. A18). And it is here that her significance is measurably noticeable. It is in her soul that her insightful longevity in protecting her clan, which permeates her being. In this regard, ‘‘no mother can love more tenderly and none is more tenderly loved than the Negro mother’’ (Du Bois, [1920], 1999, p. 97).

For all women, but especially the Black woman, "her work is never done’’. There was seldom any rest and she was never expected to tire. Even though fatigued, she was *expected* to place everything before herself, granting little time her own rejuvenation and restoration of her own soul. In the depth of her being, she was not to "be not discouraged black women of the world, but push forward, regardless of the lack of appreciation shown you. A race must be saved.... (Garvey, 1925). In her ability to preserve all that surrounds her, her plight has never reached closure.

Today, the black woman's inner strength has been misrepresented as domineering, brash and male-like. "Black women are pictured by some segments of white society and even some black men as loud, obstinate, domineering, emasculating and generally immoral" (Ferguson, 1970, p. A18). Stricken by her independence, it is presumed that she either acts like the man or does not need one. Little consideration is given to the fact that "the black woman is

independent. She's always been educated in the school of hard knocks. And she has had to make her way, even with the family, the children, everything" (Lerner, 1973, p. 586). Despite the heterogeneity "our experiences as black woman go beyond our lack of recognition by the larger society; we do, in fact, identify with one another" (Myers, 1980, p. 61). This strong sense of collectivity,".... identified with other black woman in situations similar to their own" has served as a buffer redefining her self-worth in sisterhood (Ibid, 1980, p. 89).

The centuries spent deflecting extreme prejudice sentiments, the rapes, the whippings, the bartering and selling of the black woman and her lack of freedom served as a baseline disjoining many separated by the racial divide. While her walk in life can often form a prison of solitude, she has found solace those black woman sharing in common experiences. Forged from the harsh reality of her existence, the black woman learned to cope, displaying strength from within. This she learned to do it exceptionally well! Despite her marginalization, she has emerged with dignity. "No other women on earth could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which once engulfed and still surrounds black women in America with half the modesty and womanliness that they retain" (Du Bois, [1920], 1999, pp. 107-108).With this in mind, it is undeniable that the black woman is a unique entity!

THE FORMATION OF THE "BLACK" MATRIARCH

The previous chapter discussed the lack of parity, dispelling the myths of cross-racial gender similarity. As outlined previously, contrary to popular rhetoric the Black women is unique. Conceptualizing American family life and culture, this subsection contrasts the role of motherhood between white and black women, elaborating on the influence of societal expectations and stereotypes. Much of the Black woman's role within the family is traced to African heritage and slavery. The adaption and variations between the cultures provides a basis for viewing the similarities and differences within white and black family structures.

The formation of the "Black" Matriarch has been long in the making. For enslaved African women, plantation life forced them into dual roles, which was an evitable consequence at its' foremost, which ultimately led to the formation of the "Black Matriarch". There is seldom any acknowledgement that the black woman's role as matriarch was not by choice, but by consequence. Moreover, ''there is a complete denial by this society of the fact that since the slave ships brought the black woman to this country she has had to hold the family together" (Ferguson, 1970, p. A18).

Even though African societies were considered primitive in nature,''...the men and women who were taken as slaves to the New world came from societies every bit as civilized and "respectable" as those of the Old World settlers who mastered them''(Billingsley, 1968, p. 48). However, ''…the two were very different types of society for the African family was much more closely integrated with the wider levels of kinship and society''(Ibid, 1968, p. 48). Many of these West-African civilizations were far from primitive and quite sophisticated in organization. Despite some interpretations,

> …. of ancient Africa describe a civilization rich in precious metals, agriculture, and culture and highly evolved spiritually with a great emphasis on home and family life....many of these processes have not been lost but have been transmitted through the family's emotional process over space and time (Logan, 2000, p. 10).

In many West-African societies, family structures were closely integrated with kinship and community. Mothers were important societal members serving as the keepers of culture. In fact, some West-African tribes were matrilineal. Similarly, "... the African American kinship pattern is derived from African cultures not destroyed in the transatlantic "Middle Passage" or during enslavement" (Nobles, 1974 & McAdoo, 2007, p. 60).

African heritage emerged as the crux of several distinctive Black-American practices(Herskovits, 1938; Billingsby, 1968; Nobles, 1974; McAdoo, 2007). "The integrity of Afro-American culture, and its family patterns, begins within African origins and continues with an adaptation for environmental conditions(Dodson & et al., 1975, p. 3). Although European practices became an amalgamate of the West-African traditions, Black-American cultural patterns remained the result of African heritage (Herskovits, [1941, 1958, 1962, 1970] 1990).During the early stages of slavery, racial unity was complicated by the diversity of African dialectic, region and culture. Even though enslaved West-Africans were transported from various regions, many traditions were integrated into their ways of life in the New World. Although segmented, in many instances "....Afro-American culture based on the culture of West African peoples was identified in the cultural expression" (Dodson & et al., 1975, p. 1).

Slaves used cultural forms to lessen their burden. These forms took the shape of songs, dances, and intergenerational narratives that sustained hope, built self-esteem, and focused on a time where they would be free from the control of the slave owner. While many slaves found solace in unique cultural expressions, ‘‘most of the slave culture – language, customs, beliefs, and ceremonies – set him apart from his master. His thoughts, values, ideals and behavior were all greatly influenced by these processes’’ (Blassingame, 1979, p. 105). But these unique cultural expressions further solidified the ever-present racial distinctions that served as moral justification for the ill-treatment and subordinate societal position of antebellum black slaves.

During the Enslavement era, African captives were forced into a system of acculturation that integrated or often replaced native African traditions with dominant Eurocentric values.

While European domination had a detrimental impact on black life, African culture and heritage remained an omnipresent force in the practices of Black-Americans. In this, the enslaved Africans "who were exported to the Americas were Africans before...and Africans afterwards, and their descendants are still Africans (Turnbull, 1976, p. 242).The

> ....similarities between cultural behavioral patterns of Africans on the continent and those of African descent living in the Americas.... found clear evidence of commonalities among these groups in their use of language, music, art, house structure, dance, traditional religion and healing practices. The common factors were traceable to African and/or African-derived components (Herskovits, 1938; McAdoo, 2007, p. 58).

During the 1900s, much debate was centered on whether African heritage had retained any influence within Black-American culture under the oppressive dominating system of slavery. Sociologists and other social scientists spearheaded the initial conceptualizations of Black American family life, most assertions were based on the loss of African heritage or a homogenous American culture rooted in Eurocentric values. It was perceived that enslaved Africans "coming from all parts of Africa and having no common language and common tradition, the memories of Africa which they brought with them were soon lost" (Park, 1919, p. 117).

"The manner in which Negro slaves were collected in Africa and disposed of after their arrival in this country would make it improbable that their African traditions were preserved" (Frazier, 1930, p. 203). Much of the African heritage was further lost by the separation of slaves from their kinsmen "....thrown together with slaves who had already forgotten or dimly remembered their life in Africa" (Park, 1919, p. 117). "Memories of the homeland were effaced, and what they retained if African ways and conceptions of life ceased to have meaning in the new environment"(Frazier, 1948, p. 435). The ‘‘European penetration and the slave trade debased much that was vital in African culture’’ (Bennett, 1961, p. 22).

These prevailing sentiments often argued that the Black family was shaped by the American environment and "...for the roots of the Negro family, one must go to the slave family as it developed on the plantation"(Frazier, 1931, p. 386). Additionally argued, "....to seek explanations for the deviations in the American Negro family from American standards in African

customs. When the Negro was introduced into America the break with African culture was well nigh complete (Ibid, 1928, p. 44).During that time, the impression of many scholars were,

> .... that the amount of African tradition which the Negro brought to the United States was very small. In fact, there is every reason to believe, it seems to me, that the Negro, when he landed in the United States, left behind him almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament. It is very difficult to find in the South today anything that can be traced directly back to Africa(Park, 1919, p. 116).

In dispelling the above ideologies, an alternative approach presented "the integrity of Afro-American culture, and its family patterns, begins with African origins and continues with as adaptation for environmental conditions"(Dodson & et al., 1975, p. 3). Within the family structure, the role of black women are different from white women because they view themselves differently, are viewed differently and lead a different kind of life" (Morrison, 1971, p. 15). The white female was "subordinate to white male authority and facing sexual competition from colored and black woman for their husbands' favors, white women were arguably more brutal in their treatment of slaves than white men" (Gaspar & Hine, 1996, pp. 194-195). "The differences between white mothers and black mothers....scholars were more likely to associate white women with frigidity and black women with promiscuity" (Gabin, 2002, p. 305).

Black women have a unique history ingrained in negative images, as "....part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of black womanhood take on special meaning"(Collins, 2000, p. 69). However, "....we can gain some understanding of the black women's world by examining archetypes" (Morrison, 1971, p. 15). The"....authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas of black womanhood (Collins, 2000, p. 69). For Black women, these socially constructed images have furthered exploitation well into the new millennium.

During the 1960s, the emergence of the "Black Matriarchy" became a popular stereotype, centered on the Black-American family structure. Within most black family structures, economic inequality and poverty became a catalyst, serving as a cornerstone of the formation of the "Black" Matriarch. Within these households, Black woman were depicted as an overly

controlling, domineering, outspoken and emasculating. "These stereotypes have even caused the black male to think that he is dominated" (Ferguson, 1970, p. A18).

> The Black Matriarch (1) regards the black male as undependable and is frequently responsible for his emasculation, (2) is often very religious, (3) regards mothering as one of the most important things in her life, (4) attempts to shield her children from and to prepare them accept the prejudices of the white world(Anderson, 1976, p. 93).

The economic exclusion of black men left them systematically disadvantaged and unable to support their families. These economic injustices further established financial hardships within many black families, compelling Black women to enter the labor market for subsistence. Again, societal constructs proved detrimental in shaping the black woman's role as sole provider. With the black males masculinity attacked, the admiration in the black woman's strength once revered, gave way to contempt. Instead he became intimidated by her strength and independence. The black males inability to provide, reified his sentiments of inadequacy, which resulted in a sense of displacement.

When adequately compared, "....the tendency to compare African American families with European American families, implying that the latter provide norms for measurement" has established another vicious cycle of inequality (Kane, 2000, p. 691). The state of the Black family, were often associated as entrenched in the "culture of poverty", a notion that many blacks are trapped in poverty because they do not share the same values as middle-class (No author, 1989, p. 26). These interpretations has lacked variation, thus shaping

> the idea that there is a singular homogenous American culture....contains the assumption that all families in this culture should have a common definition and, therefore, a similar conceptual character. Naturally, by assuming a common cultural reality between blacks and whites, one expects a common singular theoretical framework for interpreting their respective lifestyles. The fact that the condition of black American family life is different from that of a white American family life, in turn, led to the conclusion that the differences perceived between black and white families represented a black deviation from the "normative" culture (Nobles, 1978, pp. 2-3).

The rise of black-female headed households prompted criticisms, targeting black women for the dysfunctional state of the black family. "When Black women were forced to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of mainstream America it helped to contribute to the myth that Black

women are naturally aggressive, strong and dominant" (Green, 2006, p. 2). Characterized as a domineering matriarch, black women were also held responsible for the castration of the black male. But the black female were "....collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group" (Eze, 1998, p. 345). "Certainly Negro women are domestics and there are some black sex symbols, but this is by no means the extent of the Negro woman's total make-up" (Teer, 1967). Nevertheless, it was "....promiscuity and illegitimacy, behaviors that connoted black women as matriarchs" (Gabin, 2002, p. 305).

Black women still contend with the socio-historical characterizations and images"....as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas" (Collins, 2000, p. 69)."She is both condemned and praised by sociologists and psychologists for creating and perpetuating a matriarchal stereotype" (Anderson, 1976, p. 93). For in fact, a "good woman" is expected to be a "*superwoman"*, yet another paradox that also depicts the female as strong-willed, domineering and unfeminine. As mentioned above, the black women is isolated to mainly "four stereotypical images are outlined by Black feminist literature: the mammy, the matriarch, the sexual siren, and the welfare queen" (Woodard & Mastin, 2005, p. 270).According to Trudier Harris, the Black woman,

> called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Women has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself (Harris,1982, p. 4).

Black women have yet to escape "the conceptual definition of stereotypical images is all negative images of Black women that serve to support an oppressive patriarchal system that degrades and denigrates them according to race, class, and gender"(Woodard & Mastin, 2005, p. 270). For Black women, the intersectionality of race, class and gender has been ubiquitous in nature.

> For centuries, Black women have stood at the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression, and many have fought against these injustices. They created, as Black lesbian poet Pat Parker so eloquently wrote, a legacy of hard work, fierce dedication to family and community, and militant struggle against exploitation. The motto of the Nannie Helen Burroughs National Training School for Girls in the early 1900s, 'We specialize in the wholly impossible,' describes the special strength which all African American women had been forced to develop since their arrival on this continent (Amott & Matthaei, [1991], 1996, p. 142).

Today, Black-American culture has made being an independent, strong black woman a trendy phenomenon. While the portrayals of black women still fall under the subordination and social construction of dominant ideology, these negative images have found a common, if not an acceptable place within the Black Culture. The images on television and in music videos depict the black woman as a "big-thighed, booty shaking, sexualized being" surrounding the black male image. She again, is that sexual siren now referenced as a bitch, a whore or a chicken head.

> The Black gangster rappers, Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, each wear nest to nothing in their music videos, on CD covers, and in pictures that accompany interviews given by them to magazines. These particular women, TV producers, writers, pornography executives, and so forth exploit the sexualized image of Black women for profit(Woodard & Mastin, 2005, pp. 272-273).

Popular black music artists, such as Kanye West, Neo, Beyonce and Webbie promote the independent woman as a desirable character, while in reality this just lends itself to another form of alienation. These negative depictions remain damaging to the black females psyche, sense of self and her overall being, still shaping a negative sense of identity. Movies, also another venue that has continued to perpetuate the black woman as either mammy or matriarch can be viewed in the character of Mama Joe in the movie, Soul Food (1997) and Tyler Perry's enactment of Mable 'Madea' Simmons (2006). These movies do provide positive displays of black family life, but each are centered on matriarchal characters. In Soul Food, the character of Big Mama is the

> ….quintessential stereotype of a grandmother whom we all want to know and love. For some, she is reminiscent of "mammy": she is heavyset, dark-skinned, scarf-wearing, and able to cook everything that comes her way—from scratch (Williams-Forson, 2006, p. 188).[35]

Tyler Perry has successfully brought to life the image of the big-busted, strong, oversized, no nonsense character of Mable 'Madea' Simmons. Madea's character is fluid, showing strength, understanding, truthfulness and encouragement, while her blatant honesty provides satire. Much of the admiration in Madea's character comes from her ability to deal with certain situations by

[35] Video clip, Soul Food, 1997 at http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi2499085081/.

any means necessary(Perry, 2006).[36] But the contrary has been the case for the white female portrayed in a domineering role. In the movie, My Super Ex-Girlfriend, (2006) the character casted in a dominant role is depicted as a well-proportioned, overly jealous, attractive superwoman constantly pulled away from dating to save the world. While the white male is initially concerned with her role as superhero, he finds favor in the heroine. She readily gets her man at the end of the day (Payne, 2006).[37] Well into the new millennium, the portrayals of black and white women in domineering roles are still very different.

In short, the black woman has been thrust into an institutionalized system that required endurance as a response to the social constructions placed before her. "However, far too many are left wounded by the reality of oppressive circumstances that confront all women in general but especially Black women" (Bush, 2000, p. 147). The *social world* which has been externally imposed has played a significant part in the construction of the Black Matriarch. A role only reified by a system of exclusion, thus subject to interpretation not her own.

The black woman has used their inner strength to endure life's struggles, to nurture, guide and support their families through hard times. Although she may have desired the pampering easily provided to her white counterpart, perceptions of her inward strength and independence would leave her exempt from this reality. Therefore, the *Black Matriarch* is just a watered-down version of the *Black Mammy*. Our society has just found other ways to mask the same old ideology, just in a more politically correct manner.

[36] Video clip, Madea's Family Reunion, 2006 at http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi2744582425/

[37] Video clip, My Super-Ex-Girlfriend, 1996 athttp://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi1419247897/

CHAPTER SIX
RITUALISTIC FOOD HABITS AND PREPARATION: CULTURAL CUISINE

In this chapter, ethnic-specific traditions are discussed in relation to ritualistic food practices. As a form of culture, these habits are often easily observable in Black-American food habits and preparation.[38] These cooking patterns are not frequently observed in daily cooking routines, but are viewed in ritualistic food practices that are socially rooted in traditional cultural practices. In our current society, time constraints have made the purchasing of fast food an easy alternative to the sit-down family meals. In most ethnic groups, sit-down family meals allowed quality time for primary group interaction. This chapter subsection departs from a broad approach signifying the importance of ethnic-specific ritualistic food practices, concluding with ''Black-American ''food practices as cultural linkages to identity.

Food (sources) has always been important to all living species as a requirement of sustenance. But food has deeper meaning than mere nourishment. Since all ethnic groups engage in some form of ritualistic food practices, these cuisine specific traditions are important to the culture. In most instances, ritualistic food practices are centered on occasional cooking patterns and interaction. Often passed from the older generation, ritualistic food preparation and practices trickle cultural characteristics through learned behaviors.

The old phrase, ''you are what you eat'' made reference to the significance of individualized food intake. The underlying message intended to sum individualized food habits and practices as having direct inference to healthy/unhealthy outcomes. But in relation to identity, ''you are also what you practice''. Ethnic group identification is attached to the formation of self, primarily stemming from cultural constructs. While daily routine practices do not have the same meaning, cultural cuisine poses as an acting agent, shaping that sense of ''self''. The ''self'' as a complex entity, separates the routine from the ritualistic occasions in

[38]The discipline of *gastronomy* also focuses on significance between food and culture.

which cultural habits and practices are exercised. Therefore, the individual comprises more than what is eaten, but what is practiced also has meaning attached.

In Black-American culture, the slavery lexicon blended the food habits of various ethnic groups. Since the legacy and conditions of enslavement infiltrated as aspects of black existence, it separates cultural constructions, including food habits from any other ethnic group. Thus, the cultural constructions formulating "soul food" is unique in experience. Once an overt practice, the history and biography of Black-Americans as economic and political social pariahs limited many opportunities, food habits were one of the major places in which black people used little of nothing to make something good.

These ritualistic food habits are deeply ingrained practices, of which behavioral modification is difficult. For Black-Americans, the ritualistic food habits and preparation of Black-American cuisine represents a history tied to identity. In some way, it is through food habits and traditions that the myriad struggles of Black-Americans are remembered. For some, departing from ethnic-cultural food habits and consumption is to lose a small part of the black experience.

THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF RITUALISTIC FOOD HABITS, PRACTICES AND PREPARATION WITHIN BLACK-AMERICAN CULTURE

Erving Goffman's work, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, (1959) and Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face to Face Behavior, (1967) are pivotal in understanding perceptions of self through interaction. In the book, Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face to Face Behavior, (2005) the introduction by Joel Best states, "…Goffman saw the self as embedded in particular situations. For Goffman, the self was primarily motivated by a desire to be well regarded—both by others and by oneself—and every interaction offered occasions for eliciting that regard" (Goffman, [1959, 1961, 1981, 2005] 1967, p. viii).As opposed to the meanings, motivations and interaction itself, Goffman's interest is in "*order that is demanded by interaction"*(Allan, 2006, p. 76).

As with symbols, language and gestures, food habits are also symbolic processes of conduction, serving as a source of interaction. Cooking practices provide a foundation that induces additional interaction also filled with symbolic meaning. Certain cultural suppositions are implied in these practices, where the initial action prompts another, then another, all symbolic to the actors. Accordingly, action for Goffman, "….serves as a way to characterize the emotional investment actors have in interaction" (Goffman, [1959, 1961,1967,1981] 2005, p. ix).

Food preparation and habits are governed by particular cultural rules of conduct. Using Goffman's definition, "a rule of conduct may be defined as a guide for action" (Goffman, [1959, 1961,1967,1981] 2005, p. 48). The rules of conduct in the kitchen require a sort homogeny, a quasi-consensus in the ways that things are done that formulate into a cultural norm. Whereas, rules of conduct in the kitchen may vary greatly within the Black culture, the symbolic meaning at its' basic tenets are often shared.

Many of the interactions surrounding food preparation are formulated through traditional habits. So the conduct in the kitchen acts as a means establishing "*rules of engagement*". As with other rules of conduct, most of the kitchen etiquette is learned. Much of the impetus behind many ethnic food dishes and cuisines are culturally shaped from tradition and social inheritance.

As stated previously, these dishes serve as distinctive representations of an ethnic group. Food habits may seem simple on the surface, but it constitutes deep underlying meaning for the individualized self, respective to ones' ethnically associated culture. As with language, those that do not possess a working knowledge of ethnically-derived cooking practices, operate as outsiders to those fully entrenched within the culture. Therefore, the individualized ability to prepare ethnically-derived food dishes becomes a form of identification to ones' associated culture.

In specific "soul food" is a hybrid amalgam of other cultural influences, but For Black-Americans, soul food as a symbol of cultural expression that symbolically encompasses the distinctive features of black life and experiences. As in other cultures, Black-American cuisine transmits distinct meaning. Often the preparation of soul food is attached to emotions. Having very little in material wealth to share, the uniqueness of food within the Black-American culture was it served as the one resource that could often be spared, since there was very little in area of expendable resources. A sentiment sometimes stated in the terms, ''I may not have anything to give you, but I can feed ya''.

In the Department of Rural Sociology, a colleague referenced this research study as a rebuttal to the existing claims of ''medical science health enthusiasts'' using culture as an alternative to current research claims.

> The prevailing wisdom in the healthcare practice is the cause is a lack of education about diet, nutrition, and healthy eating. The graduate students own observations suggested that black women were actually well educated about.... nutrition but consciously choose to ignore them as irrelevant to their quality of life, their own budgeting priorities, and the guidelines contradictory to their cultural relationship with food. The latter is the central thesis of her research that food is more than just about nutrition but it symbolizes deeply held beliefs, is incorporated into rituals and traditions, provides comfort, and defines the unique elements of the Black/Black-American heritage. While she may not draw the same conclusion that Endicott does that targeted healthy issue promotion is increasingly perceived as an attack on specific way of life and a particular identity.... Reconciliation "requires a fundamental reconsideration of the epistemological foundation of science" by incorporating the laypersons knowledge and experiences into the discourse of "how we want to live" (Hubbard-Mabry, 2007, pp. 7-8).[39]

[39] The above commentary is a response to the articles written by Enticott, G. (2003) "Lay Immunology, Local Foods and Rural Identity: Defending Unpasteurised Milk in England." Sociologia Ruralis 43:257-270

Kloppenburg, J. (1991) "Social theory and the de/reconstruction of agricultural science: local knowledge for an alternative agriculture." Rural Sociology 56:519-548.

As articulated previously, in Black-American culture there is an entire ritual associated with the process of ritualistic cooking, from the purchase, preparation and consumption of these dishes. Cultural cooking practices are narrated in the book, Tell Us a Story: An African American Family in the Heartland. "Food is very important at the family reunion. We spend a lot of time talking about and planning meals, shopping for the appropriate ingredients, cooking and eating (Portwood, 2000, p. 170). These ritualistic processes are depicted as follows,

> We expect to overeat, so we don't worry about it for this one week. We focus on what tastes good, as opposed to what is healthy. We forget about restrictions on calories, cholesterol, fat, sugar, salt, and all of the other things that make food so delicious. And we fry everything: fried catfish, fried potatoes, fried bacon, fried green tomatoes. By the way, those tomatoes that caused such a sensation in the movie, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, based on the Fannie Flagg novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café,* would not have passed muster with us. Too firm! Further, one should not serve them in a little basket covered with a checkered dinner napkin. Nor should one pick them up with one's fingers and nibble little bites. Fried green tomatoes should be soft enough to require eating them with a fork. And they should be served on a plate. They are not a cutesy-pie hors d'oeuvre. There are country foods. The latter, unlike the former, is acclaimed for its taste rather than for its appearance. No one makes little things on toothpicks, or anything that has tofu, or anything cut into little pieces. We prepare real food, like in the "good ole days" (Portwood, 2000, pp. 170-171).

In Black-American culture, large festive gatherings are where food dishes are affirmed as tasting good. "At the family reunion Daddy makes two outstanding old recipes: blackberry jam and rolls" (Ibid, 2000, p. 172). This begins with the commentary that references the food looking good. If the dish is considered well made, the statement acknowledging this "who put their foot in this". The dishes, now associated to the individual are often considered an item of their specialty. If the dish is only prepared on a particular occasion, it becomes a reoccurring expectation the following year. In this, the food dish and individual become intimately associated.

Although women predominantly rule the kitchen, there are few occasions where ritualistic behavior is centered on the male figure in the household. As Portwood narrates, "....wearing one of Mudeah's aprons, he would make bread-and-butter pickles or bake cakes and rolls. His real baking specialty was a beautiful delicious coconut cake, which he made each year for Christmas" (Ibid, 2000, p. 171). "As he cooked, he cleaned the kitchen so that when finished, everything was orderly and clean" (Ibid, 2000, p. 172).

Although briefly introduced here, a detailed discussion on the relationship between Black-American food habits, ethnic affiliation and identity are addressed in detail within the subsequent chapter. In Henderson's article, the intersectionality of soul food, socio-economic classes and identity are meshed with ''blackness''. He states, the ''….connections based upon consuming soul food on occasions that focused on family and community—such as Sunday and holidays. They would also have known this from other texts that made the connection between soul food and blackness'' (Henderson, 2007, p. 94).

Comparatively the empirical data gathered in this research on ritualistic food habits and preparations were strikingly similar in detail. As scripted below, gatherings surrounding "food'' were an important source of family interaction centered on ritualistic behaviors.

THE RITUALISTIC FOOD HABITS AND PRACTICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Most of Sasha's memories of the holidays were centered on ''being together''. She briefly comments on how the interactions on these occasions were organized. For Thanksgiving, Sasha recalled,

> At holidays, the only holidays I remember was Aunt and Uncle's house. When I was five and six there was turkey, ham fried chicken, candy yams, greens and gravy. The entire table was filled. It was one of best that I remember because we were all truly together.
>
> Most often we went to relatives homes. We got to eat a lot of sweets, pies and cakes that we did not get at home. We were all together. The kids had to go sit off to themselves. The grown folks discussed grown folk business, current times and future events. The men and women blended together.

Lydia's description of ritualistic holiday behaviors brings in socio-economic class and expectations of formal etiquette.

> I remember at "um" at Thanksgiving and Christmas is making cookies with my mom and I am not sure whether they were shortbread or sugar cookies. Roll them out and we got to cut them out. With the extended family what I remembered was there was always lots of food. I cannot even say that I am consciously aware of who did the cooking or what, but there were always lots of food.
>
> I think my mom was self-taught. She was Martha Stewart before Martha Stewart was invented. So I do not remember any particular menu. We always had a very formerly set table. Whatever seam of the year she was on that moment, (um) she cooked like Martha Stewart. I do remember that we always had (um); the only consistency I can remember is we always had some type of greens –collard greens, turnip greens, and we always had cheese macaroni with real cheddar cheese - not the cheese macaroni in the box or Velveeta nonsense…. We usually cooked all day and ate late afternoon. When we all sat down and ate, we had to wash up put on you know nice clothes, it was a very formal affair.

According to Beyonce Hinton ritualistic were displayed as

> Family members would come over – uncles, aunts and cousins. You see people that you haven't seen and you don't even know that they were your kin people walking down the street. You don't realize how many people you have in your family until you see them at holiday time. It was an enormous gathering, uh there wasn't enough room at the table (subject laughs).
>
> It would be at the oldest house the oldest living relative of the family is where everyone would unite. Uum! the women would be in the kitchen, each one of them made a different dishes and the men would be playing games with the children, cards games or just talking –drinking(subject laughs) The kids would be outside playing games or we would be inside rushing in the kitchen, trying to put our fingers in something (subject laughs).
>
> Um! We would have again-like I say, would have ham, roast pork; she would have three types of meat. Main dishes would be three types of meats. You'd have greens, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, or cornbread and biscuits. We'd have fish – (subject laughs) all kinds of foods that contain fatty foods.

Sister Bertha Jones provides an extremely detailed response in the ritualistic behaviors that she remembers were practiced over the holidays.

> Christmas we did not have a lot of gatherings because it was cold and we lived in the country and it was snowy and folks could not get out, so we did not have a lot of outside people. But at Christmas we always had a big dinner. They would start early with killing the hogs and we would have chitlins from the hog and they would have to clean them smelly things, but they were good when they got through. They would clean those hogs and they would clean the pig feet, they would clean all that stuff. But for Christmas stuff we could not eat until they had a chance to smoke it, hang it up and let it drip or whatever was that they did. But we always had them there chitlins for Christmas dinner. We always had green beans, potato salad, and cold slaw and then we would have fried chicken. Fried chicken was something that we always had or if we did not have fried chicken, then we'd have baked chicken with stuffing and stuff. The way that they stuffed chickens back in the day was so different from what they do now.
>
> They would make their cornbread three days early, set it aside, let it sit there and I guess get crunchy I don't know. But they would go in and stuff it into a big old pan and start scrunching that cornbread up. They would put their own seasoning in it, like sage and onions. I don't think they used celery because we did not have access to it. But they had these different little seasoning that they'd put in the stuffing. After they got it all mixed up and they would just take it and work it with their hands and my brother would say, "look at them, they're puttin their feet in that". My brother was really funny, he say "they putting their feet in that sis, it's gonna be good" ha, ha. But anyway, after they got that all mixed up they would put the stuffing in the turkey and until this day, I don't know how to stuff a turkey. I watched them do it, but I remember because they got the easy going stuff now, but they would put this stuffing in the bird, cook it and how they could cook that stuff and get it done, get the bird done and get the stuffing done and put it on the platter and look as good as it did, I still don't understand. But it was delicious. Take oh! gosh mincemeat pie that was one of the special things that they would have and I remember my Aunt and my mom they would start saving their little pennies and things, so when they went to the store they'd have enough money to buy mincemeat, so we could have mincemeat pie at Christmas time. Pumpkin pie and they canned a lot of stuff. We had apples and stuff like that they would just go up under the bed. They'd put it in a box, stick it up under the bed and when it was time they'd pull it out get 'em a jar and don't your run around and make too much noise, because you kick those apples over you gonna get your butt whooped (laughter). Because those apples were special, but that's how we always had apple pies, cause they would can 'em.
>
> Ooh! Chocolate pie, Oh my goodness! It's just a pie shell and it is best to use them cooked because when you make up your –use chocolate cocoa, sugar butter, vanilla and I think maybe eggs and you stir it up- mix it up smoothly, but it's gotta be kind of thin because then you pour it into your pie shell and stick it in the oven and bake it. You have never eaten chocolate pie? Oh my God! (ha, ha).

In Sister Bertha Jones account on holiday rituals she further elaborates on the family interaction and placement of children during the holidays. In our present society, phrases such as ‘‘a child should be seen and never heard’’ or ‘‘stay in a child’s place’’ is a means of communicating the hierarchal authority of the adult. But the placement of children and others were deeply ingrained socialized practices that were an important part of transmitting respect and appropriate guidelines within the Black culture.

> For Thanksgiving the men had to make sure there was enough fire. They cooked on a wood burning stove, so the men had to make sure there was enough wood. Sometimes two or three days before they would go out into the woods and shoot rabbits or if they did any raccoons they would be sure that stuff was already cleaned and ready for the women to cook. Then the night before Thanksgiving the women would get busy making preparations for all the stuffing. Put them old coons into some water and let' em soak and be sure the kernels were out from under the arms, if you don't it will ruin the meat. I never did like raccoon. But they would get up and get it all seasoned and prepared to get started the next morning. Now I don't recall us having turkey as a child because we usually had the wild meat or baked hen. I think we had probably moved to town and then we started having turkey. And but my mom and my aunt prepared chicken in the same way they prepared turkey. They would stuff that bugger and get a ready to go.
>
> Then the kids, we would play games, but we would make up our games as we'd go along because we were too poor to afford to buy. But we did a lot of guessing games, guess what this is and guess what that is. Marbles, we would set up a little marble station on the floor and we'd shoot marbles. These were definitely outdoor games, but we would have to do something. And then Chinese checkers we had those and then we had the regular black and red checkers and cards. We would play card games. So we just mostly id the game stuff, cause you know they didn't want you in the kitchen under foot.
>
> Repeat: They didn't want you in the kitchen under foot, cause you would get in their way and when they said certain times that they would show you how to cook certain things, but on holidays ump ump! You couldn't do that you would just be in the way. So we had to busy ourselves with other things. We didn't have a radio, or a TV, so we just had to make up our fun. I think that's why children in our day were a lot smarter because we didn't have all those distractions off T.V. You were lucky enough to have a book, everybody had to read that book and for those that could not read, they had to listen and they'd ask questions. That was one of the best teaching tools and we really appreciated those books that we did have. We did not have too many, but if we got our hands on a book, we really did appreciate it. There was always a Bible around, but that was sacred- kids couldn't touch that Bible. That was God's word and ya'll might mess up, ya'll not holy enough yet to touch that bible (laugh). Sometimes we would get a hold of a comic book, but the comic books weren't as violent then as they are now. They were funny (you know) and were inspirational because we thought one of these days we are gonna grow up and be like those people. Because it was fun, but nowadays everything is so violent.

Majority of the women interviewed made some indication in their narratives that there were clear distinctions between the adult and children interactions. Although the comments ranged in detail, children were only allowed to cook with the women. None of the participants indicated their male siblings were side by side cooking apprentices, the boys frequently played outside or in some other area of the house during these ritualistic cooking occasions.

Shanequa Washington's depictions of holiday rituals are impacted by religious affiliation. But despite this, staunch similarities of ritualistic food habits, here described as everyday occurrences were still evident in her narrative.

> We did not have family holidays because my mother was a Jehovah's Witness. So every meal was like any other day. Fried chicken, fried potatoes and onions, hot dogs and shoestring potatoes, spaghetti and nasty salmon croquets.
>
> Mom you know were Jehovah's Witnesses, so we didn't have a Thanksgiving dinner. But every year around Thanksgiving we always had a big meal. She claimed that's because the turkeys were on sale. Everybody would come to moms for Thanksgiving dinner. When I went back to school, I told my friends what we had for Thanksgiving dinner, since it was always during that same time or the day before or after. Oh my God! Waldorf salad, it's a salad and it's got raisins, walnuts, and apples. Uh! I really can't remember anything else - those are the two things.
>
> It was just mom who cooked. When they were growing up they were eating fat back, collard greens and hog maws. She knew we were not going to eat that, so she gave us chicken, hot dogs, tato chips. We ate a lot of vegetable soup and spaghetti. Mom cooked salmon croquets. She made things that had to stretch because she had six kids at home and uh when she fried chicken we only got one piece. Mama's motto was "I'm not trying to fill you up, I'm just trying to get something up in ya" and that's what I tell my children today. I'm not trying to fill you up.
>
> Yeah! I don't remember any. We were never in the kitchen with mom cause mom worked eleven to seven and so she'd sleep in between. She watched her soap operas during the day, but she'd have dinner done by the time we got home from school. Me and my sister would try to cook every night, we tried to make peanut butter cookies, but they ended up being peanut butter biscuits. It was awful, but my brother's would come home and eat 'em. We got the big cans of commodity peanut butter to make peanut butter cookies. I still can't get them. Mom never she never taught us how to cook. We made you know catsup sandwiches and sugar sandwiches, cereal sandwiches: a captain crunch sandwich. Sugar sandwiches are the bomb. You put sugar on the bread and eat it; my kids even do that. I don't allow my girls in the kitchen either and I know that's sad. I don't know I wasn't raised like that and I know that I should, but they'd just be in the way. They know how to make scrambled eggs and that's the only things my kids are gonna make. My son is twelve and he's just now flouring my chicken for me.

Lisa Harris discussed the cooking practices and interactions of her family and blended families during the holidays. Her account also indicated the placement of the males during the holidays.

> My grandmother was responsible for most of the cooking, but she really doesn't like a lot of people in the kitchen. How she did her greens was she put them in a basket, a trash basket and she soaked them six or seven times before actually cooking them. She'd put them from the basket into the sink and she took them back out again. That was the most popular thing with the family and the chitlins that she had cooked. She did her potato salad and her macaroni salad the night before any of the holidays because it would take some hours to do that. Um! She would get big blocks of cheese and she would cut them up, I mean it would be in a big bowl because she would use the little blocks for different foods. And I was the one to help her because sometimes it would take a long time for that. I told you about my aunt, how she liked to bake things.
>
> When my grandmother made greens, she would soak them several times and put salt in them to get the bugs out. She would buy thirty to forty pounds of greens, in the bundle. She still does that till this day. She cooks like she is she making food for a fraternity because the men in our family like chitlins and greens. But they don't like to help, but sure can come over and eat. She also likes to make sweets.

For Christmas, it was like Thanksgiving all over again. There were two dishes she made chocolate cherry cake and rice pudding. Again the greens and how she made them. Sometimes she would put the ham hocks in there. But she really didn't season, she seasoned it, but because she is a diabetic, not enough or not too much. She would let everybody season their own food. Sometimes it would be the bacon, the turkey bacon. Easter it was a really big breakfast and I told you that we would go on out to dinner at Golden Corrals, my favorite place to go (laugh). Sometimes my uncle would have a little drink in him and pick fun with the waitress at the Golden Corral. If she was good looking, my uncles would hit each other in the arm, but I'd say, "you will not get the time of day". This was all in having fun.

Back to Christmas, about them and they would be in the living room watching the football game or wherever games that was on. What were the drinks? Oh gosh! Gin or rum and coke, or something (ha. ha)! My aunts and my mom would be coming in; my grandmother doesn't like anyone in the kitchen – she would be arguing with them to get out of the kitchen. They would come in there tasting things with the spoons and stuff. Mostly they fixed each other's hair, that's another thing they would do. Lifetime would be on in the room in there; make a little music, they'd dance and pay me 25 cents to dance (laugh). They would make corners and stuff for me to dance. Let me see! My grandmother had eight kids and oh! Grandma had eight children, four were boys. Each of them has an average of eight kids a piece. My uncles, three of my uncles have many children and the children's mothers would be there. Many of their kids had different mothers (three baby mommas) and all of them would attend the family event, sometimes things got pretty awkward. Some of the women of the children would come over to show face and it was to see all the kids come together. The children's mothers would be there and sometimes there would be arguments. But Grandma had to throw them out sometimes. My Aunt's liked some of them, but now don't have so much of that on holidays.

Anna's family originally from Mississippi, included holiday rituals for Easter.

Our family holidays when we were growing up, was pretty exciting. We always had our family over, in-laws and we would um… like for instance one family holiday was Easter. We would traditionally dye eggs. But the types of foods that we ate Easter would be a ham that was our tradition. We have to have a ham, greens, mashed potatoes, corn and two or three different desserts. We would all pot luck and bring in different stuff. Devil eggs yup! That's a must; we had to have deviled eggs on Easter. We don't have to necessarily have deviled eggs on any other holiday, but we do have to have it on Easter. What else -then the desserts.

For Christmas we have to have turkey dressing, greens, macaroni and cheese, potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn bread, rolls and ten or twenty different desserts. We I would have pumpkin pies, potato pies, chocolate cake, yellow cake and bread pudding regularly— I mean …we just, we did it up.

Usually on Thanksgiving we are over to my Moms or my sisters. This last Thanksgiving we had it over at my sister's house and all of us joined together, give thanks to God and we say a family prayer before we eat. We say what we're thankful for and have the turkey dressing, greens, (similar to what we had at Christmas) corn and we would kind of feast on that for most of the day. Then we would clean up and put our desserts out on the table and get ready for desserts. We would have anywhere from a cheesecake to a pound cake, ice cream, whip cream, strawberry's. Um! We would just do it up real big for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Traditionally, every year that kids are downstairs and the ladies are sitting at the table, the kitchen table and the men are watching the game and fought- every single year and we hate it. Normally, we think we can stick in the movie, but they won't let us do it, so we don't watch T.V. we sit around the table and talk about them watching the game (all day long), every year...every year.

FOOD HABITS, PRACTICES AND PREPARATION OF SOUL FOOD: A SOURCE OF RACIAL/CULTURAL IDENTITY

In this chapter section, the direct food practices and habits pertaining to soul food as a context of cultural ethnic identity and the close family ties of black people are discussed. The chapter links the kinship, family ties, and the food practices of enslaved Black-Americans as mechanisms forming from necessity. As previously outlined in the previous chapters, the acculturation and amalgamate of European and African culture forged new ways and practices that are parts of the "black experience". The chapter concludes with discussion of family, food habits and cultural expressions in contemporary Black-America.

Black-American families have been long recognized for their strong family ties. While these ties have become weakened in our current society, its origins can be traced to slavery (1600s-1860s). Many slaves were forced to standby aimlessly and watch their sons, daughters, husbands and wives being sold off. But ''despite the frequent breakup of families by sale, Black-Americans managed to forge strong and durable family and kin ties within the institution of slavery'' (Mintz, 2007a). The lack of allocated food became germane in the forced interaction among slaves building stronger kinships and communal ties centered on the sharing of food. For Black-Americans, the institution of slavery, the centuries of strife and suffering, solidified family ties and extended kinships as bonds that held the slave communities together. As Deborah Gray White notes,

> this generation won't know Africa in the same way that their parents knew Africa.... The child also won't know freedom in the same way that a parent knew freedom... Because a child sees daily the whippings, the brutality of the system, sees their parents coming under the authority, coming under the rule of the whip of the overseer, even. So it's very difficult. But at the same time, I think parents teach children what it is to be about the slave community. And that's family. That's religion. And that's togetherness (Gray-White, 1985).

African culture, incorporated in American values and norms are essential to the construction of America and has been maintained in the lives of Black-Americans. The ''acculturation in the United States involved the mutual interaction between two cultures, with Europeans and Africans borrowing from each other'' (Blassingame, 1979, p. 20). Since racial

differences were imposed, it is reasonable to presume the formation of a distinctive culture for Black-Americans would stem from the fluidity of this exchange and present itself as an inevitable response, despite impending bias and displacement of such a notion.

From the moment of captivity, enslaved Africans were confronted with the difference of class, biological characteristics (color), religion etc. These distinctions were used to justify superiority of one group over another. Therefore, either by intent or consequence the formation of Black-American cultural identity was based on exclusion. Black-American culture and identity was epitomized by forced amalgamation, which resulted in a sort of racial/cultural hybrid. For this purpose, it has been easy for some to elude accepting Black-American culture as distinctive. Yet by its' very premise these notions are inaccurate. The justifications in lieu are not only false representations, but aid in maintaining the status quo. In the book, Reflecting Black: Black-American Cultural Criticism (1993), Michael Eric Dyson uses an interpretative framework to dispel early forms of black cultural criticism. In his preface, Dyson discusses the emergence of a unique racial identity that stemmed from slavery,

> eventually, however, the commonalities of black racial experience, which were fashioned under the rigorous and, in some instances, almost immediate decline of African identity in slavery, reciprocated the emergence of a distinct racial identity in American culture…. While clan, community and nation were central to African societies, only a cultural catastrophe the magnitude of chattel slavery could impose blacks an artificial and single racial identity (Dyson, 1993, p. xv).

For centuries Black-American distinctiveness was a by-product of racial separation. Being "black" in American society, made you an outside member of the dominant culture, a sort of interloper that was reified in a system of rigidity. The extreme blatant prejudice and institutionalization of racism was an unavoidable life experience, a constant reminder of lower stature and placement in society. But as stated above, it was from distinctiveness that Black-American culture emerged. The alienation of Black-Americans provided a sense of group collectivity and formed a consciousness in which unique characteristics were transformed into cultural expression. These forms of cultural expression, such as poetry, art, dance, language, songwriting etc., would convey messages of strife and racial difference. As with other forms of

cultural expression, food habits were also a unique source of expression attached to ethnic identity.

As with race, food traditions are culturally powerful representations of an ethnic group. Food is an unspoken identifier, symbolizing of sort of recognition, collectively associated to the ''black experience''. For Black-Americans food traditions are so powerful it transcends in-group class stratification by either knowledge or practice. Although frequently unrecognized, soul food brought the bourgeois and working class to a place of common, in an attempt to address the accusations that they were "acting white," the black middle class used their professed consumption of soul food to align themselves with the black lower class and their ethnic identity'' (Henderson, 2007, p. 94).

The transformation of southern food to ''soul food'' as the tradition was an intra-group phenomena. As an ethnic identifier, the preparation and consumption of soul food was a response to black assimilation of westernized values. If there was anything that ethnically united Black-Americans, rooted in tradition was their shared appreciation for ''good ole soul food''. Moreover, as Henderson postulates,

> In *EJ* the production and consumption of soul food as an ethnic identifier was used to inform black children from all socio-economic classes of their cultural identity. Although the food in *EJ* may not have reflected the food that some children ate on a daily basis, it was consistent with the traditional southern black food served on Sundays, holidays, and special events. It was also consistent with the discourse on soul food and black identity (Henderson, 2007, p. 94).[40]

Today, ''contemporary Black-American culture is radically complex and diverse, marked by an intriguing variety of intellectual reflections, artistic creations and social practices'' (Dyson, 1993, p. xiii). But following the traditions, there is food for every occasion, weddings, funerals, cook-outs, graduations and family reunions. While ''….the constitutive experiences of Black-American culture in monolithic terms'' are considered unreasonable generalizations, the in-group patterns of commonality must not go unrecognized (Dyson, 1993, p. xiii). If there is any

[40] In Henderson's article the term EJ is abbreviated for Ebony Jr.

practice from which Black-Americans can collectively associate, it is most certainly the food habits and consumption of soul food.

As part of the history and biography of Black-Americans, there is so much more to soul food than throwing a meal together. "Soul food is food for the soul" centered on a "focused interaction….of cognitive and visual attention, as in conversation, a board game, or a joint task sustained by a close face-to-face circle of contributors (Goffman, 1961, p. 14). Family gatherings as "….long standing groups from which the participants in the encounter may derive" that we can observe self-reflective actions (Ibid, 1961, p. 7). But "what has not always been noted about the soul-food experience is that those who provide it, in home or in restaurant, do so with an unmistakable inflection of psyche, conscious or unconscious" (Ulanov, 1999, p. 3).

As a ritualistic or daily practice, all of my participants, in some manner identified memories and knowledge of "soul food". As stated in a participant's response, "I was the only kid until I was 13 years old, so I was spoiled. Mom worked at the school board, but she was predominantly a stay at home parent. Well! Basically mom always cooked soul food" (Shanana Jones, 2006).

Although most of the traditional food practices still exist, it is very common that these practices, once every day have been replaced by more expedient measures. Since we live in a society where many things are based on fast moving production, time has become the essence for many Black-Americans. Soul food symbolizes the bittersweet memories of sorrow and triumph, serving as a quasi-reflective manifestation of the way kinship and ties were re-formed by the ancestors of Black-Americans. But for some Black women, it is an inflective or observed piece of their inner self. While the practice of soul food may vary it is still pervasive in the Black culture today.

SOUTHERN vs. SOUL FOOD

The previous chapters have discussed the symbolic nature of food habits in Black-American culture, along with linkages to identity. The chapter focuses on the origins of ''soul food'' as ''in-group traditions'' as a sole contribution of Black-American culture. While Black-American cooking habits were diffused into the construction of mainstream southern traditions, it also serves as a veneer of fallacy that masks ''soul food'' as not being distinctive and unique to ''Black Americans''. While the distinctive difference between southern and soul food is radically complex, it is my contention that ''soul food'' is a derivative or a continuum of southern food, but *it is not southern food.*

The focal part of the chapter discusses the socio-cultural amalgamation of food habits, preparation and cooking traditions of enslaved woman of African descent. The goal of this chapter is to clarify the differences between soul and southern food, also dispelling any ideological misrepresentations that soul food is not unique to Black-American culture. Participant narratives provide empirical support, elaborating on the distinct differences between soul and southern foods. This is important because ''food preparation and dietary practices have rarely been studied by sociologists, although they hold great potential for an understanding of gendered social relations, knowledge construction, and cultural identity in communities'' (Beoku-Betts, 1995, p. 535).

Black–American cuisine or ''soul food'' was heavily influenced by native African traditions and is a byproduct of the cooking practices inspired by black slave experience. As discussed in the previous chapter, this form of soul-style cooking *began in Africa.* ''The roots of the diversity of Black-American cuisine may be traced back to 1619, when the first African slaves were sold in the New World'' (Garces & Sutherland, 2008, p. 1). On the southern plantations, the cooking practices of enslaved women gave impetus to what would later emerge as the cultural cooking associated to Black-Americans.

As in many African societies, Black-American women were predominantly responsible for the cooking and preparing of meals on the plantation. "In addition, to the usual work load, the women had to cook for their families, put the children to bed, and often spin, weave and sew well into the night" (Genovese, [1930, 1976] 1974, p. 495). " Harrison Beckett of Texas grimly recalled his mother coming in exhausted from the fields and having to cook for her husband and children: "Lots of times she's so tired she go to bed without eatin' nothin' herself" (Ibid, [1930, 1976] 1974, p. 495).

Under the enslavement system, food preparations of Black-Americans were not just mere dishes of food for sustenance, but ritualistic practices filled with displays of love and affection. Symbolically "food is not just for the satisfying of one's hunger, but is an aspect of bringing people together for fellowship, discussion, and the sharing of experiences ….the pastoral nature of food that is evident is inviting, sharing and celebrating (Toppin, 2006, p. 55 & 56).As referenced in the book, *A Picture of Freedom: The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl,*

> Our day starts when the roosters crow….We fix three meals every day—take the food up to the Big House and serve it. Miz Lilly likes her food served on time. First meal is on the table at 8 o'clock. Midday meal is served up at noon. Dinner is at 6:30 o'clock. Then we clean up and get ready for the next day (McKissack, 1997, p. 16).[41]

Since "food played a role in slave culture beyond mere sustenance. It had immense cultural and ideological significance: the choice of particular foods and particular means of preparation involved issues of crucial importance to slaves' sense of identity" (Joyner, 1984, p. 106). "So it was, that when slaves ate or made music, they were best able to express themselves, to reveal their souls" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 14). Food practices as

> ….one of the inherited practices of our forerunners is that of "soul food." This practice has been maintained. This was and still is an important strategy employed to combat racism and classism, and, as such, has become a method of support, encouragement and healing (Toppin, 2006, p. 45).

The origins of soul food, rooted in American slavery can be traced to the South. At the hull of the enslavement era "….four million black people lived in bondage in the United States,

[41] McKissack's book is a fictitious novel, but the content simulates the real life events of slaves on the plantation.

and almost all of them were in the Southern states" (Egerton, [1987] 1993, p. 15). For the "…. Black-American slaves, particularly those located in the Deep South, had retained many of the eating habits of their African ancestors"(Ferguson, 1992, p. 97). For those living in bondage learning unique ways of stretching food rations were essential mechanisms of survival. Slaves learned to stretch the meager weekly rations of corn meal, salt pork, bacon, fruits, molasses, vegetables and the meat scraps into good tasting meals. "They used the scraps of meat their masters would not eat—such as the small intestines (chitterlings) or thighs (hocks)" and "….stretched their meals by preparing starchy foods, like yams, corn, or rice, as they did in Africa" (Boyle, 2003, p. 48). Using whatever they could find, recipes were adapted to local ingredients of access. In this, "….soul food was defined as traditional foods consumed by blacks who had migrated from or still resided in the South (Henderson, 2007, p. 83).Slaves had to be resourceful and indeed they were. As John Egerton's states in his book, Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History,

> In the most desolate in hopeless of circumstances, blacks caught in the grip of slavery often exhibited uncommon wisdom, duty, strength, and creativity. The kitchen was one of the few places where their imagination and skill could have free rein and full expression, and there they often excelled. From the elegant breads and meats and sweets of plantation cookery to the inventive genius of Creole cuisine, from the beaten biscuits to bouillabaisse, their legacy of culinary excellence is all the more impressive, considering the extremely adverse conditions under which it was compiled (Egerton, 1993, p. 15).

Since many slave cooks were highly skilled in combining African cooking techniques with locally harvested foods, they merged African traditions into their own soul food style combining it with the cuisine of their masters. Yet many of the traditional foods found in Africa were ultimately replaced with local products.

> The fresh vegetables found in Africa were replaced by the throwaway foods from the plantation house. Their vegetables were the tops of turnips and beets and dandelions. Soon they were cooking with new types of greens: collards, kale, cress, mustard and pokeweed. With a lot of lard for flavor from the slaughtered hog and cracklin from its skin, they made a filling meal (T.M. & © Fox, 2008, p. 1).

During the colonial antebellum period, southern cuisine and hospitality with all grandeur and elegance reached its apex. Enslaved women often prepared traditional meals with scraps provided from weekly slave rations. As a result, "….southern-style cooking of Black Americans"

was built out of necessity and many of ''the recipes and cooking techniques was generally handed down orally'' a method similarly used in African traditions (Harrell, 2006, p. 1). On the plantation slaves prepared meals for themselves, but ''this was no less true of the foods they prepared for themselves and their white masters' tables'' (Shiflett, 2004, p. 58)."These same cooks passed this tradition down not only to their descendants, but also to the descendants of their Anglo-American owners and neighbors'' (Ibid, 2004, p. 58). ''The black cook, like her West African ancestors, used six basic cooking techniques: boiling in water, steaming in leaves, roasting in the fire, baking in the ashes; toasting beside the fire; and frying in deep oil'' (Mitchell, 1998, p. 14).

These food dishes were an amalgam of Native-American, African and European influence. In specific, Southern and American cookery stem from the foods of the Powhatan tribe and the British. But much of what is considered southern black food was built on the backs of slave labor. While widely unrecognized, ''Southern eating and cooking habits were specifically influenced by Black-American slaves, who did the majority of cooking on the old southern plantations'' (Shiflett, 2004, p. 44).

Certainly, slaves demonstrated their creativity in various ways, ''….but it was the black cook, when she cooked for her white owners, who had the raw materials and time to be supremely creative'' (Mitchell, 1998, p. 14). In fact, ''slave cooks not only maintained cultural continuity with West African cuisine but also adapted the African tradition creatively to the necessities and opportunities of a new culinary environment'' (Joyner, 1984, p. 106). In essence, the ''Black-American, though their own strength of will, adapted what they found in their new environments and maintained, even if in small ways, many of their ancestors' African Cultural traditions'' (Shiflett, 2004, p. 58). In mastering these cooking techniques,

> The Afro-American cook had certain culinary tendencies: the abundant use of leafy green vegetables; the utilization of okra, or nuts and seeds, as thickeners; the addition of peppery/spicy hot sauces; the use of smoked meat for flavoring; the preparation of various kinds of fritters; and the creation of many one-pot dishes composed primarily of rice with "enhancements
> (Harris, 1995, pp. 21-22 & Mitchell, 1998, p.14).

Traditionally soul food cuisine "was cooked and seasoned with pork products, and fried dishes were usually cooked in lard, because they had to use what was available at the time'' to supplement the lack of quantity and the poor quality of food provided(Harrell, 2006, p. 1). ''The smell of sweet potatoes, corn, yams, pork, cabbage, cowpeas, and hoecakes cooking in big black pots over open fires pervaded southern plantations'' (Boyle, 2003, p. 48).According to Schenone,

> For their own families inside the slave quarters, slave women made simpler meals, using the corn and pork of slave rations combined with their garden vegetables (gardens tended at night after long day shifts or on Sundays) and whatever hunted, gathered or fished items they could manage on their free time. Hoecake, chitterlings, and greens cooked and pig's feet represented the memories of the lost continent combined with the realities of bondage. Hundreds of years later during the political 1960s and 1970s, this food would be renamed "soul food," a political term for the food of the diaspora, raised up as a symbol of the Black-American experience (Schenone, 2003, p. 79).

Moreover, ''....most well- to-do- families…had Black-American cooks. These wealthy people soon found themselves eating the same foods as their cooks' families'' (Ibid, 2003, p. 48). As these appetizing dishes made for the slave masters grew in popularity slave cuisine, later referred to as soul food, became commonly expressed as just southern cuisine.

Additionally, 'the poorer whites, or po' white trash as they were called, who either owned no slaves or worked alongside them on small farms, also began to adopt soul dishes (Ferguson, 1989, p. x). While it is true that, ''poor whites and blacks in the South ate many of the same dishes, but styles of preparation sometimes varied. African American soul food generally tends to be spicier than Anglo-American cuisine'' (Harrell, 2006, p. 1). Slave food, thus ''soul food'' fell under the guise of southern food. In many cases, the history of Black-Americans in the South had great impact on the perceived overlap between soul food and southern cuisine. The emergence of slave food, thus ''soul food'' fell under the same guise as southern food. In this,

> …southern cooking took on new meaning. Fried chicken began to appear on the tables, sweet potatoes (which had replaced the African yam) sat next to the boiled white potato. Regional foods like apples, peaches and berries, nuts and grains, soon became puddings and pies(T.M. & ©Fox, 2008, p. 1).

In many cases the overlap between southern cuisine and soul food became ambiguous, which may have in part, raised the notion that ''soul food'' was and is not unique to Black culture.

Adding more complexity to the issue, "....each state had its own cultural influences, the African dishes began to take on the qualities from that region" (T.M. & ©Fox, 2008, p. 2). The French and Spanish influence introduced saucy dishes, jambalayas, gumbo and bisques. While the cultural blending of Africans living alongside Native Americans produced gumbo (okra), ground green sassafras used by Choctaw Indians as spice, also recognized among Louisiana slaves as gumbo file.

As indicated by the Gullahs' cooking practices, which resemble West African tradition, the maintenance of cultural boundaries are based on the distinctive features in preparation style and seasoning.

> One way in which Gullah women try to control cultural boundaries in their way of cooking these foods, as distinct from other southern practices, is to assert that although similar foods are eaten by others in the South, their style of preparation and the type of seasonings they use are different. Just as West African cooking is characteristically well seasoned with salt, pepper, onions, garlic, and smoked meat and fish, Gullah food is flavored with a combination of seasonings such as onions, salt, and pepper, as well as fresh and smoked meats such as bacon, pigs' feet, salt pork, and (increasingly) smoked turkey wings (to reduce fat content) (Beoku-Betts, 1995, p. 547).

Similarly, distinctions must be made on the differences between soul food and southern cuisine, despite its similarities. Unlike southern food, soul food cuisine is an aggregate of a *multi-acculturation* and while it has been modified it is still a unique synthesis.[42] "Soul food cuisine uses a large variety of dishes and ingredients, some unique, some shared with other cuisines. But Soul Food stand uniquely on its own"(Harrell, 2006, p. 1). Underlying, most of the comments and slants on soul food, whether politically or economically driven there has been little room to challenge its' origins. As the country cooking of black slaves,

> in its culinary incarnation, "soul food" was associated with a shared history of oppression and inculcated, by some, with cultural pride. Soul food was eaten by the bondsmen. It was also the food former slaves incorporated into their diet after emancipation. Therefore, during the 1960s, middle-class blacks used their reported consumption of soul food to distance themselves from the values of the white middle class, to define themselves ethnically, and to align themselves with lower-class blacks. Irrespective of political affiliation or social class, the definition of "blackness," or "soul," became part of everyday discourse in the black community (Henderson, 2007, p. 94).

[42]The term multi-acculturation is referred to as the blend of various cultures.

Some contemporary writers view soul food as a converted terminology, politically driven by the movements of 1960s and 1970s (Witt, 1999; Schenone, 2003; Graces & Sutherland, 2008; Opie, 2008; Yellowseed, 2007). The "…notion of soul food as an African American cuisine emerged in the 1960s", there is considerable controversy over what types of foods are included (Yellowseed, 2007, p. 1). The radical changes and shifts in Black-American thinking in the 1960s, led to a resurgence of establishing distinctions in food, amongst many other things unique to Black culture. While one could argue the term "soul food" as politically driven, the distinction was certainly not a new phenomenon.

In the 1962 essay, "Soul Food" cultural critic Amiri Baraka responds to a writer's article in *Esquire,* which claimed Blacks had no language or cuisine. Baraka outlines items considered soul food, such as fried porgies, potlicker, turnips, watermelon, black-eyed peas, grits, okra, chitterlings (more commonly called chitlins), Hoppin' John (Black-eyed peas and rice) and hushpuppies. Foods that came North with those Black-Americans migrating from the South, were considered unfit for the mainstream cultures consumption. "Collards and turnips and kale and mustards were not fit for anybody but the woogies. So they found a way to make them taste like something somebody would want to freeze and sell to a Negro going to Harvard as exotic European spinach" (Jones, 1966, p. 102). In response he states,

> And this to me is the deepest stroke, the unkindest cut, of oppression, especially as it has distorted Black Americans. America, where the suppliant, far from rebelling or even disagreeing with the forces that have caused him to suffer, readily backs them up and finally tries to become an honorary oppressor himself. No language? No characteristic food? Oh, man, come on (Jones, 1966, p. 101).

Garces & Sutherland find "…southern food is typically known as "soul food," many African Americans contend that soul food consists of Black-American recipes that have been passed down from generation to generation, just like other Black-American rituals" (Garces & Sutherland, 2008, p. 2).

> Prior to the 1960s, this distinctive fare had only been defined regionally, as "southern," "plantation," and "Creole" foods. During the sixties, however, these foods gained an explicitly cultural flavor and soul food became a popular signifier of blackness, like hairstyles, fashion and music. Indeed, a wide spectrum of folks, many of whom disagreed on political issues, could come together at the soul food table and grease (Ibid, 2007).

Soul food as a Black-American foodways is an amalgamation of Central/West African socio-cultural influences that have been adapted by Black-Americans in response to the conditions of slavery. Soul food dishes made with inexpensive ingredients are a reminder of their rural roots and African heritage (Opie, 2008). Soul food habits must be kept in context of the history, biography and division of labor when considering the slave food culture and the impact it has had on American society. Like it or not, "it is here—in the kitchens presided over by Black-American women—that African traditions first influenced American food" (Boyle, 2003, p. 48). The rigidity of categorizing soul food as strictly southern is a continued perpetuation of the racist ideologies and writings of that time period. We must remain cognizant that while soul food may be considered southern, southern food is not necessarily soul food.

PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOUL FOOD AND SOUTHERN CUISINE

In the questionnaire, the perplexing similarities and differences between southern cuisine and soul food were addressed to derive insights. Participants were asked a several questions pertaining to soul food habits, practices and preparation. Each were asked to (1) define the characteristics of soul food, (2) discuss whether soul food be recognized, (3) discuss any differences between soul/southern food, (4) was the content of soul food high in fat, (5) were additives necessary for food to taste good, (6) discuss whether Caucasians eat similarly to Black-Americans and, (7) to provide some items considered as soul food. The list of items considered as soul food were grouped and placed into the columned chart below with one side illustrating the frequency in the item selected. The participant's responses illustrated considerable commonalities and were equally descriptive in nature. This commonality was viewed across the interviews, but also supported the contents written in the above subsection. Their detailed responses integrated and summarized the overall data.

In describing soul food, some of the participants used the history of enslavement as a context for their statements, while others centered their comments on family interaction. The historical references focused on the slave rations provided and how cooking Black-American cooking practices emerged from the conditions of this era. According to Ume No,

> I wouldn't say soul food is comfort food, because I have heard it try to be explained that way, because any food could be comfort food. But soul food is unique to African Americans, Black (whatever you want to call us) and it's the way it is prepared. Soul food I would imagine those things our parents, grandparents cooked because that is all we had—was the leftovers from the slaughtering of the pig. That's where we get our chitterlings. Being able to farm mustard greens or pork, so those things that was indigenous to our culture and the way we prepare it makes it soul food.

Shanequa Washington stated,

> Back in the day that's all you had, that's all you got was the scraps, so you had to eat it. You knew how to mix it with whatever, to make it taste good. That's all you were gonna get is the scraps. You know mama got slaves in our family, so I guess that just trickled down from there. I guess some people would say it's the love that you put into it to prepare it—to me it just started out as the scraps and it just trickled down with tradition.

Lydia Comet's sentiments on soul food were argued within the "black experience".

> There are just certain things that I associate with being soul food. I see the word SOUL; I associate that with the Black experience. Just like Jewish people have those wafers for Passover, Polish people have uum, I can't think of them now. But every ethnic group has some food that you always expect to see. You know, Italians don't call it sauce, they call it gravy.
>
> Soul food I associate with the black experience. Whereas, southern food, I associate with kind of a regional deal. Since my family is from the Northeast, what they were eating was soul food. My mom's people were several generations from the South, and my dad's people- it was his grandma Marie's mom migrated to the North with her husband. Both her and her husband both in migrated when they were like teenagers.

Swirl Pudding described soul food as,

> Soul food when I think of it- is more a gathering-its family, people getting together that is the basis and the food, it's the way it is cooked-its kinda cooked with love and its cooked with lots of oils and fats. Because everything, I was about to say chitlins quite a few times because they throw down on those chitins, hog maws, the fried chicken has you know, its fried chicken its seasoned to the max, ham, the sweet potato pies, the greens oh man with the ham hocks in them, the potato salad with the onions, pickled relish and then eggs, and corn on the cob with butter running over top of it. Uum! Girl don't get me started (ha, ha).

For Laurie Jones,

> Soul food comes from the heart. It is cooking from your emotions. If your emotions are to please your family and you are cooking for their tastes and what they are accustomed to. You are also cooking for not only the family in front of you but from you remember. You are incorporating all that, so that's with soul food there is not a lot of measuring or a lot of this, it's all how you feel with it. You are trying to bring out the best of you in that food.

In describing soul food, Sister Bertha Jones stated,

> Soul food is common food like greens, beans, rabbit, squirrel and chicken. But it is highly spiced and seasoned to a taste that meets our palate. I think that's why we call it soul food because we put more into it and a lot of love goes into our cooking too. That's another reason why we call it soul food, if you use a recipe and it doesn't look just right then you throw in another pinch of this or another pinch of that-fluff it up a little bit. I think that's why they call it soul food, because you go above and beyond the traditional way of cooking.

Other participants referenced soul food in the context of a cultural tradition that was handed from generation to generation. In general, clear distinctions were made that soul food were particularly consumed by Black-Americans. Tina James described soul food as,

> I guess I would define it with the original definition as the certain types of foods that provided sustenance to particularly black folks. When they cooked they learned how to make do with left over parts and stuff that other people didn't want. That's kind of how some of the stuff that is eaten by that group and what people ` refer to as soul food. That's kind of the origins, cooking you're your heart and soul, that's kind of how I see it.

Table 1: Responses to Recognizing "Soul Food"

Can you recognize "soul food" when you see it?	
Agree	14
Disagree	
Don't Know	1

The table above shows majority of the participants felt they were able to recognize soul food when observed. When participants were asked whether soul food could be recognized, several provided responses detailing specific characteristics. For Ume No,

> Well it's the way it is prepared. When we get together, the Black segment has social interaction, whether it be a party or just a day at a picnic you are gonna see typical foods, which is going to be, spaghetti, with fried chicken or cornbread. You are gonna see those greens with ham hocks. You are gonna see chicken wings as opposed to a breast or a back. You will see the legs because of the kids that is universal. You are gonna see that fried fish, whether its catfish. I see black folks going more toward the catfish, but you are gonna see that fish and you are gonna see that hot sauce and the bread and the mustard, Coca-Cola or that nice old beer. There are things that are just the basics, you might find some off the wall stuff—we don't have too many off the wall stuff (laugh). But you are gonna find some off the wall stuff-maybe like spinach or some canned corn (something like that). You are gonna find your okra and your corn and your tomatoes all together, so you are just gonna see that. We are not into no lima beans or peas, so you just recognize it; that's the way I recognize it.

Swirl Pudding recognized soul food,

> By where it is and how it looks. When you go into a gathering and you see just one item, then this next item, the sweet potatoes, fried chicken, the cornbread, the turkey, the chitlins, pig feet it all registers and the people that are behind it, it all registers. You can have a ham, but that don't make it, when you got that ham and those other ingredient going with it and that ham is dressed (ha, ha) got that brown sugar on it, that pineapple, cherry they are the reminders (ha, ha, ha). We would get together and get our soul food dinners on Saturdays. Everyone would bring a dish. We would have candied yams, turkey, ham, baked beans, sausage, bacon, pig feet, pig ears the whole nine yards. We had to have that at least once a week.

Laurie Jones stated,

> I know by the way it is prepared by the cook, served by and he or she is happily telling you what all they did with it (laugh) and you are seeing probably for the greens on the table you will see the peppered seasoning and the vinegar and peppered seasoning, and you will see the Tabasco sauce and you will see the (oh! goodness gracious) the soul food salt out. It's just seeing things that are flavorful, because even though there are things on the table you really don't need it because it is already in the cooking. Uum, you'll see the vegetables vibrant simmering in their own juices, food prepared with their own ingredients a lot because that's how we had to do it back in the day, especially in the latter days, you had to pretty much just do it with what you had. Uum, very battery, you will see the best of the ingredients probably used cause again if you are cooking with your heart and your soul you wanting to present the best to everybody, so that's what I see in soul food. Things are not dried out when you bite into it, you go uum! You say you put your foot in this and then you have had soul food. .

Sister Bertha Jones discussed the clear distinctions to identity soul food. She stated,

> Soul food is usually cooked with a distinction that just stands out. If you have candied yams, those candied yams are cooked in a syrup. They are not cooked in clear water. They are not stemmed, they are in a syrup. If you have fried chicken, that fried chicken is golden brown and it is crunchy. It even got little, little come and get me look on it. The aroma –when you cook greens and you cook them soul way, even though I do not use a lot of meat and stuff now, but when you mix them greens just right they have a smell to die for. So yeah! There is a difference. They are cooked down, simmered and they are not standing in water or lying on the plate looking like they need some help. Broccoli and Brussels sprouts really look like they need help when you steam them.

Grace Ellen's rendition of soul food is,

> When it looks like Sunday dinner sitting on the table by Big Momma. Soul food would like Sunday dinner, when my mouth starts watering. Most of time when black people cook it is mostly soul food, unless they are with a white man and perceive themselves as being white. The old people really do that soul food. They can pass it down, but nobody can really cook like them, like mom and grandma.

Table 2: The Difference between Soul Food and Southern Food

Is there a difference between soul food and southern food?	
Yes	11
No	
Don't Know	4

As indicated in Table 2, several of the participants, (73.3%) believed that there were differences between soul food and southern cuisine. In determining the difference between soul food and southern cuisine, cultural boundaries were also drawn by the participants. Similar to the Gullah women, participants indicated the differences between the two were in the seasoning, cooking style and preparation of the food. A more descriptive account of these differences was as followed. Laurie Jones stated the distinction as

> Southern food is mostly fried and overcooked. That's why I particularly stayed away from meats when I was naming soul food because a lot of people think soul food just means fried chicken and stuff. I mean soul food could be smothered pork chops and that's not fried at all. It could be boiled meat, it could be grilled meat, but again it is just how you season it, how you flavor it see the difference, whereas, southern food is mostly just fried.

Beyonce Hinton viewed the difference between soul food and southern cuisine was the texture in preparation style and taste. Soul food is,

> Well-seasoned uh it's mostly fatty fats, greasy heavy. It's heavy on the stomach (subject laughs). It just your soul put into it when you are cooking – that's just what soul food is. Southern food is not as greasy or heavy. Southern food is just I don't know. It doesn't have that texture of fat. I don't think they cook with too much fat…I don't know. Southern food – soul food, there is a difference that's all I would say. The difference is texture, aroma, it's not heavy like soul food is.

Shanana Jones stated,

> Soul food is basically like the traditions that African-Americans carry from one generation to the next generation. It's the meats, seasonings and tradition that African American people carry. Southern food is usually cooked different than ours. Southern I would say is like a Caucasian type thing from down South. How they cook their meats and use their seasonings is probably different than ours. Soul food is a tradition, the seasonings and how it's cooked is carried from one generation to the next and also it's the taste of the food.

For Swirl Pudding the difference was in

> The seasoning! Uum! Southern food has a different blend of seasoning. I guess kind of like Emeril has that essence of Emeril. They may be using thyme, those dry seasonings. With soul food you get all the seasoning you want out of a ham hock. A ham hock is put in greens, it's put in beans and basically salt and pepper. Yeah! and Southern food, they get a little far-fetched in their eating their crawfish. They eat more sea food and we can too in the Midwest, but it's not as prevalent as it would be Southern, and I am thinking southern as Mississippi, Alabama, and the Carolinas that area.
>
> Soul food has a different taste. Kinda, I don't know what the word is- but it's not the same because it has to do with people, the gathering. Southern fried chicken just don't have taste the same, when one of those grannies throw it down and season it just that way or any of it, it's just different. And hot sauce that another thing, shoot that goes with the soul food, got to have that bottle of hot sauce (ha, ha, ha). I now I am not one for it, but I know it's' got to be there.

For Tina James, the difference in the soul/southern food cooking traditions was subtle. Her narrative details some of the core problems in distinguishing differences between the two food cuisines. Despite the overlapping similarities, she perceived the ingredients and preparation techniques were distinctly different.

> A lot of times, some of the origins are southern cooking because black folks were doing the cooking, so you see like the seasonings, use of okra and that kind of things. So, some things are very similar, but you know if you go down South and go to a southern restaurant you will see many Black people in there as you will see as many whites eating it. I think that the preparation may vary a little bit. You know things have gotten more sophisticated with this Southern living with magazines, recipes in there to try to take some of the fat out. Basically some of the things considered southern food is also some of the same dishes as soul food, but the ingredients are different. I think it makes sense to me, because the folks originally cooking the stuff like fried chicken and those kinds of things where the poor blacks, that's the way I see it.

The remaining participants that were unsure as to whether soul/southern food had a difference expressed a limited experience with southern cuisine. For example, "I haven't had the opportunity to eat a lot of southern food. The stuffing was tasty, but didn't look like ours" (Sister Bertha Jones, 2005).

FAT CONTENT AND ADDITIVES: In the tables below indicates the participant's perceptions on whether soul food is high in fat and whether additives were necessary for food to taste good. An overwhelming majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed with these sentiments.

Table 3: Study Participants Perceptions of Fat Content in Soul Food

"Soul food" is very high in fat?	
Agree	13
Disagree	
Don't Know	2

Table 4: Perceptions on Food Additives

Do you feel adding butter, smoked turkey wings, oil, ham hocks or vegetables are necessary for food to taste good?	
Strongly Agree	14
Agree	
Disagree	1
Strongly Disagree	
Don't Know	

As indicated in the table below, the question on similarities in eating practices brought about the most blatant disagreement on any similarity in White and Black-American eating practices. Some of the descriptions were filled with passion while others used pejoratives illustrating this question as a farce. Swirl Pudding states,

> Well-being that I have being that I got Caucasians in my family, it served different than those that have been there for years and those new ones when you are eating. Like my son, he goes with a Caucasian, they eat differently, their spaghetti and pasta the way that they cook it is sauces, may not have two pounds of hamburger in it or something like that. They may have just sauce or just some macaroni and cheese and meat-that's it. I am like boy! And he comes home to eat when he wants a real meal.

> They tend to eat; they don't season their stuff very well! They tend to eat lots of salads. A lot of them are more conscious of their weight or whatever. But a lot of them eat pasta, rice or pasta and that's a meal. Macaroni and cheese that's a meal, to me that's not a meal- that's side dish and they really don't season their food and prepare it the way that we prepare it. They don't but extra butter, fat back or stuff in their greens. Most white folks that I have been around, I have never really seen them cook a pot of green and put bacon or stuff like that in it. They may have it in the salad, but as far as cooking it uh, uh. I know because I know quite a few, I work with one, she does the box thing. I have cooked pork chops for her and smothered them in gravy or salmon crockets or did stuff like that for her. When I cook at work, they sit down and eat it, they love it. I showed her how to make spaghetti with a lot of meat in it and seasoning, mushrooms and different stuff like that, with the garlic bread and the butter.

According to Shanequa Washington differences were,

> Because they're a whole different breed ok! When I say that its' because I know white girls tend to be more into their looks. They tend to wanna be more that societal notion of beauty, that little bitty skinny thing, so they're eating salads without dressing, which I do, but not because I wanna lose weight, because I don't like dressing. You know like the girls I work with they don't put butter and stuff in their green beans, they don't do that you know "oh no, that's too much fat". Ya know black girls we're supposed to have some pounds up on us, some little curves, so we gonna eat whatever tastes good.

Lydia Comets expressed her sentiments of as, "Soul food I associate with the black experience. Whereas, southern food, I associate with kind of a regional deal. Since my family is from the Northeast, what they were eating was soul food (Comets, 2005).

Table 5: Similarities between Black-American/Caucasian Eating Patterns

Do you feel Caucasians eat in a similar fashion as Black-Americans?	
Agree	
Disagree	14
Don't Know	
Other	1

Table 6: Participant Perceptions and Frequency on Items Considered "Soul Food"

List some things you consider "soul food"	
Greens	15
Ham	1
Sweet Potato Pie	5
Chitterlings	8
Catfish	1
Ham hocks	3
Fried Chicken	5
Beans	1
Pig Feet	2
Pig Snout	1
Cabbage w/ meat	1
Black-eyed Peas	2
Stuffing/Dressing	2
Cornbread	6
Red Beans	1
Macaroni & Cheese	7
Neck bones	2
Potato Salad	2
Rabbit & Gravy	1
Hog Head Cheese	1
Banana Pudding	1
Apple Pie	1
Pumpkin Pie	1
Candied Yams	2
Red Beans/Rice/Sausage	1
Ox Tails	1
Short Ribs	1
Ham on Bone	2

As stated previously, the information in Table 6 provides a summation of the participant's responses on items that were classified as soul food. In response to whether others from different cultures eat the similarly itemed foods, is emphasized that the food preparation, seasoning and taste would not equivalent to that of Black-Americans. Of the participant responses (100%), indicated that greens (meaning collards, kale and mustard) were a food item predominantly prepared as a soul food dish. This was followed by chitterlings, cornbread and macaroni and cheese. All other items varied in responses based on age and geographical exposure to certain food items.

In summation, of the (15) participants interviewed, (97%) suggested soul food was high in fat. The narratives also indicated that several of the participants were health conscious, yet majority (98.5%) still believed that some type of additive must be included for food to taste good. Almost all, (98.5%) of the participants were able to recognize soul food when observed and only one stated she was not sure. The responses provided on the differences between soul and southern varied, several of the participants (73.3%), believed that there were distinguishable differences in the cooking practices, seasoning and style of the food. Of the remaining (26.6%), with the response "did not know", most explained their selection as having a lack of exposure to southern cuisine.

Among the most controversially stated comments, pertained to whether Caucasians and Black-Americans eat similar foods. According to the responses, all of the participants (100%), believed Caucasians did not consume the same types of food dishes customary to Black-Americans.[43] Ironically, there were two aspects in this that are important to mention, (1) the participant responses in this study crossed education and class classifications; (2) were in total opposition to the perceptions of Caucasian-Americans, which was information that I became privy to in the construction of this project.

[43] Participants reference to preparation include how the ingredients are used, (1) organization of the task, (2) manner in which ingredients are prepared, chopped, sliced, diced, (3) the sequence in which the ingredients are included, (4) and cooking time.

Table 7: Participant Responses on "Soul Food"

Name/ Survey #	S.F. High in Fat	Additives to Taste Good	Recognize S.F.	Difference Soul/Southern Food	Caucasians same as Black Amer.	List of Food
Sasha Jones #1	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	Black Eyed Peas Collard/Turnip Greens Sweet Potato Pie Stuffing/Dressing Cornbread Red Beans Fried Chicken Macaroni &Cheese Potato Salad Chitterlings Rabbit & Gravy Hog Head Cheese Banana Pudding Ham Hocks Neck Bones Pumpkin Pie Apple Pie Oxtails Short Ribs Candied Yams Ham w/ Bone Pig Feet Red Beans & Rice/Sausage Country Ham
Shanequa Washington #2	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Don't Know	Disagree	
Shanana Jones #3	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	
Anna Louis #4	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	
Tina Davis #5	Agree	Agree	Yes	Don't Know	Disagree	
Lisa Harris #6	Agree	Agree	Yes	Don't Know	Disagree	
Ume No #7	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	
Laurie Jones #8	Agree	Disagree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	
Swirl Pudding #9	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	
Bertha Jones #10	Agree	Agree	Yes	Don't Know	Disagree	
Rosemary Spice #11	Don't Know	Agree	Don't Know	Yes	Disagree	
Tina James #12	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	
Beyonce Hinton #13	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	
Lydia Comet #14	Don't Know	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree/ Other	
Ellen Grace #15	Agree	Strongly Agree	Yes	Yes	Disagree	

Table 7: Illustrates responses that have evolved into the foods identified as soul food. This list does not include wild game, which was once the most available and affordable food source for poor Black-Americans.

I HAVE SOUL: SOUL SISTER AND BROTHERS
THE RISE OF A BLACK MOVEMENT

In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement brought the plight of Black-Americans to the forefront of the nation. In America, this was a time of great upheaval; people from both sides of the racial divide challenged the established system at its core. "The Vietnam War was the longest military conflict in U.S. history"(Vietnam War, 2007, p. 1). But by 1968, the Vietnam War had reached its pinnacle and the nation was divided on the conduct and claims justifying U.S. presence. "With the loss of 58,000 American soldiers, countercultures sprang up in opposition to sine qua non of the war" (Ibid, 2007, p. 1).

For Black-Americans, the past two decades had sparked some of the most prominent outspoken leaders that have yet to be seen again. On all fronts, it was a period of change and with Black leaders confronting injustices in the political fabric of America; the establishment was forced to pay attention. Groups from both sides of the racial divide outspokenly challenged the nation's status quo. Many Caucasians were angered by the direction of the U.S. and became sympathizers of the Black cause. Some of which had developed a conscious over the grave injustice and blatant discriminatory practices in which Black-Americans had endured. For Black-Americans, sharp rebuttals to the history of U.S. oppression were delivered by some of the most powerful spokespeople of the time. [44]

After centuries of living in the shadows of racist interpretation, Black-Americans sort to redefine the construction of "Blackness". For the first time in the history of America, Black people were aimed toward a racial definition that would be group determined. Until this point, the term "black" was a stigma that carried a negative connotation. But writers of this time gave quite a bit of attention to the usage of this term, focusing especially on the negative implications of this terminology for Black-Americans.

[44]To mention a few, the messages of Stokley Carmichael, Black Panther Movement, Malcolm X, The Nation of Islam, Martin Luther King, Southern Christian Leadership Conference & The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Medgar Evers, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, Theodore Roosevelt Mason Howard, The Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) and Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

The decades of the 1950s-60s brought about sentiments of Black pride. Commonly, phrases like, ''I'm Black and I'm proud'' became slogans for Afrocentric sentiments. Soul brother or soul sisters were terminologies of respect, an endearing form of recognition used in addressing others of the same racial classification. For many, this time period sagaciously set an undertone of self-awareness, a sort of sentimentalism that promoted the natural appearance of Black-Americans. It was acceptable, if not expected that one did little to nothing in altering their natural appearance. So many retained the natural texture of their hair, wearing Afros and leaving behind the processed straightening that was once prominent. One of the symbols of this time period was a (black) Afro-pick, with a closed fist at the end. Both my mother and father carried one of them.

Within the Black community, the ideologues embraced the notion that unpretentious appearances and mannerisms were characteristics of ''remaining true to oneself''. In some regard, those that selected appearances and personas that opted for the old patterns were considered the pompous bourgeoisies, whom were out of touch with their heritage. During the Black Power Era (1952-1968), the term ''soul'' became a positive representation of black cultural expression. Terms like soul brother, soul power, soul music, soul food etc. became empowering to the reconstruction of black identity. To have ''soul'' was identified as a manifestation of African Diaspora or contemporary Africanisms. While it was widely recognized that everyone has a soul in the spiritual sense, anything with soul was a cultural representation of the Black experience. In this context, ''having soul'' was embedded in Black identity. As illustrated by Mason,

> Every being born in the world has a soul, but not everyone has "soul." Soul, in this context, is the socioethnic phenomenon peculiar to African Americans as manifested in the retention of African elements in African- American culture in the United States(Mason, 1992, p. 52).

Socio-culturally, ''having soul'' was an authentication of self-definition that had a powerful distinction, one in which the dominant group could not borrow, barter or share. Within these confines, to ''have soul'' was guarded phenomenon, for which outside ethnic groups could not readily access. In many cases, any attempt from outside ethnic groups were mocked, dismissed

or denied as viable contributions. Beneath the superficial constructs, the concept of ''having soul'' was embedded in deeper meaning for those within the Black culture. It encompassed the strife and endurance of a culture that remained resilient.

> As a cultural concept, "soul" was closely related to Black America's need for individual and group self-definition. During the Black Power era, the self-defining capabilities of this soul were nowhere more evident than in the soul style that originated in and was authenticated by the urban black folk culture (Van Deburg, 1992, p. 195).

> ….soul is the product of a cultural mixture of various African tribes and kingdoms. Soul is the style of rural folk culture. Soul is black spirituality and experiential wisdom. And soul is putting a premium on suffering, endurance, and surviving with dignity (Opie, 2008, p. xi).

Although there was a certain level of group collectivity and consciousness, this did not resign the intra-group turmoil that also existed. There were those within the culture that were renitent to the change and reprehended any constructs of separation that could possibly further black isolation. While there was considerable in-group dissension, it was rarely disputed that personification of ''….soul as the sum of all that is typically or uniquely Black'' (Cooper-Lewter & Mitchell, 1986, p. ix). Even though,

> soul has referred to a variety of other Black-related items: a style of cooking (Soul food), a complicated handshake, a widely popular genre of music, or an identity (Soul sister or brother)….most would simply say that it really defies description, and that one who has to ask what it is can never know (Cooper-Lewter & Mitchell, 1986, p. ix).

In our current society much as changed and the distinctions among ethnic groups are not as overtly visible. Yet among Black-Americans there are still vestiges of old sentiments that believe true cultural understanding or anything related to its' context only exists from an inside perspective. While Caucasian-Americans could be empathizers, they could never truly understand the nature and construction of the Black experience.

Literary writings on topic of ''Blackness'' still spark controversial debate. In the book, *The End of Blackness*, Dickenson's takes the position that ''…we need to redefine what 'black' means. 'Black' should only mean those descended from African slaves brought involuntarily to labor in the USA'' (Anchor Books, 2005, p. 1). As prominent in the 1960s, Dickerson's message

aimed at empowering Black Americans to take responsibility for their own social, political and economic plight parallels to the self-empowerment. Dickerson argues,

> ....four centuries, 'black,' the lowest caste, has only really meant the opposite of 'white,' the highest caste, with all the political, cultural, aesthetic, psychological, and financial overtones that implies. It serves no purpose beyond maintaining hierarchies of privilege (with whites at the top) and shoring up the status quo (Anchor Books, 2005, p. 1).

Dickenson's takes the position that ''…we need to redefine what 'black' means. 'Black' should only mean those descended from African slaves brought involuntarily to labor in the USA'' (Anchor Books, 2005, p. 1).By redefining the terminology of Blackness, ''….you will not be told *by anyone* who you are, what you think, how to organize your life" (Ibid, 2005, p. 2). Individual and collectively, "....we have to stop living our lives and building our personas with whites in the equation'' (Ibid, 2005, p. 2). In essence, in redefining the terminology, we also redefine the ideology.

> Here's what I *am* saying: however blacks got to this point in history, whoever's fault it is, the only way out and up is by 'divorcing' both the past and whites, qua whites, and starting all over again psychologically. We have to take responsibility for *our* actions, not monitor whites', and decide that it's time we actually began acting like we really were free, autonomous, moral and rational human beings rather than the group constantly protecting itself from a rapacious oppressor (Anchor Books, 2005, p. 5).

> There was a time when black uplift was impossible without white involvement, but that time has long passed. It simply no longer matters whether or not whites hate blacks. It only matters whether blacks are determined to achieve their goals or whether they are determined to prove how racist some whites are. We're free (Ibid, 2005, p. 1).

In conjunction to Dickerson's argument, Kee believes that ''Black folks ought to "surrender" the idea that blissfully oblivious white folks ought to feel guilty or that they owe black America something for the injustices done during and since slavery'' (Kee, 2004, p. 1). Similar to the proactive messages of Black leaders in the 1960s, Dickerson urges Blacks must free their minds from the ''last plantation'' collectively charting a course of autonomous existence.

> Only by daring to live as autonomous individuals with *voluntary* group identification, only by charting a course unconcerned with the existence of white people, only by taking responsibility for their own comportment and decisions - only then will blacks be able to achieve collective goals, assess collective penalties, award collective benefits, and jockey for sociopolitical position like fully entitled citizens (Dickerson, 2004).

These aims can be achieved by taking action—serving on city councils, improving black neighborhoods and educationally excelling. In this way, Black Americans can be in control of their own destiny.

Even though many would agree with the premise of Black in-group self-reliance, some would find the message radical and possibly oppose anything self-contained. While her overall point of taking an activist approach to issues in the black community are well received, there is deep concern over the directives, proposed as a solution. The notion on an autonomous in-group collectivity that is driven with little regard to white existence is quite limited. Consider the fact, that our economic system is based on globalization, meaning our interdependence as a nation is dependent on what conditions exist in other countries.

Therefore, it seems relatively impossible for one ethnic group to be totally self-sustaining, when our very economic system cannot function efficiently in an autonomous mode. This point is especially true when considering the autonomy of Black-Americans, a group whose vitality is reliant on the very system economically/politically spearheaded by a white-ruled oligarchy. While blacks may be free, messages of uplift that disregard white existence in a system dominated by the white powerful elite is paradoxical, no matter how well the intentions.

In America, white involvement simply does matter—sheer determination is not enough, no matter what racial classification you are. If Dickerson's intentions are to elude "dismantling the master's house with his own tools" than fine, but take note when burning an entire structure in the process without considering the replacement. Granted, there is much need for new directives of self-empowerment in the Black community. But as an ethnic group, there must be caution in following messages that have failed in the past. Taking "responsibility for our own actions" is one thing, but divorcing ourselves from the past to start over as autonomous human beings is to divorce history and reference. This approach may further weaken the Black community.

As argued in Chapter two, it is the history and biography of an ethnic group that provides context for the lens in which the world is viewed. Human entities, solely and purely self-reliant can lose direction if ones' history has any indication of the future. I for one would more than likely find some comfort in going about my everyday life and existence without regard to others. But how ridiculous is that and what are the consequences of such action?

Today the American society is at the crossroads of change and while change can be good, we must be privy to the aftermath. Sometimes change does not result in the better, just the different. Now to urge self-governing action to improve life chances of Black-Americans or other disenfranchised groups is one thing, but to proclaim successful outcomes are possibly accomplishable outside of the system maintaining our vitality is not only short-sighted and far-fetched, but seemingly repeats the mistakes of the past.

CHAPTER SEVEN
RESULTS: FOOD HABITS AND BODY IMAGE

In this chapter a summation of the main findings are presented discussing the characteristics of Black culture, the perceived role of Black women and perceptions of body image. While perceptions are not definitive, it illustrates the interpretative embedded in the history and biography of their experiences. While there is significance in the commonalities presented, one cannot conclude that *all* Black women share the same experiences, engage in ritualistic practices, cook soul food or retain traditional eating habits. The individual nature of self is explored through behavior and reflexivity that which is associated to the history and biography of the Black experience. In this, the genesis of the theoretical approach of symbolic interaction is integrated, while still asserting the interpretive nature in the methodological approach of interpretative interactionism.

Although the data gathered was extensive, the ethnic roots of Black culture were still vivid in the participant's narratives. As followed under the guise of interpretative interactionism the data proved rich, setting a context embedded in "thick description". [45] While each interview was scheduled over two days, often lasting two-three hours per session, several exceeded this time. Notes were taken as well as recorded in each interview, which were later transcribed for detail, accuracy and authenticity.

Before the interview, contact had been made with the interviewee, confirming the location and meeting time. This initial meeting provided the opportunity to discuss the interview process and establish a sense of familiarity. As dictated in qualitative research, the aim was to establish a rapport and "....create an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable to talk freely about themselves" (Taylor & Bogdan p. 93). In this, participants were more likely express their

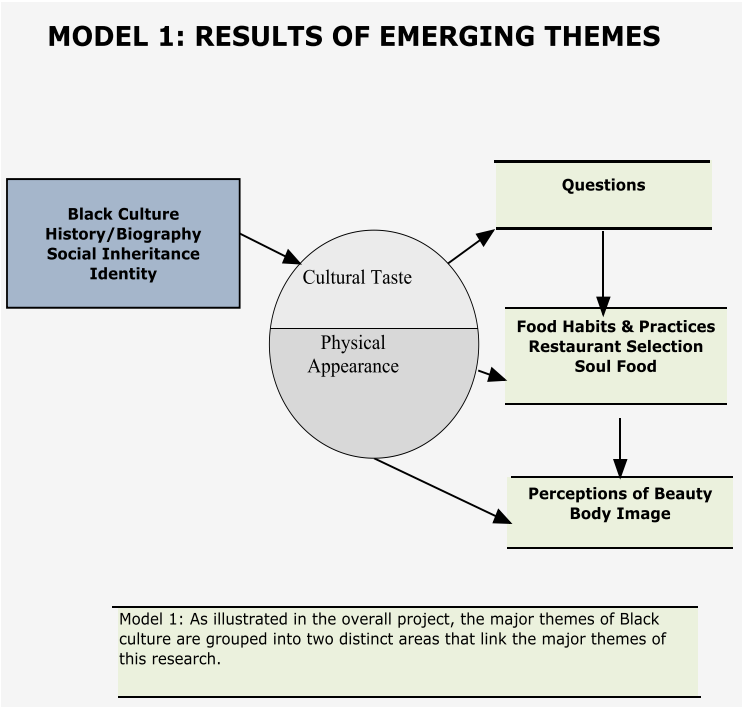
[45] Thick description or contextualized materials are interpretations "...built out of events and experiences described in detail. They record experience as it occurs, locates experience in social situations and records thoughts, meanings, emotions and actions. Moreover, they speak from the subject's point of view". Referenced from Norman K. Denzin's book, "Interpretive Interactionism, (1989), Applied Social Research Methods Series, Volume 16, p. 63.

views without restraint. The data compiled from 15 participants, also illustrated that perceptions are embedded in a world of meanings. Through human interaction, meanings evolve and are continuously interpreted and re-interpreted by lived experience. Through Black-American cooking traditions and practices, other aspects were comparatively linked to ethnic perceptions, such as black cultural roles, identity, in-group affiliation, body image and obesity. Even though a wealth of data was gathered, only particular areas of relevance were organized into themes referenced in this work.

To recap, the original questions guiding this research were centered on why Black women were more obese than any other ethnic group? If in existence, identify any unique characteristics of "black culture"? Since food habits, preparation and intake are an immense part of obesity, several questions were geared toward Black-American cooking practices. Excluding basic demographics, a host of possible contributors were explored as indicators. These included (1) historical context, (2) food habits and cooking preparation, (3) ethnic identity, (4) food selection, (5) social inheritance, (6) body image, (7) food selection, (8) food selection and availability, (9) food consumption, (10) exercise, (11) health. Of these, five major areas of importance empirically emerged (1) historical context, (2) food habits and cooking preparation, (3) ethnic identity, (4) social inheritance and (5) body image. The conceptual mapping provides a glance at the eleven areas linked to design of the original research. Questions were color-coded for comparison, cross reference and consistency.

Culture and social inheritance emerged as the main contributor of cooking habits, the role of the black woman, body image and perceptions of obesity. In the results, the recurring themes identified as of Black cultural practices and perceptions were distinguished in two grouped areas, (1) cultural taste and (2) physical appearance. The final chapter closes with the conclusions and recommendations for further study.

Model 1, illustrates the emerging themes resulting from this study. It depicts the grouped areas of cultural taste and physical appearance as the conduit, in which other areas are filtered, establishing in-group affiliation.



BASIC DEMOGRAPHICS

As outlined below, basic demographics are provided on the participants in this study. The tables are designed to quickly review the diversity in class, education, employment, marital status, age and dependent children. Questions pertaining to religion and civic/social affiliation were not included. All of the participants classified themselves as women of African-American or Black decent. But one respondent differentiated Black-American from African-American. Her comments below suggested the Black-American experience is rooted in a shared history. The remaining participants seemingly accepted the terminology as an inclusive categorization.

> I don't like the phrase African-Americans. It was one that was adopted by the media. Jesse Jackson gave a speech and he used the term African-American to suggest that –like all these other hyphenated Americans, we had a legitimate homeland and it was Africa. Well first of all, Africa is a continent, a very heterogeneous continent when it comes to cultures, so we are mainly talking about Sub-Saharan or what's called Black Africa. But, I think what makes us unique as Black Americans is a shared history in the New World.....Our culture comes from this shared history on oppression (Comets, 2005).

AGE: The age of the participants ranged from 24-71, all were either employed or retired. Age of the participant illustrated importance in the insight of Black culture. The older respondents were more reflective in discussing historical milestones for Black-Americans. As indicated in the chart below, (86.6%) were currently employed, with one being part-time. The remaining (13.3%) were retired and no longer employed. Majority either purchased lunch or brought lunch from home. Three purchased lunch in the company cafeteria and one had lunch provided by the company.

Table8: Employment Status

N=15	PT	FT	Retired Unemployed	Retired Employed
Employed		12		
Unemployed				
Retired/Unemployed			2	
Retired/Employed-PT				1
* Four of the respondents working full time were also students and none classified themselves as stay home parents.				

MARITAL STATUS: Several participants, (53.3%) classified themselves as single, (26.6%) were married, (6.6%) were divorced and (13.3%) were widowed.

Table9: Marital Status

N=15	
Single	8
Married	4
Divorced	1
Separated	0
Widowed	2
Living Together	0

DEPENDENT CHILDREN/OTHERS RESIDING IN HOME: Respondents that were responsible for the care of others were presumed to have an obligation in preparing meals at home. In Table 9, respondents with dependent children under the age of eighteen (DC), accompanied by the age of the dependent individuals are summarized. This provided insights on the frequency and typical family meals made in the home. Table 9, included others adults residing in the home and those no longer living at the residence. In one instance, the respondent had dependent adults resided in the home. Of the respondents, (53.3%) had dependent children living in home, (6.6%) had dependent adults in the residence, (6.6%) was expecting an infant and (33.3%) had either no children or adult children that no longer resided in the home.

Table 10: Dependent Children/Others Residing in Home

N=15	DC > 18	# DC	Ages	Others Residing	Who
1	Yes	3	3,5,7	No	------
2	Yes	5	3,9,10,12,17	No	------
3	Yes	1	5,12	No	------
4	Yes	2	10,12	No	------
5	No	0	---	No	Expecting a baby
6	Yes	1	5	No	------
7	No	0	---	No	No children
8	No	0	---	No	No children
9	Yes	2	13,17	No	------
10	No	0	---	No	Adult children
11	No	0	---	No	Adult children
12	No	0	---	Yes	No children
13	No	0	---	Yes	Paramour/Grandson (18 yrs. old)
14	Yes	1	10	No	------
15	Yes	1	17	Yes	------

* In Chart 3: DC is abbreviated for dependent children. Dependent children were considered anyone residing in home under the age of 18.

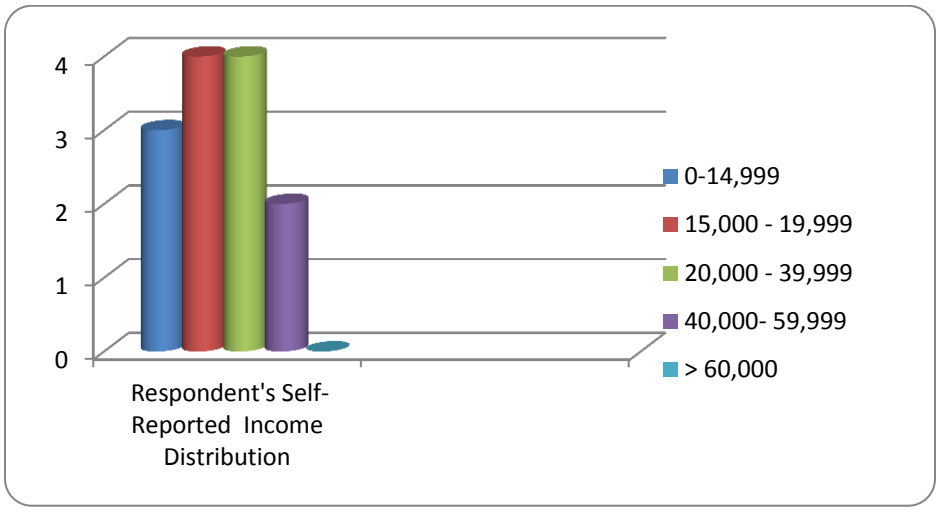
BIRTH PLACE AND FAMILY ORIGINS: In most cases, the respondent's place of birth was different than what was indicated as their family origins. The place of birth was reported as where the individual grew up, but their family origins where identified in location as the South, Midwest, North, Northeast or West. However, the majority grew up in a specified location in the Midwest.

SOCIAL CLASS, (SES) AND PLACEMENT: Since socio-economic questions are often considered sensitive information, these were placed in the back of the survey instrument. Financial questions targeted respondent's income, social class classification and excess monthly capital (money). Self-reported data lacks reliability, since information can be incorrectly estimated. But with the information gathered inferences can still have general significance. Using income for social class placement can be ambiguously determined by the researcher. The lower and middle strata's were divided into two groups, due to the ideological differences in the perceptions of those with incomes that fell below $14,999 per year compared to those with incomes ranging between $15,000-19,999. Participants with incomes ranging between $20,000-$39,999 compared to those with incomes ranging from $40,000- 59,999 were considered middle and over $60,000 were classified in the upper bracket. Importantly, the self-reported information in this study, showed a difference between actual occupational income and the respondent's perception of social class placement.

As indicated below in Chart #1, of the (87%) that replied, (23%) reported earnings below $14,999 whereas, (30.7%) had incomes below $19,999. Similarly, (30.7%) reported earnings under $39,999 and (15.3%) had incomes below $59,999. None of the participants reported incomes above $60,000. When divided into lower, middle and upper class (46.6%) fell in the lower strata, (40%) were middle and none met the income classification of upper class. All of the participants self-reported perceptions of class placement. As indicated two (15.3%) considered themselves as upper working class professionals. Most (53.8%) considered themselves in the middle class with (30.7%) classifying themselves in the lower strata.

When asked about their excess money at the end of the month (50%) noted having not enough, (42.8%) had some money and (7%) had just enough. Despite the range in reported salaries, Black women found their financial expenses per month were being minimally met.

Chart #1: Self-Reported Income



Model 2: Educational Attainment/SES

(LOW SES)	(MID SES)	(HIGH SES)
< HIGH SCHOOL	SOME COLLEGE	BACHELOR DEGREE
GED	TRADE SCHOOL	GRADUATE DEGREE
	ASSOCIATE DEGREE	PROFESSIONAL DEGREE

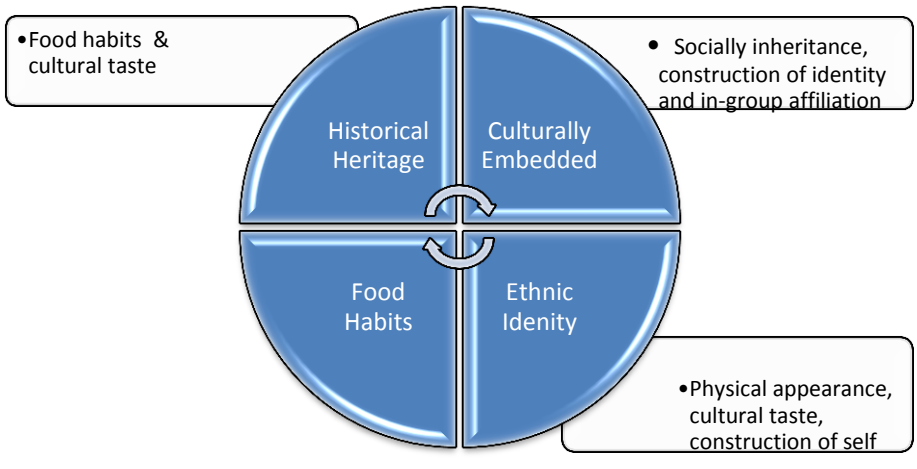
EDUCATION: Of the 15 respondents in this study, (6.6%) had less than a high school degree. As indicated, (40%) fell into the middle socio-economic status and (53.3%) possessed a Bachelor's degree or higher. The participants that obtained a college degree were from various disciplines, providing an array of expertise. Despite their educational achievements, several still classified themselves in the lower socio-economic bracket.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: All human lives are embedded in history and place, allowing reflectivity in human action. Place provides context, rooted in the social, cultural, political and

economic placement of the time period. Place also includes geographic context and food availability. The social construction of reality for Black-American women is uniquely shaped by the history of enslavement. Past and present experiences as "…interpretations are reflected against the person's ongoing self-definition"(Denzin,1989, [2004], p. 62). "Meaning is biographical, emotional and biographically….unfolding definition of self" formulating ideologies through observation and interaction in the social world"(Ibid,1989, [2004], p. 62). In totality, cultural taste and physical appearance have interpretative meaning within the black experience.

FOOD HABITS, PREPARATION, CULTURE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY: In this study, 93% of the respondents indicated food habits and preparation were socially inherited practices, often passed from generation to generation. Interpretively, food habits are cultural constructions that are "*historically and relationally grounded*" in thickly contextualized lived experiences (Ibid, 1989, [2004], p. 63). Food habits and preparation are merely cultural constructions often embodied in what is available or affordable. Cultural taste is equally embedded in cultural constructions, but through socialization and interactions the self emerges, relative to one's ethnic identity and affiliation. Food habits are interpretatively powerful and "….expands the framework of interpretation" to a holistic understanding (Ibid, 1989, [2004], p. 71).

Model 3: The Intersectionality of History, Food Habits, Culture & Ethnic Identity



** Illustration shows interconnectedness of four distinct parts all engulfed in Black culture.

BLACK CULTURE: Since culture is an ambiguous concept, determine unique characteristics of "black culture" seemed a challenge. Although the unique attributes of black culture varied, all (100%) of the participants believed a black culture existed. Some defined, "....black culture as hair, food, clothes, etc." (Louis, 2005). Others expressed uniqueness of,

> Black culture is the things we do that make us unique. Our hairstyles-where we have weaves and corn rolls, Caucasians have French braids. It can be based on region. Southern blacks are more into cooking and language. Language could be regional. The things we trip on here, blacks in other places do not (Washington, 2005).
>
> Most the white folks don't cook with all that extra stuff, so I think that is unique to black culture. But that's about it. With everything else they want; they want our men, they want our hair, they're getting collagen injections in their lips to give them full lips, you can't have anything. Anything we have, they want it and they're gonna get it. They're gonna emulate our style, that's like you know the little babies that be out here with their pants sagging the white boys do it too, but they're trying to be black, you can't have anything you can't, you can't (Washington, 2005).

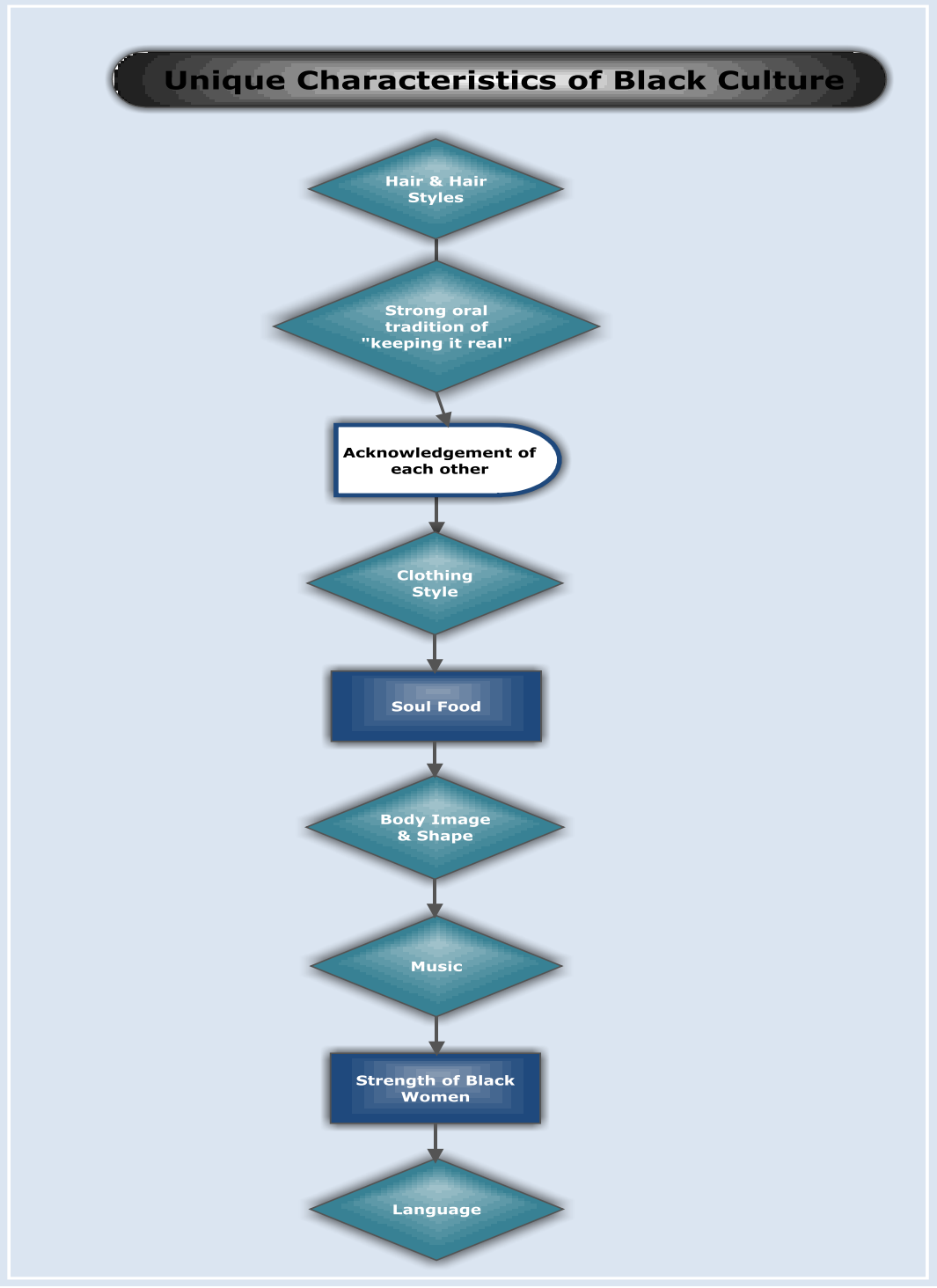
According to Lydia Comets,

> I think of the black culture, and granted it is not homogeneous, but I think of this shared experience we have beginning with slavery. You had these diverse people coming together, had to try and learn the language of their masters and adapt their traditions, what they could remember. When I think of black culture I think of the way, when you walk into the room of strangers and you look to see if there is other black person there. You will make a point, if you see another black person nodding to them. When you go on the street and you are in a predominantly white environment, as I have always been, whenever you see another person you nod as if you are saying- I am validating your existence, you are validating my existence. It is not like anyone ever taught us to do that, it is something you do. Uum! I think there is always this sense of having to prove yourself as part of the black culture because there are all these external stereotypes, images and media (Comets, 2005)

For Laurie Jones,

> How would you define any culture? A group of people with similar tastes, with music, beliefs, clothing, attitudes, desires and with the black culture I see it waning. Unfortunately things that we have let's say, pretty much in house is becoming mainstream, and people see that as only the black culture. The things that we highly valued, I would say majority, such as education to do well and better yourself has fallen by the waist side for what I call now, the quicker and easy money which is the rap music, style and profile. That has become embraced unfortunately and so people see that as the black culture.
>
> But I still see the black culture as very enriching history full of people with each generation striving to better than the other. Still wanting that better education and still wanting to see the young to improve. Black culture really has strived in always the next generation who is really going to break out as future leaders. Black culture is very much enriched. I am really happy to see in these nearer generations is that poetry and the word is coming back. That is becoming very strong. We have an enriching language, not saying Ebonics or anything like that. Just how we say things, cut dry and to the core at times when you need to (laugh) and uum! It really does have two languages; I mean you have what you say in the house and what you say out in public. So yeah! We have such an enriching history, meaning where we have come as a people, having come here in chains overcoming that and again embracing not the American dream, but the black dream is to better yourself each and every time and I really hate to see that unfortunately the black dream has become the almighty dollar and use to not be the case. As long as you got that degree and you could go back and help somebody else and we were always there (Jones, 2005).

Model #4: Characteristics of Black Culture



**Model 4: Illustrates the nine predominantly grouped area's referencing the unique characteristics in Black Culture.

BODY IMAGE: Body image preferences are categorized in this research under physical appearance. Physical appearance, particularly body image were culturally derived deductions that grew"….out of the woman's interpretations of her experiences"(Denzin, 1989, [2004], p. 113). Respondents' perceptions were based on their cultural experiences with Black men and women. In American society, the standard of beauty is based predominantly on European preferences. This standard of beauty promotes smaller petite body frames as more desirable to male attractiveness. The thinner, more proportioned the body frame the more likely the perception of beauty. While the respondents indicated Americanized models of beauty, tend to mimic the shapeliness of white women, there little research that supports this claim. Contrarily, there is considerable research showing thinner people are more healthy. Despite the validity, in some means the support of health models has further stigmatized Black women who do not have thinner shaped proportions. The respondent's in this study, illustrated a working knowledge on health models, but the overwhelmingly majority (86.7%) preferred a "thicker" body frame to the "thinner "notions of beauty.

Swirl Pudding preferred "thick, because I think thick is sexy. You gotta have a little something, so I like thick" (Pudding, 2005). Tina James stated a "thick body frame -the more hefty the frame the more stronger you are"(James, 2005). "I think I prefer a thick because a thick body is beautiful. They don't count every rib" (Jones, 2005). Sasha Jones found, "thick looks healthy and curves are beautiful….but I want to keep my hips. African-American men like a woman healthier that don't have flat butts. It embraces my culture and most African-American women are built like that" (Jones, 2005). Of those that indicated the preference of having a thin body frame, it was primarily for males to look beyond physical attractiveness, for something more inner. Ume No, provided an alternative response,

> I guess I would have to go with thin, because I have been considered a thick frame. Why? Because I have been there before and liked it, of course this one doesn't bother me either. Listen to me, I don't have a thick body, I don't have a brick house. I like thin, no I don't want to have a brick house, like some of them are built. Because they wouldn't see me, they would see my body- male and female and it's hard enough with my body now to get them to see me. Just imagine if I had a brick house, no! (No, 2005)

According to Devendra Singh's, the distribution of body fat is a determining factor in sex differences among males and females. Female beauty and attractiveness are measured in terms of waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), properties which include breast size, risk and disease, and reproductive status. Although oversimplified, he draws his conclusions using natural selection, were females with high WHR were considered healthier, but low WHR were rated as more feminine (Singh, 1995, p. 491). [46] In Singh's renowned work, males "…..located underweight figures with feminine WHRs (0.7 and 0.8) much closer to attractiveness and desirability for marriage in spite of such figures being perceived as not highly capable of having children"[47] (Singh, 1995, p. 59). Singh finds "Afro-American men have also been found to associate many positive qualities with overweight figures, although they do not rank them as attractive" (Singh, 1995, p. 59). According to the perceptions of Black women in this study, there was no indication that black males lacked attractiveness in overweight women.

In this study, respondents were asked a several questions pertaining to beauty, body image and weight satisfaction. Women were asked to discuss, (1) what were they taught about beauty and how beauty was defined, (2) what did they perceive as beauty, and (3) whether a thick or thin body frame was preferable. Participants were also asked to rank women, in which they perceived as beautiful. Finally, women were asked, (4) what they felt men wanted in a woman, (5) what they presumed men perceived as beautiful, and (6) were men interested in oversized women.

[46] Singh, D. & Young R.K. (1995), "Body Weight, Waist-to-Hip Ratio, Breasts, and Hips: Role in Judgments of Female Attractiveness and Desirability for Relationships" Ethology and Sociobiology, 16: 483-507.

[47] Singh, Devendra (1995), "Ethnic and Gender Consensus for the Effect Of Waist-To-Hip Ratio on Judgment of Women's Attractiveness" Human Nature, Vol. 6, No., 1, pp. 51-65.

WEIGHT AND BODY SATISFACTION: The questions on weight and body satisfaction ranged. Women were asked to discuss, (1) whether African-American they considered themselves overweight, (2) how long have they struggled with their weight, (3) what weight loss methods have been tried, and (4) feelings on their figure. Using a Likert scale, women were asked to discuss what best fit their perceptions on attractiveness, weight satisfaction and any changes they would make on self and body image.

Table #11: Attractiveness of Figure

YOUR FIGURE IS:				
1 Very attractive (0)	2 Pretty attractive (3)	3 Somewhat attractive (7)	4 Not attractive (2)	5 Very unattractive (0)

Of those that responded, (58.3%) found their figure somewhat attractive. The responses selected, ranged moderately from 2 and 4. None of the respondent's selected the extreme areas.

Table #12: Perceptions of Weight

1 Very underweight **(0)**	2 Slightly underweight **(0)**	3 Normal weight **(0)**	4 Slightly overweight **(13)**	**5** Very overweight **(2)**

Of the five areas listed on the Likert scale, majority of the participants (86.6%), selected slightly overweight, while (13.3%) the remaining respondents perceived themselves as very overweight. None of the participants classified their figure as normal weight, very underweight, or slightly underweight.

Table #13: Weight Satisfaction

WEIGHT SATISFACTION Use the 1 to 5 scale to indicate how satisfied you are with your *weight*				
1 Extremely Dissatisfied (2)	2 Somewhat Dissatisfied (10)	3 Neither Satisfied/Dissatisfied (0)	4 Somewhat Satisfied (1)	5 Extremely Satisfied (0)

Of the (86.6%) responding to the question, the overwhelming majority (66.6%), indicated being somewhat dissatisfied with their weight and (23%) were either extremely dissatisfied or somewhat satisfied.

MALE PERCEPTIONS OF BEAUTY: In combining the participant responses on male perceptions of beauty, grouped responses fell into three categories, (1) contrasts between external and inner beauty, (2) popularized standards and representations of beauty and (3) distinctions between temporary/permanent relationships. The respondents indicated "most men like their women, like they like their chicken, curves with a nice bottom - nice enough to jiggle a little bit" (Jones, 2005). "Some men want the picture perfect model type" (Washington, 2005). "Ninety percent of men look at body image, the boobs and booty and skin showing, regardless of her inner spirit" (Jones, 2005). "It's not inner. They are interested in the physical beauty" (No, 2005). Lydia Comets compares black versus white male preferences to

> …. I think most black men prefer women are more rounded, curvier. I don't think they are as hung up on body size, whereas as (yuh) with white males, young males in particular they seem to draw their conclusions of what is beautiful based on the media which tends to portray very thin women and women who tend to have unrealistic proportions (Comets, 2005).

However, Ume No cross-compared black/white women to male desires in stating,

> that hourglass -a brick house. Now are we talking men in general or black men? Well I think all men want that hourglass shape, with some hips and a derriere. I don't know why –but a derriere, a bosom, lips and long hair, shoulder length hair. Yes, that's what they want. I have to say this, Black men, bless their little hearts want a white girl and they don't mind putting their health in jeopardy to not eat for months to have that hour shaped glass figure. There is nothing wrong with going to the gym ok and sweating, but I am not going to have a nickname of anorexic. They ain't gonna call me Anne and someone that is going to be quiet in demeanor, so they can be the all-powerful male.

> In some places it could be during slavery that it is the forbidden fruit. But it may be what's underlying, I don't know because it's so prevalent now that it just may be a matter of whose is talking to me now or who is going to give me what I want. Yes the black woman can be hard, but she has to be to make those advances. I am not saying that the white woman doesn't want to make those advances with the black male, but if things don't go or one little hick up happens, all she has to do is just say she was raped and there are the authorities. No one comes to our defenses, but let little Miss Cindy get hit, not to say we like to get to hit you know what I am saying. There is just so much more involved in dating a white girl, one of those extenuating circumstances, than there is with your own race. Now I don't mind the mingling because you have to find love where you want to find it, but look at those extenuating circumstances ok. Black men are willing to take on all of that extra pressure, just in case you and Cindy have an argument and Cindy goes home and cries, the parents don't want you with her anyway....but now we are gonna stand up and fight for ya, than little Miss Cindy,–now what do you want (No, 2005).

In referencing what men perceived as beautiful, Rosemary Spice states, "look at the magazines, curves in shapes the sexy tanks. But not necessarily looking for wife. Yes! Black men like legs and butts" (Spice, 2005). Lydia Comets stated,

> I really think it depends on whether they are looking for an accessory or a partner. Well if you are looking for an arm accessory, then you are looking for someone to parade around. To say I have whatever the current it is. But if you are looking for a partner, I think you look beyond the physical, once you get older. Which is not to say that you are necessarily looking for a great personality or stuff? If you are looking for someone who has a upper class background, you do not care what they particularly look like, you are marrying a particular class. There are some really plain looking rich women (Interview with Lydia Comets).

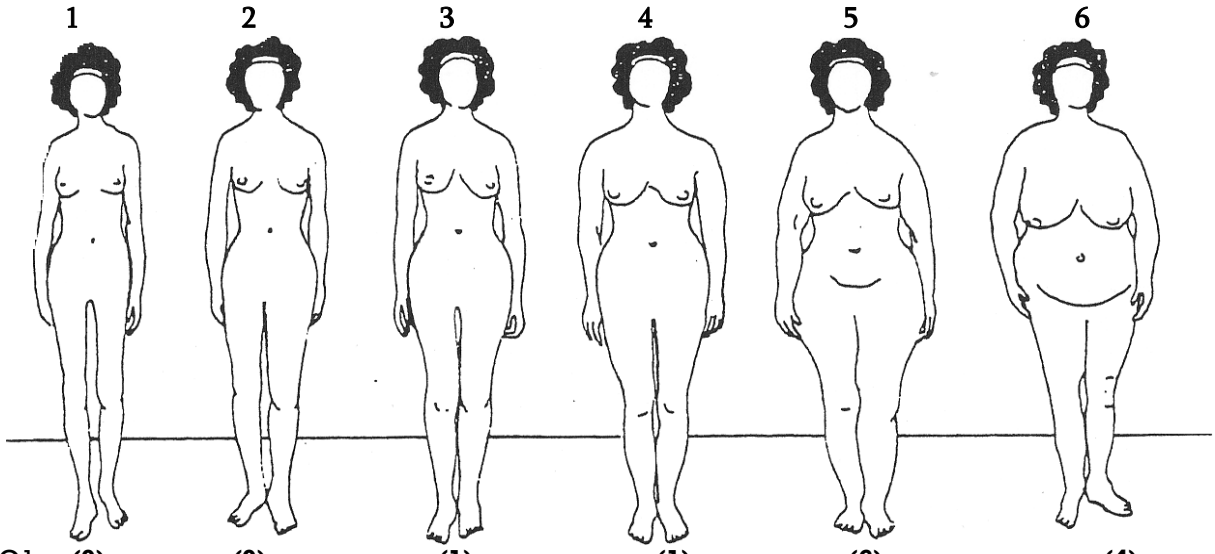
Additional comments made on what men wanted were grouped into five areas, (1) men wanted mothers, (2) control, (3) good housekeepers, (4) particular body images or (5) patient listeners.

OVERWEIGHT WOMEN AND MALE ATTRACTIVENESS: Black women's perceptions on whether men were interested in oversized women differed to Singh's findings on male perceptions of overweight figures. Majority (60%) said yes, (20%) somewhat and (7%) indicated no. For those that stated men were somewhat interested, ethnic or racial preferences were outlined. Accordingly, Shanequa states, "see – that just depends. I don't think black women are interested in oversized men, but black men seem more interested in oversized white women before they are interested in oversized black women" (Washington, 2005).

SILHOUETTES:

Three different visual silhouettes were used to determine whether participants would select images that corresponded to their Likert scale responses on weight, attractiveness and satisfaction. For each silhouette, the same three questions were asked. All three questions were consistent with the theoretical approach of symbolic interactionism. Building off the work of Charles Horton Cooley's, *"Looking Glass Self"* participants were asked to select a number from the image that best describes (1) appearance, (2) how you would like to look, and (3) how you think others view you? Participants were asked to select a number that best fit their perceptions. By using similar questions, a cross-comparative of the each silhouette would determine consistency in the visually selected images.

Silhouette #1



Q1	**(0)**	**(0)**	**(1)**	**(1)**	**(6)**	**(4)**
Q2	**(0)**	**(1)**	**(3)**	**(8)**	**(0)**	**(0)**
Q3	**(0)**	**(0)**	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(4)**	**(5)**

RANGE OF RESPONSES: (n=12)

(1). Which drawing do you feel best describes your appearance? Figure: 3-6

(2). Which drawing do you feel best describes how you would like to look? Figure: 2-4

(3). Which drawing best describes how you think others view you? Figure: 3-6

** Silhouette adapted from Scott, Mildred (1980). Patterns of Influence of Some Known Correlates of Obesity in Middle-Class Black Women. University of Maryland: Department of Health Education. Dissertation: Advisor Dr. John Burt.

In Silhouette #1, of the (80%) that replied (50%) selected image #5 that best described of their appearance. In Q2, majority (66.6%) selected image #4 as how they would like to look. For Q3, (41.6%) selected image #6, which was followed by (33.3%) selected image #5 as best describing how others viewed them. In Silhouette #1, majority of the responses ranged between the visual images #3 and #5.

Silhouette #2

Body Satisfaction:

Please consider how you feel about your body. When looking at this drawing, write the number that goes with the drawing in the blank to the right. **CHOOSE ONLY ONE drawing for each question.** Remember there is no right or wrong answers.

	9	8	7		6	5	4	3	2	1
Q1	(0)	(0)	(4)	(4)	(3)	(1)	(0)(0)(0)			
Q2	(0)	(0)	(0)	(1)	(6)	(3)	(2)(0)(0)			
Q3	(2)	(1)	(2)	(4)	(2)	(1)	(0)(0)(0)			

RANGE OF RESPONSES: (n=12)

Q1 Which drawing do you feel best describes your appearance? Figure: 4-7

Q2 Which drawing do you feel best describes how you would like to look? Figure: 3-6

Q3 Which drawing best describes how you think others view you? Figure: 4-9

** Silhouette found in article by Anderson, L.A. etal. (1997)."Diabetes in Urban African Americans. Body Image, Satisfaction with Size and Weight Change Attempts" The Diabetes Educator, Vol. 21, No., 1, pp. 301-308.

In Silhouette #2, the visual body images were shaded black, with the smallest figure falling to the right. For Q1, (33.3%) of the respondents equally choose images #5 and #6 as the best description of their appearance. In Q2, (50%) of the participants selected image #5 as describing how they would like to look and Q3, had the largest distribution in responses, ranging from images #4 through #9 as how others view them.

Silhouette #3 requires further explanation because it borrows from the prominent work of Devendra Singh, Waist-to-Hip Ratio (WHR) and female attractiveness (1993, 1995).[48] In this study, Singh's model was altered in hairstyle to create images more conducive to that of Black women. The WHR silhouette, modeled female body proportions, similar to the images of Body Mass Index (BMI) used in health models. For Silhouette #3, (67%) of the respondents indicated they were of large frame with an emphasis in LF III. 1.0 (O10) and 0.8 (O8), while others did not find any of the body images representative of the shapeliness of Black women.

The participant responses to Silhouette #3, varied more than any other model presented. Moreover, none of the participants referenced the models as healthy or indicated the images as attractive, but rather stated, "none fit me, but if I had to choose" (Jones, 2005). ''These drawing do not match my proportion even when I was a smaller size seven" (Jones, 2005)."None of the models fit me" (Comets, 2005). "When I think of a large frame, I think of shoulders and hips" (Spice, 2005). ''Shanequa, stated "none of them. We have to keep some curves and none of them have any" (Washington, 2005). "Even the large frames are not large. When we say people are big-boned it's ethnic. None of these translate to a larger frame and none look real'' (James, 2005) Respondents tended to ponder over the images, in which breast size, body proportion or hips were typically scrutinized. Despite the altering of the images, respondent's still found the WHR less representative and *not* reflective of the black female body.

[48] Silhouette found in article by Singh, D. & Young R.K. (1995), "Body Weight, Waist-to-Hip Ratio, Breasts, and Hips: Role in Judgments of Female Attractiveness and Desirability for Relationships, Ethology and Sociobiology, 16: 483-507.

Silhouette can also be found in article by Singh, D. (1995), "Body Shape and Women's Attractiveness: The Critical Role of Waist-to-Hip Ratio" Human Nature, Vol. 4, No., 3, pp. 297-321.

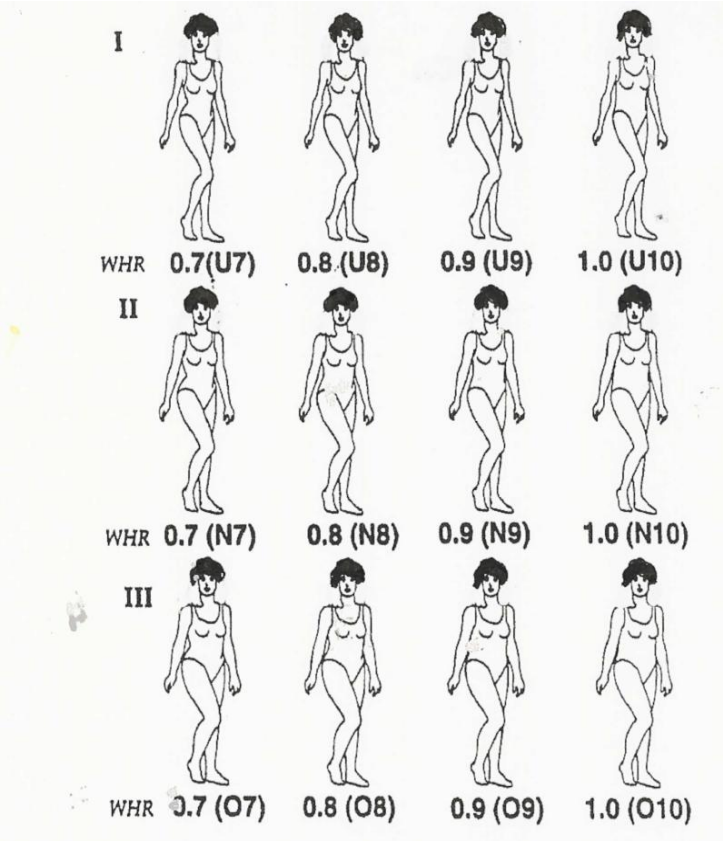
Cross-comparatively, the participant's responses were consistent across silhouettes. In addition, there were commonalities in the area of cultural taste and appearance. As indicated in this research, Black women's perceptions on attractiveness and male selection were drastically different than information reported in other studies. Cultural constructs within the black culture is a sort of language that is understood even if unspoken, it is ever-present.

Silhouette #3: Health Model, (WHR)

Small Frame

Medium Frame

Large Frame



SF	I. Q1	(0)	(0)	(1) -U9	(0)
MF	II. Q1	(0)	(0)	(0)	(0)
LF	III. Q1	(0)	(2)-O8	(3)-O9	(4)-O10

SF	I. Q2	(1) -U7	(0)	(0)	(0)
MF	II. Q2	(0)	(0)	(1)-O9	(0)
LF	III. Q2	(1) -O7	(5)-O8	(0) (2) -O10	

(**one respondent stated none for Q2)

SF	I. Q3	(0) (0)	(1)-U9		(0)
MF	II. Q3	(0)	(0)		(0)
LF	III. Q3	(1)-O7	(1)-O8	(2)-O9	(5) -O10

RANGE OF RESPONSES FOR WHR:(n=12)

(1). Which drawing do you feel best describes your appearance?

(2). Which drawing do you feel best describes how you would like to look?

(3). Which drawing best describes how you think others view you?

**Note: n=2 selected none of the categories.

CHAPTER EIGHT
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter a summation of the main findings of this dissertation study are presented along with a brief overview of the study. The chapter also provides the rationale for selecting this topic, the sociological implications of this study and how this study could have been approached differently. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings and suggestions for further study.

The initial purpose of this study was to determine why Black-American women tended to be more obese than any other ethnic group. Most of the studies in this area focused on unhealthy eating practices, lack of exercise, sedentary lifestyles, differential access to nutritious food and lack of adequate healthcare as contributors of obesity in Black-Americans. But these studies lacked integrating various socio-cultural factors and traditions in Black-American culture as indicators. Therefore, with the burden of obesity being disproportionately observable in Black females, determining the contributing factors of excessive weight gain would be a significant contribution to the field of sociology. But as the study evolved, empirical findings identified black cultural habits, specifically linked to traditional food habits as a form of identity and thus an indicator of perceived body image and obesity.

As mentioned previously, this study was conducted using in-depth interviews with 15 Black-American women that had resided in Columbia, Missouri for more than two years. Each was asked various questions on cooking traditions and practices, body image, soul food vs. southern food and characteristics of black culture. This research project used in-depth surveys as a narration that was aimed at capturing the history and biography of the Black female experience, maintaining the authenticity of reporting in their own voices.[49] Personal narratives of the researcher's experiences were incorporated as an additional dimension.

The findings of this study indicated that culture is something we define in our own minds, in which we give meaning. Within this, the history and biography of Black-women experiences were imperative in how meaning was shaped. This is instinctive and used to make distinctions in one's social reality. In essence, it generates a symbolic culture from which perceptions of self and identity are embedded in black cultural constructs. This equally helped explain resistance to change or behavioral modification. The creation of a symbolic culture is based on what people perceive that it means. Even though perceptions have heterogeneity, the symbolic nature of a distinctive culture and what it means should be recognized and not limited to an anomaly.

Since culture-specific foods are symbolic representations of an ethnic group, ritualistic cooking practices and interactions were also cultural in nature and adapted through social inheritance. According the practice and sharing of "soul food" was an aesthetic, an intrinsic display of affection. It was a means of commemorating a cultural history built on struggle, directly linked to self-identity and ethnic in-group affiliation. In this, the notion that "you are what you eat" takes on special meaning. Therefore, as indicated in this study to conceptually understand the perceptions of Black-American women on food habits, body image and obesity it was essential to embed their ideologies in the socio-cultural history, biography and inherited ways of living. [50]

ETHICALLY- DERIVED CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

As indicated in this research, ethnically-derived cultural constructions were a powerful force in the perceptions of Black women. From a symbolic interactionist approach, culture has been viewed as the process by which agents of socialization transmit a way of being to future generations. But as observed in this research *culture is an agent of socialization.* Undoubtedly,

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[49] The study found significant commonalities in the responses presented, but does not conclude that *all* Black women share the same experiences, engage in ritualistic practices, cook soul food or retain traditional eating habits.

[50] The areas below are an elaboration of the findings divided into particular focused areas.

black culture is multi-dimensional, but the women in this study continuously reported a distinctive cultural reality than observed in other ethnic groups. Even if a person opts in rejecting the culture in which they live, they can never totally divorce themselves from it because their existence and actions are still immersed in cultural constructions and restricted by its' structural boundaries.

WEST AFRICAN CULTURE AND BLACK AMERICAN "SOUL FOOD"

In exploring West-African food habits and culture, informal discussions with a few West-African women proved insightful. However, one interview was recorded in this dissertation because descriptive notes were taken as opposed to a verbal conversation. Although these discussions with West-African women were informal, topics were centered on the agricultural food base, traditional food habits and cultural development of women. Their narrations made a striking cross-comparison to that of Black-American culture. While each of these women was cognizant of "soul food", they lacked the familiarity with Black-American food and were limited to identifying the West-African foods from their respective homelands. Additionally, these women expressed the ability to observe the physical features of Black-Americans and with a significant level of confidence determine where that Black-American's West-African roots may have derived.

As indicated in this research, my respondent's perceptions were that soul food is unique to Black Culture. Soul food serves as a unique characteristic of the history and biography of the black experience in the New World. While soul food is a label from the political movement of the 1960s, its' roots as slave food on southern plantations remain irrefutable. Cooking is a cultural practice and while there are deviations in the preparation of these foods, ''taste'' was the primary identifier distinguishing soul food dishes. These ritualistic practices gave distinctive meaning to the identification of the individual as well as ethnic specific in group affiliation. Despite the fact that region and culture go together in the preparation of Black-American soul

food habits place only made a difference when outside of southern boundaries. Much of this was due to the slight changes in the ingredients used to favor these food dishes. Even though there are minute differences in the preparation of soul food or that it is a time consuming, it is still an important ritualistic practice within the black community.

THE DISTINCTIVE REALITY AND ROLE OF THE BLACK WOMAN

Black women have a unique history, social placement and role expectations in American society. Besides the relative issues of gender, their plight has required them to be strong. Now black women are expected to have a dual nature—to be strong and independent. On the surface these characteristics seem harmless, but underneath is a profound conundrum. Within the black culture it is trendy to be an independent, self-reliant, strong black woman. In fact, several black male artists have popular songs dedicated to the appeal and worth of women possessing these traits. However, for many black women while being strong and independent are attributes of male attractiveness and desire, these same characteristics were also targets of black male contempt. Although the Black women's perceptions in this study were based on micro-analysis, the individualized narratives were filled with richness and provided a glimpse into the person's unabridged reality.

REPRESENTATIVE BODY IMAGES SENSITIVE TO BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN

The American standard of beauty is modeled from women of Western Europe. The thin body images in our society associated to beauty are not culturally sensitive, nor do they represent the physiques and shapeliness of Black-American women. Even the healthy models, based on Body Mass Index, (BMI) were not culturally sensitive and proportioned to the body image of Black-American women. According to the participants in this study, the American standard of beauty did not remotely represent the typical body image of Black-American

women, nor did the models coincide with how they view themselves. External beauty is a plus, but black women placed more credence on the true substance of a person, which is measured by demeanor and disposition.

Moreover, black women were very meticulous in determining what they classified as beautiful. In their deliberations, various areas of attractiveness were pondered and scrutinized. While some black women have adopted the American standard of beauty, others have accepted their exclusion. The women in this study were relatively confident in their sense of self, thereby less concerned with the model images of attractiveness. Results indicated the measures of waist-to-hip ratios, (WHR) of male attractiveness, equally lacked the curviness in the figures and shapes of Black-American women.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implications of the study found "cultural constructs" essential to understanding the perceptions of black women. The construction of reality materializes in the interpretation of one's lived experience. From infancy, the development of the self is nurtured within the ethnically derived cultural milieu of the significant others. The construction of identity and ethnic affiliation originate from socio-cultural factors and the fluidity of primary interactions, which are embedded within cultural constructs. Using this research as a foundation, the implications of this study illustrated the importance of exploring in-group commonalities and how these perceptions of reality bind black-females together

This research contends that sociologists must revitalize the discourse and re-examine approaches to culture, using ethnic specific characteristics as a viable context. In this, the potential of furthering the usage of culture from the abstract to the more definitive may be possible, by establishing a culture-specific index that can be used in quantitative data analysis. Furthermore, research rooted in ethnically-specific experiences, will incorporate the group's history and biography providing a holistic approach to attitudinal research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This research provided an insightful knowledge base, but there are several areas recommended for further study. As determined by the empirical data gathered "culture" was unequivocally the major factor in the perceptions and practices of the women interviewed, as opposed to any other measurement. In replicating this study, using the same indicators the perceptions of black males as a cross-comparative would be advantageous in determining whether there is collectiveness in Black cultural ideologies.

Further research is also needed on comparing specific West-African foods to Black-American food dishes. In particular, which West-African practices were transmitted comparatively to Black-American culture? What plantation foods can be compiled and which food items were eaten by slaves in the main house? Further study is needed on the cultural perceptions of West-African women compared to Black-American women on body image to determine differences and similarities in desired figures. Culturally sensitive body images that more accurately illustrates the Black-American females figure must be included into mainstream models. Thus, building off existing methodological approaches developing ethnic-specific indexes of black culture will be a step toward operationalizing culture. The use of quantitative measures would be used to categorize body mass index into individualized obesity measures that can be compared within and across ethnic groups.

Lastly, this research project has exceeded my original aspirations; however, this is just a step toward future explorations of culture. Social scientists have done a remarkable job advancing certain areas of culture, but we are also at the helm of continuously perpetuating gross misrepresentations and assumptions of Black-American culture. As sociologists, it is far past the time to correct our outdated suppositions.

APPENDIX
BROWNSVILLE HOUSING PROJECTS

The borough of Brooklyn, New York is divided into different geographical communities. The boundaries of these communities are designated by particular streets and bordering lines define other sections. Within the one square mile designated as the section of Brownsville, there are over 65,000 residents. ''Over half the population lives below the poverty line and receives public assistance (AFDC, Home Relief, Supplemental Security Income, and Medicaid)'' (Wikipedia, 2008, p. 1).

Brownsville has the highest concentration of public housing developments in the borough of Brooklyn. As a part of urbanized renewal, a significant number of semi-detached homes have been built around the concentrated public housing projects, which replaced vacant lots and abandoned tenements. The New York City Housing Authority, (NYCHA) manages at least eighteen low income housing projects within the geographical radius.

Violent crime based on drug addiction is rampant within the community. Since most families are headed by single women, poverty is generational. Brownsville has one of the highest crime rates in New York City and the 73rd precinct responds to most police calls in the neighborhood. The dropout rate is extremely high and students must pass through metal detectors to enter school. ''Many if not most males in the community have been arrested at some point in their lives'' (Wikipedia, 2008, p. 2). Police interaction is considered an inevitable occurrence.

For many areas in Brooklyn slogans are used by residents to define some depiction of character life. The area of Bedford-Stuyvesant, (also known as Bed-Stuy) is home to the Notorious BIG, borders Brownsville. The residential area consists predominantly of brownstone row houses. The slogan for Bed-Stuy is ''I'm from do or die, Bed Stuy''. The slogan for Brownville is ''*I'm from the ville, never ran, never will*'', an ideology that many youth follow as a doctrine.

The harsh reality of growing up in Brownsville is that many never successfully make it out alive. The common practices among youth in the middle class, such as college selection, after school activities and driving at sixteen are almost non-existent conversations for youth growing up in Brownsville. Instead, planning for the future was an afterthought, when every day the primary struggle and emphasis was on survival.

I grew up in Van Dyke projects on Sutter Avenue, in the heart of Brownsville, which was in close proximity to the Main Avenue, then Stone Avenue. The 73rd precinct was roughly five blocks away in the opposite direction, but police substations were all over Brownsville. On Stone Avenue (now known as Mother Gaston), was where the bodegas, liquor stores, barber shops, cleaners, among others shops led to the markets. During the day, the area was filled with people, but one should never let their guard down by some false sense of protection because the potential of dying could come at any hour. There were several side streets with abandoned buildings, which were havens for the local junkies. [51] Brownsville, a place where reputation meant everything and the code of the streets, was you never backed down and engaged when you had to. When the sun went down, many residents went inside because of the frequency in random gunshots. The fear of being hit by a stray bullet was quite likely, since bullets had no names.

I was referred to as a house girl that indicated most, if not all of my movements were tracked by my parents and my time outside was limited. My mother was a firm believer in the street light rule. When the street lights went on, you had better be in the house. There were rarely any acceptations to the rule and certainly no compromises were made. While I loathed the over-protection and lack of freedom from their watchful eye, I was mindful of their requests. For reasons that now seem obvious, the streets were dangerous and it was their way of protecting me from the negative.

[51] "Weed-wild lots dotted the landscape. Some brick dwellings were constructed on side streets, but mostly the deterioration continued unabated. The 1960s brought a scourge of heroin, the living dead who scratched like chickens through the torched and abandoned private buildings around the projects" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 5).

My father was a main presence on the Ave; nothing ever went under his radar. In Brownsville, my father was privy to a lot of information, so every move I made was under scrutiny and any mishaps certainly reached his ears by nightfall. Since so many people knew my parents or grandmother in one way or another, the watchful eyes were extended. The likelihood of getting caught in a bad situation served as a deterrent, which made me walk a straighter line than most other children in the neighborhood.

As mentioned in the introduction, my grandmother worked for the housing authority, so her interaction with the police was always positive. She spear-headed citizen patrols in the neighborhood that worked in conjunction with the police, geared at making the projects safe. On tenant patrol evenings, citizens volunteered their time on different days and shifts. A table, chairs and telephone were set up in the lobby, and non-residents were required to sign in a log. The back door of the housing project was pad locked with a chain link, forcing only a lobby entrance to the building. While I often thought she was fighting a losing battle, people respected her efforts. On brief occasions, tenant patrol members were required to call for police assistance. From the sidelines, I observed the police as an arrest was conducted. Most often, when police presence was required situations were diffused quickly and by any means necessary.

In Greg Donaldson's book*, The Ville: Cops and Kids in Urban America,* the excerpts selected in the prologue provide a customary portrayal of life in the hood and youth interaction with the police. These excerpts have been extracted to provide the reader some background information on the place of my origins –the place recognized as home.

Many of the housing projects in Brownsville and East New York, "….are now some of the most dangerous spots on earth"(Donaldson, 1993, p. 4). "Here, murder is a curse laid on a people who have carried too many burdens, an unspeakable place where a segment of the African American population has found itself after a desperate journey" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 3).

> But outside the windows of their sector car are the streets of Brownsville and East New York, where there have been 185 murders in the past twelve months. Where it is so dangerous the bars have shut down for years, there are no movie theaters, and some newly renovated city-subsidized apartments on New Lots Avenue go unclaimed because of fear (Donaldson, 1993, p. 1).

As police respond to a ''shots fired'' call,

> As is almost always the case in Brownsville, the body is that of a young black man. The cops kneel down next to the figure and fumble for a few moments. They have no medical supplies, will not give mouth-to-mouth unless a child is dying. Nor will they carry the man to their patrol car and whisk him to Brookdale Hospital, the way they would if this were a10-13, an officer shot….One officer reports over his radio that the young man is "likely, "police jargon for either dead or soon likely to be….an EMS technician in a green uniform hustles out and verifies the "likely" report. The boy is already dead (Ibid, 1993, p. 2).

For the police, this is only one call of many that they will respond to. As the weather warms, the calls for police assistance will magnify. The older residents often mimicked that hot weather breed's discontent. As the sun rises over the projects of Brownsville, there is a sense of hopelessness in the air. It's a new day, another chance for making a dollar in the streets of a war zone; you could only hope that by sundown you would live to see another day.

> At first there were dreams, a trip from the South to New York, better schools, escape from poverty, segregation, and that deep dust of hatred. Some grabbed the frayed rope of opportunity and hoisted themselves up and out of the neighborhood. Others snatched up the city-subsidized mortgages and carved out a homestead. But for many the hope flickered. The dream faded to simple pleasures, pocket money, girlfriends. Youths like the one that fell tonight found fast friends, squeezed thick nuts of bills in their pockets. Trouble. The parents watched and worried. Soon the worry wasn't a sharp twinge but a dull presence, and every time this young man left home there was the possibility he would not come back. He was so alive and so close to death. He was a son of Brownsville. Then, murder most predictable (Ibid, 1993, p. 5).

ILLUSTRATION #3: BROWNSVILLE: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Van Dyke Housing Project

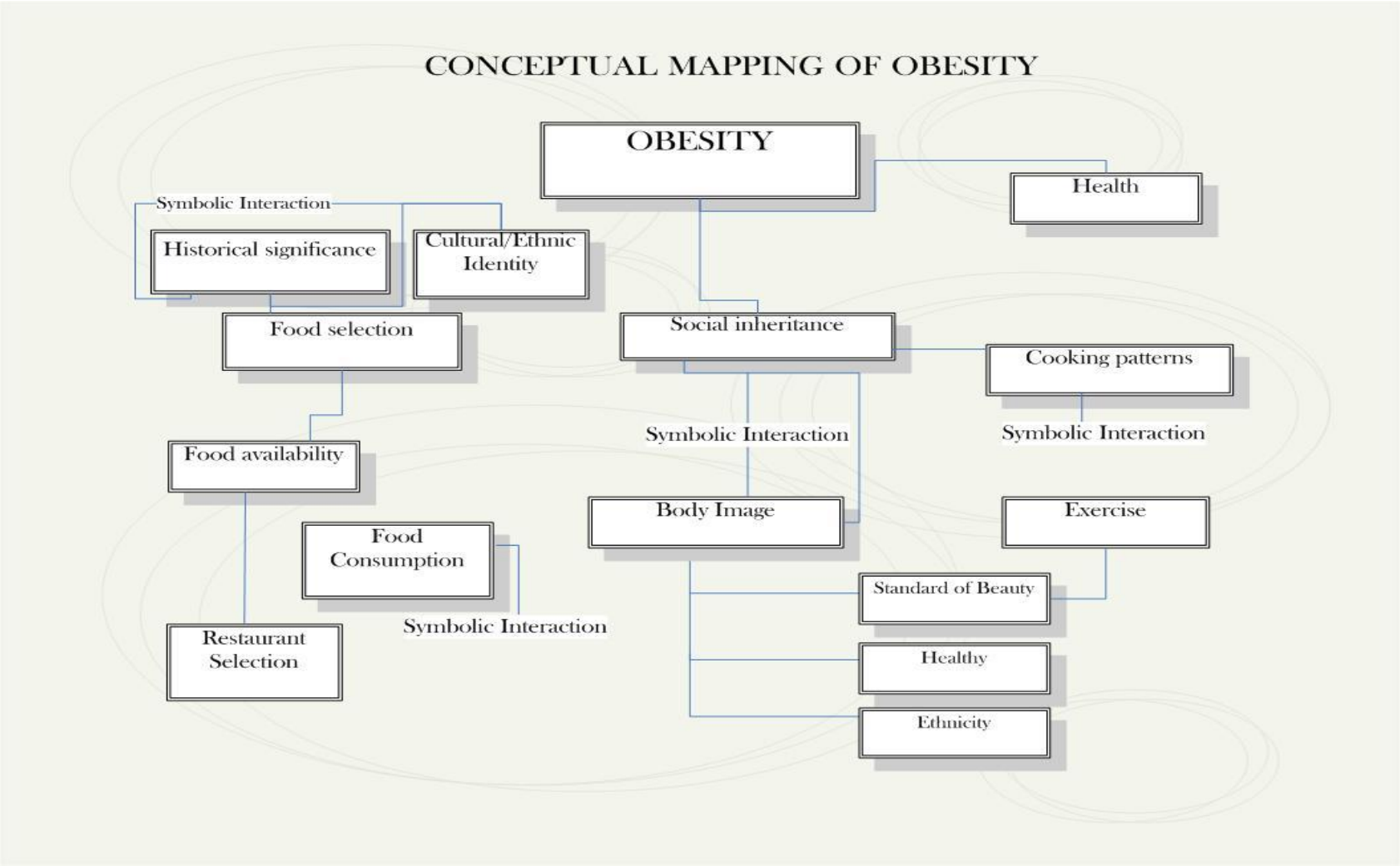


Chart 2: Original Map of Obesity Project,(Greene, 2006).

Nzinga Mbemba (Afonso I)

LETTERS TO THE KING OF PORTUGAL

The largest state in central West Africa by 1500 was the kingdom of Kongo, stretching along the estuary of the Congo River in territory that today lies within the nations of Angola and Zaire. In 1483 the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cao made contact with Kongo and several years later visited its inland capital. When he sailed home he brought with him Kongo emissaries, whom King Nzinga a Kuwu dispatched to Lisbon to learn European ways. They returned in 1491 accompanied by Portuguese priests, artisans, and soldiers, who brought with them a wide variety of European good, including aprinting press. In the same year, the king and his son, Nzinga Mbemba, were baptized into the Catholic faith.

Around 1506 Nzinga Mbemba, whose Christian name was Afonso, succeeded his father and ruled until about 1543. Afonso promoted the introduction of European culture in his kingdom by adopting Christianity as the state religion (although most of his subjects, especially those in the hinterlands, were unaffected), imitating the etiquette of the Portuguese royal court, and using Portuguese as the l language of state business. His son Henrique was educated in Portugal and returned to serve as West Africa's first black Roman Catholic bishop. European firearms, horses, and cattle, as well as new foods from the Americas, became common in Kongo, and Afonso dreamed of achieving a powerful and prosperous state through cooperation with the Europeans. By the time of his death, however, his kingdom verged on disintegration, in no small measure because of the Portuguese. As many later African rulers were to discover, the introduction of European products and customs caused widespread dissension and instability. Worse yet, the unceasing Portuguese pursuit of slaves undermined Afonso's authority and made his subjects restive.

In 1526, the desperate king wrote the following three letters to King Joao III of Portugal, urging him to control his rapacious subjects. The documents are part of a collection of twenty-four letters that Afonso and his Portuguese-educated, native secretaries dispatched to two successive kings of Portugal on a variety of issues. the collection is our earliest extant source of African commentary on the European impact.

JULY 6, 1526

Sir, Your Highness should know how our Kingdom is being lost in so many ways that it is convenient to provide for the necessary remedy, since this is caused by the excessive freedom given by your agents and officials to the men and merchants who are allowed to come to this Kingdom to set up shops with goods and many things which have been prohibited by us, and which they spread throughout our Kingdoms and Domains in such an abundance that many of our vassals, whom we had in obedience, do not comply because they have the things in greater abundance than we ourselves; and it was with these things that we had them content and subjected under our vassalage and jurisdiction, so it is doing a great harm not only to the service of God, but the security and peace of our Kingdoms and State as well.

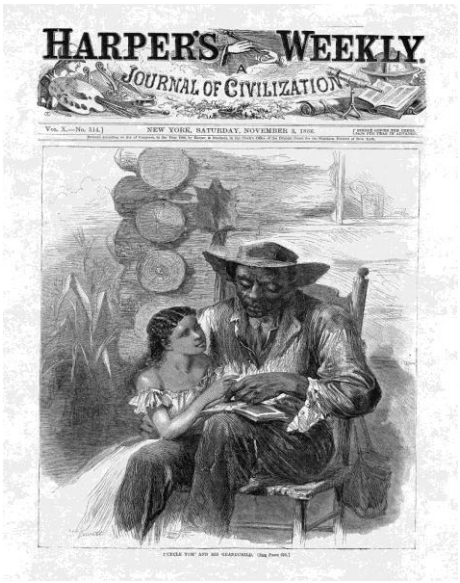
And we cannot reckon on how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom which they are ambitious of; they grab them and get them to be sold; and so great, Sir, is the corruption of licentiousness that our country is being completely depopulated, and Your highness should not agree with this nor accept it as in your service. And to avoid it we need from those (your) Kingdoms no more than some priests and a few people to teach in schools, and no other goods, except wine and flour for the holy sacrament. That is why we beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter, commanding your agents that they should not send here either merchants or wares, because it is our will that in these Kingdoms there should not be any trade of slaves nor outlet for them [emphasis in original]. Concerning what is referred above, again we beg of Your Highness to agree with it, since otherwise we cannot remedy such an obvious damage. Pray Our Lord in His mercy to have Your Highness under His guard and let you do for ever the things of His service. I kiss your hands many times.

The King, Dom Afonso.

ILLUSTRATION #4: JIM CROW

Thomas Dartmouth Rice "Jim Crow" Minstrel Illustration

ILLUSTRATION #5: UNCLE TOM



Uncle Tom[52]

ILLUSTRATION #6: UNCLE BEN

"Some people eat rice with chopsticks. Some use a fork. I say use a money saving coupon and eat it anyway you like."

[52]Illustration is from Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization, "Uncle Tom and His Grandchild," November 3, 1866, p. 689. Retrieved on May 24th, 2008 from http://blackhistory.harpweek.com/default.htm.

THE LEGENDARY MAMMY ARCHETYPE IN POEM

Fat Aunt Bess is older than Time
But her eyes still shine like a bright, new dime,
Though two generations have gone to rest
On the sleepy mountain of her breast.
Wingate children in Wingate Hall,
From the first weak cry in the bearing-bed
She has petted and punished them, one and all,
She has closed their eyes when they lay dead.
She raised Marse Billy when he was puny,
She cared for the Squire when he got loony,
Fed him and washed him and combed his head,
Nobody else would do instead.
The matriarch of the weak and the young,
The lazy crooning, comforting tongue.
She has had children of her own,
But the white-skinned ones are bone of her bone.
They may not be hers, but she is theirs,
And if the shares were unequal shares,
She does not know it, now she is old.
They will keep her out of the rain and cold.
And some were naughty, and some were good,
But she will be warm while they have wood,
Rule them and spoil them and play physician
With the vast, insensate force of tradition,
Half a nuisance and half a mother
And legally neither one nor the other,
Till at last they follow her to her grave,
The family-despot, and the slave.
—Curious blossom from bitter ground,
Master of masters who left you bound,
Who shall unravel the mingled strands
Or read the anomaly of your hands?
They have made you a shrine and a humorous fable,
But they kept you a slave while they were able,
And yet, there was something between the two
That you shared with them and they shared with you,
Brittle and dim, but a streak of gold,
A genuine kindness, unbought, unsold,
Graciousness founded on hopeless wrong
But queerly living and queerly strong.…[53]

[53] Patton, P. (1993). Mammy: Her Life and Times, American Heritage provides Stephen Vincent Benét epic poem John Brown's Body (1927) about the Civil War referenced the Mammy archetype.

ILLUSTRATION #7: LANDMARK RESTAURANT "MAMMY'S CUPBOARD"

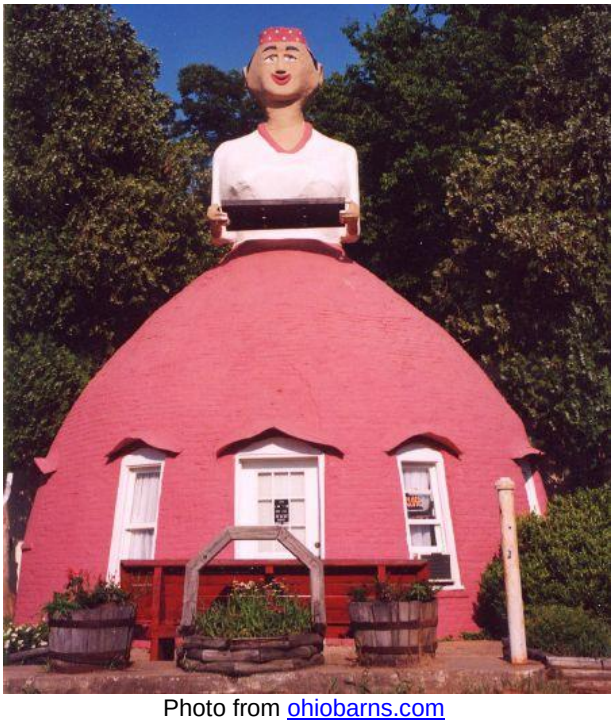
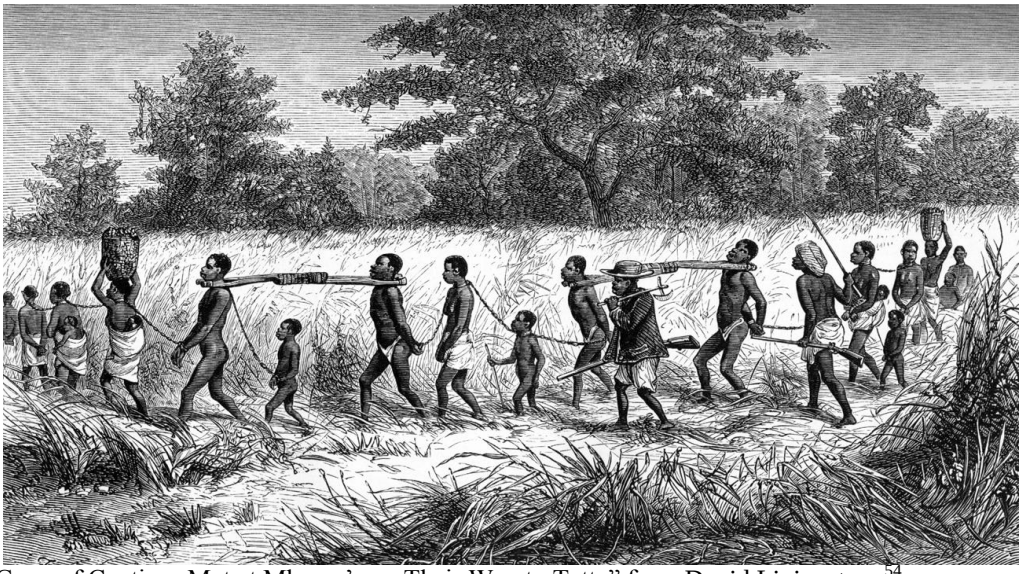


Photo from ohiobarns.com

ILLUSTRATION #8: FROM BARTER TO ENSLAVEMENT



"Gang of Captives Met at Mbame's on Their Way to Tette" from David Livingstone[54]

[54]David Livingstone,1813-1873, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa,(* pp. 355-57)

Billie Holiday
Lyrics to "God Bless the Child"

Them that's got shall get
Them that's not shall lose
So the Bible said and it still is news
Mama may have, papa may have
But God bless the child that's got his own
That's got his own

Yes, the strong gets more
While the weak ones fade
Empty pockets don't ever make the grade
Mama may have, papa may have
But God bless the child that's got his own
That's got his own

Money, you've got lots of friends
Crowding round the door
When you're gone, spending ends
They don't come no more
Rich relations give
Crust of bread and such
You can help yourself
But don't take too much
Mama may have, papa may have
But God bless the child that's got his own
That's got his own

Mama may have, papa may have
But God bless the child that's got his own
That's got his own
He just worry bout nothin
Cause he's got his own

DISSERTATION SURVEY INSTRUMENT

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF OBESITY, FOOD HABITS AND BODY IMAGE IN BLACK-AMERICAN WOMEN IN COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

Dissertation Survey/ Department of Rural Sociology 2005

Fictitious Name: _____ / Survey No. _____

1. What racial category would you classify yourself? ☐ Caucasian ☐ Black-American ☐ Asian ☐ Hispanic/White ☐ Hispanic/Non-White ☐ Native American ☐ Bi-racial If, bi-racial what racial classifications best describes you? _____.

2. What is your current age?_____.

3. What is your highest level of education?

(Low SES) (Low/mid SES) (High SES)

☐ <High School ☐ High School/GED ☐ Some College/Trade School ☐ College Degree ☐ Professional Degree ☐ Post Graduate Degree

4. Are you employed? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Retired ☐ Student ☐ Stay home parent ☐ Other_____

5. Do you work: ☐ FT ☐ PT ☐ Temporary **If employed, what do you do for lunch?**

☐ Bring lunch from home ☐ go out to purchase lunch ☐ purchase lunch in company cafeteria ☐ lunch is provided at the company's expense as part of your job ☐ Other _____

6. Marital Status: ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Separated ☐ Widowed ☐ Living together

7. How many dependent children under the age of 18 do you have?

☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 or more

8. What are their ages?

1. _____ 2._____ 3. _____ 4._____ 5. _____ 6._____

9. Are there other people that live with you? ☐ Yes ☐ No If yes, who _____

10. Do you attend any social/civic meeting, such as ☐ PTA ☐ Church ☐ Mothers Club ☐ None ☐ Other_____, if so, how often _____.

11. How important is religion to you? ☐ Extremely imp. ☐ Fairly Imp. ☐ Not too imp. ☐ Unimp.

12. Where are your family origins from? ☐ South ☐ North ☐ Midwest ☐ West ☐ Other_____
Place: _____. Where were you born? _____.

13. You mentioned your family was originally from _____ could you talk a little about how your family cooked and who was responsible for most of the cooking?

_____
_____

14. Discuss any particular "cooking traditions" you remember as a child?

_____
_____

15. Discuss what family holidays were like when growing up? Describe some of the foods you remember?

_____
_____

16. When you were a child, how often were desserts prepared weekly? (Total number per week)

☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7

17. Name three favorite desserts often served when you were growing up:
1. _____ 2._____ 3. _____

18. Discuss a typical Thanksgiving Holiday? (Probe: Where do they gather and what are the interactions?)

_____
_____

19. Describe family barbeques: (Probe various types of food and social interaction)

_____
_____

20. Describe a typical family dinner at your home?

_____
_____

21. Talk a little about how you learned to cook? (Probe: From whom)

_____
_____

22. Who currently cooks in your home? _____

23. How many times per week does your family eat dinner together?

☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7

24. Do you eat by: ☐ portions ☐ nibble ☐ until full ☐ other _____

25. How often do you get to go out to dinner?

☐ Weekly ☐ Bi-weekly ☐ Monthly ☐ Special Occasions ☐ Never ☐ Other_____

26. What is your favorite type of dine-in restaurant? Indicate two choices and how often per/wk?

☐ Buffet Style (e.g., Golden Coral, Ryan's) Times per week: _____

☐ Fast Food (e.g., McDonalds, Burger King) Times per week: _____

☐ Breakfast Style (e.g., IHOP, Waffle House) Times per week: _____

☐ Bar & Grill (e.g. Ruby Tuesday, Chili's) Times per week: _____

☐ Theme Style (e.g., Red Lobster, Olive Garden) Times per week: _____

☐ Broad Menu (e.g., Everett's, Chris McDs) Times per week: _____

☐ Specialty Style (e.g., Chinese, Mexican) Times per week: _____

☐ Other_____

27. What makes these restaurants attractive? ☐ Cost ☐ Variety ☐ Décor ☐ Favorite item ☐ Other_____

28. How do you choose the restaurants you attend? ☐ Quantity ☐ Quality ☐ Variety ☐ Time ☐ Nutrition

☐ Other_____.

29. Which of these snack foods do you eat most commonly? Circle how often do you eat them per week?

☐ Fresh fruits x per week: ___ ☐ Brownies x per week: ___ ☐ Pies x per week: __ ☐ Danish x per week: _____

☐ Cake x per week: ___ ☐ Popcorn x per week: ____ ☐ Strudel x per week: ____ ☐ Candy x per week: _____

☐ Pretzels x per week:____ ☐ Donuts x per week: ____ ☐ Granola bar x per week: ___ ☐ Peanuts x per week: ___

☐ Dried Fruits x per wk: __ ☐ Potato Chips x per week: _ ☐ Cookies x per week: ____ ☐ Do not eat snack foods

☐ Other _____

30. What types of frozen meals do you most often eat? How often do you eat the items you selected?

☐ Stouffers How often per week:

☐ Banquet How often per week:

☐ Pizza How often per week:

☐ Michelina's How often per week:

☐ Other Brand _____ How often per week:

31. What are your favorite drinks? How often do you drink the items you selected?

☐ Diet Soda (e.g., 7up, Pepsi, Coca-Cola) How often per week:_____ ☐ Soda (e.g., 7up, Pepsi, Coca-Cola) How often per week:_____

☐ Flavored Drinks & Ice tea w/ sugar (e.g., Snapple, Mystic) How often per week:_____

☐ Unsweetened Drinks (e, g., Ice tea & Lemonade) How often per week: _____

☐ Milk /Milkshake How often per week:_____

☐ Mixed Alcohol/Beer How often per week:_____

☐ Hot Beverage (e.g., coffee, tea) How often per week:_____

☐ 100% Juice (Unsweetened) ☐ 100% Juice (sweetened) How often per week:_____

☐ Water/ ☐ Other _____ How often per week:_____

32. "Soul food" is very high in fat. ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Don't Know

33. Do you feel adding butter, smoked turkey wings, oil, ham hocks or vegetables are necessary for food to taste good?

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Don't Know

34. Please rank what cooking method do you prefer?

___Boiled ____Steamed ___Fried ___Grilled ____Barbequed ___Baked ___ Other

35. Discuss what types of food/meals you commonly make:

_____
_____
_____

36. How would you define "soul food"?

_____
_____

37. Can you recognize "soul food" when you see it? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know

38. How do you recognize soul food?_____
_____
_____

39. List some things you consider "soul food":

1. _____2._____ 3._____ 4._____ 5. _____

40. Is there a difference between soul food and southern food? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know
If yes, please explain the difference_____
_____
_____

41. Please check the items you eat? How many times per/week do you eat them?

☐ Rabbit & Gravy____ ☐ Bacon____ ☐ Cornbread____ ☐ Chitlins ____ ☐ Frog Legs ___

☐ Mac & Cheese ____ ☐ Grits ___ ☐ Pork chops___ ☐ Smoked Ham___ ☐ Pig Feet____

☐ Sweet Potatoes___ ☐ Fat Back ___ ☐ Fried Eggs___ ☐ Pork Skins____ ☐ Ox Tails____

☐ Ham Hocks ____ ☐ Lima beans___ ☐ Pork Ribs___ ☐ Collard greens w/o Meat____

☐ Black-eye pea's ____ ☐ Pork Sausage___ ☐ Pig Tails___ ☐ Fried Chicken___

☐ Coon & Potato____ ☐ Fried Fish___ ☐ Turnip greens___ ☐ Possum & Potatoes ___

☐ Fried Gator Tail___ ☐ Hog Head Cheese___ ☐ Collard greens w/Meat ☐ Other _____

42. Do you feel Caucasians eat in a similar fashion as African Americans?

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Don't Know ☐ Other _____

43. Are there any foods that you ate growing up that you no longer eat? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know

44. Why do you no longer eat them? ☐ Cannot find ☐ Cost ☐ Fattening ☐ Don't Know ☐ Other___

45. Is there a "black culture"? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know

46. How would you define black culture? (Probe, meaning) Discuss whether you feel there is a difference in "black culture" based on region?
_____
_____

47. Can you list a few things unique to "black culture" that you believe does not exist in other cultures?

1. _____ 2._____ 3._____ 4._____

48. Do you feel some things society that should be solely attributed to Black America?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know. If yes, please list: 1. _____ 2._____ 3._____

49. Do you feel there are still barriers for Blacks in this society? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know

50. Please name four things you feel are still problems for Black Americans:

1. _____ 2._____ 3._____ 4._____

51. How did you come to understand "what it is to be black in our society"?

☐ Books ☐ Family ☐ Friends ☐ School ☐ Personal experiences ☐ Other_____

52. What were you taught was the role of black women?

_____
_____

53. Most often who pays the bills in your home? _____ (Probe: matriarch v. patriarch)

_____
_____

54. Do you have a favorite room in the house? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know. **If so, what room**_____

55. Hypothetical Question: If you were in a relationship where the man felt he was head of the household what attributes do you feel he must have?

_____
_____
_____

56. Hypothetical Question: Would you be accepting of a man who feels a woman's place is in the kitchen and in the bedroom? Probe what reaction they would have.

_____
_____

57. Hypothetical Question: What would the man have to have for you to be accepting of the role within the kitchen and in the bedroom?

_____
_____
_____

58. Discuss any important traditions you feel are important to pass to your children?

_____
_____
_____

59. How do you feel about women that say, "Exercise! I am exercising when I am working, running to the supermarket, picking up the children, cleaning the house, paying the bills….

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Don't Know ☐ Other _____

60. How often do you exercise? ☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Monthly ☐ Occasionally ☐ Never ☐ Other

61. What form of exercising do you most often use?

☐ Swimming ☐ Walking ☐ Bike riding/Cycling ☐ Aerobics Class ☐ Aquatic Classes ☐ Soccer

☐ Dance ☐ Tennis ☐ Running/Jogging ☐ Basketball ☐ Other _____

62. What are some of the reasons that limit your exercise?

☐ Time ☐ Work schedule ☐ Family responsibility ☐ Energy ☐ Other_____

63. How many family members exercise?_____

64. Do you exercise together? ☐ Yes ☐ No

65. Where do you exercise? ☐ Gym ☐ Neighborhood ☐ Video Tapes/Home ☐ Other_____

66. Some people feel that Black's maintain a poor diet, if you believe this is true what reasons would you provide to explain why?

☐ Not true ☐ Lack of access to healthy food ☐ Lack of knowledge on healthy food ☐ Tradition

☐ Lack of money ☐ Other _____

67. Why do you feel black's continue to eat food that nutrition guidelines consider unhealthy?

_____

_____

68. What do you consider healthy foods?

☐ Macaroni/Cheese ☐ Potato Salad ☐ Rice ☐ Macaroni Salad ☐ Celery ☐ Salads

☐ Fresh Fruits ☐ Fresh Vegetables ☐ Tuna ☐ Yogurt ☐ Sweet Potatoes ☐ Boiled Eggs ☐ Other ____

69. What types of (low-fat) foods are parts of your diet?

☐ Fresh Fruits ☐ Fresh Vegetables ☐ Tuna ☐ Yogurt ☐ Celery ☐ Salads ☐ Boiled Eggs ☐ Spinach ☐ Other

70. When you have a problem (general, financial or otherwise) who do you go to?

☐ Parent ☐ Grandparent ☐ Spouse ☐ Relative ☐ Friend ☐ Neighbor ☐ No one ☐ Other_____

71. Who do you trust with car, house keys or personal items?

☐ Parent ☐ Grandparent ☐ Spouse ☐ Relative ☐ Friend ☐ Children ☐ Neighbor ☐ No one ☐ Other____

72. Who do you trust your children with?

☐ Parent ☐ Grandparent ☐ Spouse ☐ Relative ☐ Friend ☐ Neighbor ☐ Older people ☐ No one ☐ Other___

73. Who do you talk to when you have questions about food?

☐ Parent/Grandparent ☐ Nutritionist ☐ Cookbook ☐ Relative ☐ Friend ☐ No one ☐ Other_____

74. Who do you tend to get advice from that you consider valuable?

☐ Parent ☐ Spouse ☐ Professional ☐ Relative ☐ Friend ☐ Internet ☐ TV ☐ Grandparent

☐ Newspaper ☐ Library ☐ Self ☐ No one ☐ Books ☐ Other_____

75. If overweight, at what age were you first considered above normal weight?

☐ Birth - 4 ☐ 5-7 ☐ 8 - 11 ☐ 12 -16 ☐ 17-21 ☐ Other _____

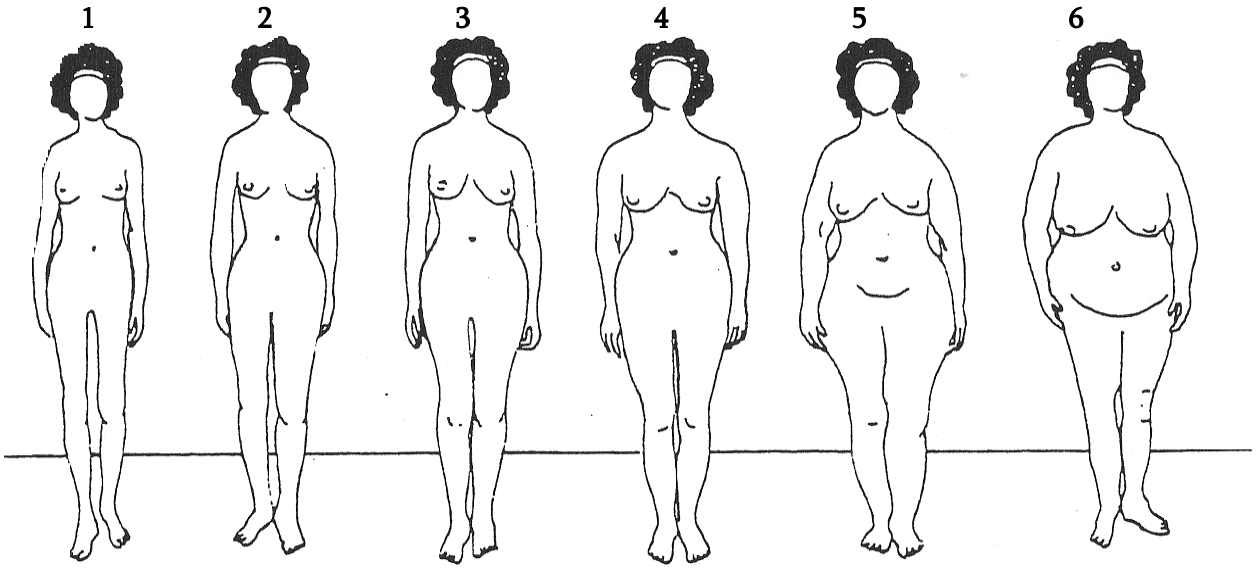
76. If you had a choice would you prefer a "thick" body frame or a "thin" frame? Probe: Why?

_____

_____

_____

77. Body Image: In each section select image that you feel best describes you: _____



78. Which drawing do you feel best describes how you would like to look? _____

79. Which drawing best describes how you think others view you? _____

80. Which of the phrases listed below would you use to describe yourself?

☐ Very underweight ☐ Slightly underweight ☐ Normal weight ☐ Slightly overweight ☐ Very overweight

81. Do you or any of your immediate family members have?

☐ High blood pressure ☐ Asthma ☐ Diabetes ☐ Heart Disease & Stoke ☐ None

82. Are any members of your family overweight? Check as many as apply

☐ Grandmother ☐ Mother ☐ Father ☐ Sister ☐ Brother ☐ Husband

☐ Significant other ☐ Daughter ☐ Son ☐ Cousins ☐ Aunt/Uncles ☐ None

83. Talk a little about your mother's build (Probe: weight and cooking patterns).

_____

_____

84. Talk a little about your grandmother's build (Probe: weight and cooking patterns).

_____

_____

85. Discuss your father's side of the family: (Probe mother/grandmother size & cooking patterns).

_____

_____

86. Discuss what you were taught (from mother/grandmother) beauty is? How was beauty defined? (Probe: appearance, inside, how you carry yourself)

_____

_____

87. What do you perceive as beauty?

_____

_____

88. What do you believe men want in their women?

_____

_____

89. What do you think men believe is beauty? (Probe: Why?)

_____

_____

90. Do you believe men are interested in "oversized" women? (Probe: Why?)

_____

_____

91. Have you tried to lose weight? If so, what weight loss methods have you used?

☐ Jenny Craig ☐ Weight Watchers ☐ Medical Consultation ☐ Liposuction

☐ Gastroplasty ☐ Stomach Staple ☐ Non-prescription meds ☐ South Beach Diet

☐ Dr. Atkins Diet ☐ Low Carb. Diet ☐ Prescription meds ☐ Exercise/Video Tapes

☐ Nutritionist ☐ Other_____

92. How long have you tried to lose weight?

☐ Weeks ☐ Months ☐ One year ☐ Five years ☐ Seven years ☐ Ten years

☐ >Ten years ☐ Always struggled with weight loss ☐ Never tried to weight loss ☐ Other_____

93. When do you shop for clothing to wear?

☐ Specific occasions ☐ Seasonal ☐ Payday ☐ Every week ☐ When depressed ☐ Other ___

94. What type of clothing best matches your taste? What do you prefer to wear?

☐ Fashionable/Fad ☐ Sporty ☐ Conservative/Business ☐ Elegant ☐ Comfortable

☐ All of them ☐ None ☐ Other _____

95. Do you prefer to wear clothes that: ☐ Show Shape ☐ Baggy ☐ Both ☐ Other _____

96. Discuss how you see yourself?

_____

_____

97. Discuss how you think others see you?

_____

_____

98. In the past 2 years, has your weight changed (unrelated to pregnancy)?

☐ Increased ☐ Decreased ☐ No change ☐ Don't Know

99. Which number best fits your feeling regarding the items below: (Body)

1. Would Change 2. Put up with 3. No feeling 4. Satisfied 5. Fortunate

___ Appetite ___ Energy Level ___ Face ___ Shape ___ Nose

___ Breasts ___ Feet ___ Health ___ Body Build ___ Hips

___ Teeth Appearance ___ Hair ___ Height ___ Legs ___ Posture

100. Which number best fits your feeling regarding the items below: (Self)

1. Would Change 2. Put up with 3. No feeling 4. Satisfied 5. Fortunate

___ Morals ___ Popularity ___ Self-respect ___ Make decisions

___ Taste in Clothes ___ Self-confidence ___ Self-discipline ___ Personality

___ Sense of duty ___Creativeness ___ Thoughtful ___ Sophistication

___ Life goals ___Emotional Control ___Will Power ___ Ability to lead

101. Please rank the people you see as beautiful?

____Jennifer Lopez	____Lena Horne	____ Jessica Simpson
____Ashanti	____Halle Berry	____ Vanessa Williams
____Cameron Diaz	____Monique	____ Britney Spears
____Starr Jones	____Tyra Banks	____ Diana Ross
____Other	____ Don't Know	____ None of those listed

Body Satisfaction

Please consider how you feel about your body. When looking at this drawing, write the number that goes with the drawing in the blank to the right. **CHOOSE ONLY ONE drawing for each question.** Remember there is no right or wrong answers.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

102. Which drawing do you feel best describes your appearance? _____

103. Which drawing do you feel best describes how you would like to look? _____

104. Which drawing best describes how you think others view you? _____

105. Do you feel your figure is?

☐ Very attractive ☐ Pretty attractive ☐ Somewhat attractive ☐ Not attractive ☐ Very unattractive

106. What do you consider an ideal weight for yourself? _____

107. Please rank the most important reasons you feel it is difficult for you to change exercise/food habits?

____Time ____Money ___Tradition ___Energy ___Family Responsibility ___ Work Schedule

___Religious Reason ____None ____Other

108. WEIGHT SATISFACTION Use the 1 to 5 scale to indicate how satisfied you are with your ***weight:***				
1 Extremely dissatisfied	2 Somewhat dissatisfied	3 Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied	4 Somewhat Satisfied	5 Extremely Satisfied

109. Which supermarket do you most frequently shop in Columbia?

☐ Schnucks ☐ Gerbes ☐ Wal-Mart ☐ Nowell ☐ Mosers ☐ Hy-Vee ☐ Patricia's ☐ Aldi

110. Why do you shop there? ☐ Walking distance ☐ Fresh meats ☐ Fresh vegetables ☐ Price ☐ Convenient

☐ Other _____

111. How far do you live from the supermarket which you frequent? _____

112. Is the store visually pleasing to the eye when you walk in?

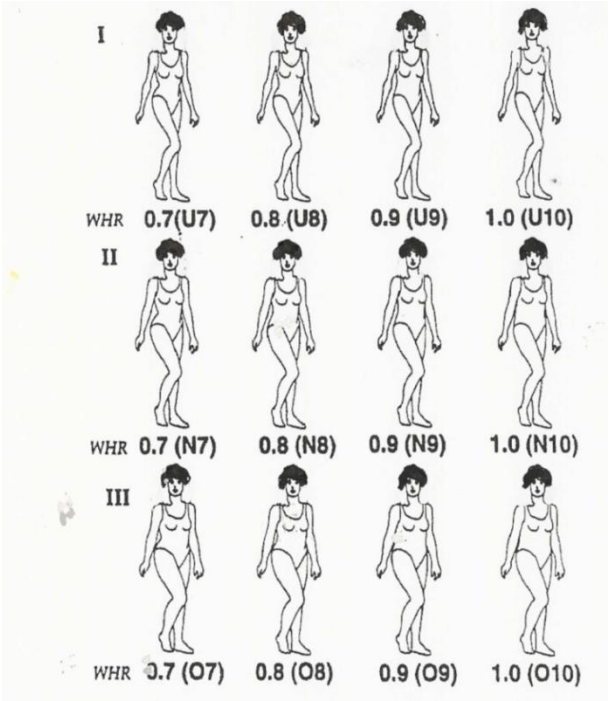
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Does not matter ☐ Other _____

113. Health Component:

Small Frame

Medium Frame

Large Frame



114. Which drawing do you feel best describes your appearance?_____

115. Which drawing do you feel best describes how you would like to look? _____

116. Which drawing best describes how you think others view you? _____

117. What does healthy mean to you? (Barrier)

_____
_____
_____

118. Are there particular vegetables you feel Black-Americans do not buy?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know. If yes, please list four vegetables they do not seem to purchase

1. _____ 2._____ 3._____ 4._____.

119. What best *describes* your view on why Black-Americans do not buy the foods you listed?

☐ Do not see it as "real" food ☐ Do not see it as not part of the culture ☐ Does not taste good

☐ Cost too much ☐ All of the above ☐ None of the above ☐ Other_____

120.Are you familiar with some of the agencies that are promoting African Americans to eat healthier foods?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know

121. If yes, do you feel they are being successful at promoting healthier food habits to Black-Americans?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't particularly care. ☐ Other _____

122. If no, why do you feel these agencies are not making a significant impact on the "black community?"

☐ Not sensitive to Black-American Diet ☐ Do not understand the culture ☐ No incentives are given

☐ Are not visually in the community ☐ Other _____

123. What approach can these agencies use in helping change cooking habits and consumption patterns?

☐ More information ☐ Educational Awareness taught in Public Schools ☐ Workshops on food ☐ Subsidize Cost ☐ Community Focus: Teach healthy cooking classes in local community center

☐ Provide it Free ☐ Hand out or Post flyers throughout the community.

Will not change: ☐ because it is not part of "black culture" ☐ because it is not "real" ☐ Other _____

124. Are Black-American women more obese than any other group? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know

125. If yes, why do you feel African American women are more obese?

_____
_____
_____
_____

126. Income Level:

☐ < 5,000 ☐ 5,000 - 9,999 ☐ 10,000 - 14,999 ☐ 15,000 - 19,999 ☐ 20,000 - 24,999

☐ 25,000 - 29,999 ☐ 30,000 - 39,999 ☐ 40,000 - 59,999 ☐ 60,000 - 79,999 ☐ >80,000

127. Stress: How satisfied are you with your present financial situation?

☐ Completely satisfied ☐ Not satisfied at all ☐ Don't Know ☐ Other_____

128. How do your finances usually work out at the end of the month?

☐ Some money left over ☐ Not enough money ☐ Just enough money left over

129. What social class best describes you?

☐ Upper ☐ Upper/Middle ☐ Upper/Lower ☐ Middle/Upper ☐ Middle/Middle ☐ Middle/Lower ☐ Upper Working Class ☐ Middle Working Class ☐ Lower Working Class ☐ Other _____.

130. Height: _____

131. Weight: _____

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