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Creating Narratives through Art as Self-Definition for Black Women

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine ways in which Black female artists have created narratives through art as self-definition. These artists have responded to stereotypical stories and images of Black women by creating self-defined stories and images. This study specifically focused on Faith Ringgold because she has combined narrative and visual art in story quilts that present Black women as empowered, multidimensional people. Her story quilt *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* reclaims the narrative of the stereotypical Black mammy character, Jemima. Ringgold depicts Jemima as a liberated, dynamic entrepreneur and family woman. In creating positive characterizations of Black women, Ringgold does not flatten her characters. They are rounded with all the complexities that come with being human.

Themes of self-definition were further investigated through narrative inquiry of biographies of twenty-five notable Black women artists of the twentieth century. The artists are from a variety of time periods within the twentieth century and include painters, sculptors, collage artists, fabric artists, and photographers. Their biographies were thematically analyzed. Findings showed that about half of the artists clearly intended to express self-definition through their art in response to stereotypes of Black women. The overwhelming majority of this half were not only concerned with creating an image of self, but also with depicting Black women in general in a positive light, illustrating them as diverse, complex people.

BACKGROUND

Self-definition is especially important for Black women because they experience the intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism (Copeland, 1977), which both contribute to the creation and perpetuation of controlling images of Black womanhood (Collins, 2000). According to Collins (2000), rather than accepting these images, Black women have “crafted identities designed to empower them[selves]” (pp. 97-98).

Hood (2001) suggests there is a long tradition of Black women who have used the arts to express self-definition. Faith Ringgold (Figure 1), who makes story quilts telling her lived experience and larger stories of Black women (Koppman, 1991), stood out to me among the Black women artists I researched as the one who speaks most directly to the importance of self-definition through narrative and art.

In her story quilt, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* (Figure 2), Ringgold (1996) deals directly with a controlling image of Black

womanhood—Aunt Jemima (Figure 3). Aunt Jemima was a mammy figure used as the face of a pancake mix (Morgan, 1995). She existed beyond the box. Smith (1999) points out that “a systematic effort was made to give Aunt Jemima a personal history and make her a ‘real southern cook’” (p. 351). Aunt Jemima’s portrayal as a one-dimensional happy servant “obscured the reality of Black people’s lives” (Ritterhouse, 2009, p. 185). With her story quilt, Ringgold changes the narrative. She develops the protagonist, Jemima Blakey, as a multidimensional empowered businesswoman (Ringgold, 1996). Accordingly, Hudson (1995) suggests that “understanding the power of image to construe a social reality,” Black artists have taken on the work to “convey Black life more realistically” (pp. 136-137).

The identification of themes of self-definition in Faith Ringgold’s work led to narrative inquiry of stories of other Black women artists.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

METHODS

The methods for this study are based on narrative inquiry, which is “a way of understanding experience...the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives...stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). I applied narrative inquiry by reading and thematically analyzing biographies of twenty-five of the most prominent Black women artists of the twentieth century. These biographies came from “African American Women Artists,” a section of the book *Women Artists of Color: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook to 20th Century Artists in the Americas* (Farris, Kramer, & Wasserman, 1999). “This book attempts to provide a representative sample of older and/or deceased artists who helped pave the way for future generations; mature, midcareer mainstream artists with national/international reputations; and younger, emerging artists” (Farris, 1999, p. xiv). The artists include painters, sculptors, collage artists, fabric artists, and photographers.

I counted the number of the artists’ biographies that fit into two themes. The biography had to meet Theme One to be considered for Theme Two. Theme One is “artist rejects stereotypes and uses empowering images of self as a primary subject matter in her art.” Theme Two is “artist’s intention is not only to portray herself, but to portray Black women at large in a positive light.” For the theme to be counted, the biographer had to clearly state that theme; I did not leave it to my own interpretation.

RESULTS

Out of the total of twenty-five artist biographies, thirteen fit Theme One: “artist rejects stereotypes and uses empowering images of self as a primary subject matter in her art.” Out of the thirteen biographies that fit Theme One, twelve fit Theme Two: “artist’s intention is not only to portray herself, but to portray Black women at large in a positive light.”

Themes found in biographies of 25 of the most prominent Black women artists of the 20 th century	
Theme	Number of biographies
1. Artist rejects stereotypes and uses empowering images of self as a primary subject matter in her art.	13 out of 25
2. Artist’s intention is not only to portray herself, but to portray Black women at large in a positive light. (Must meet Theme One in order to be considered for Theme Two.)	12 out of 13

DISCUSSION

Considering the endless variety of subject matters that art can contain, the fact that thirteen out of twenty-five of the artists actively rejected stereotypes and used empowered images of self as a primary subject matter is significant. The overwhelming majority of the artists who used images of self as a primary subject matter did so not only to portray themselves, but also to convey a positive image of Black women as a whole. These artists have created their own sense of self via artistic narratives, and have also attempted to redefine the identity of their people.

It may seem counterproductive for one to attempt to define the identity of Black people as a whole in the name of self-definition. However, the artists represented in this research did not declare a single overarching Black identity. They presented complex narratives of multidimensional Blackness. They did not attempt to box people into one identity; they offered many possibilities of what Blackness can look like in response to pervasive stereotypical narratives.

This research is a starting point for further inquiry into the empowerment of women and people of color through art. Through this project, I have been exposed to concerns, challenges, and intentions of artists who use their art as a medium of self-definition. I am now prepared to interview, survey, and

hold focus groups with contemporary women artists and artists of color who make self-definition a primary focus of their work.

by M.M. Manning. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 30(2), 350-352.

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