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Creating Narratives Through Art as Self-Definition for Black Women
Shannon Snelgrove
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is 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 focuses on Faith Ringgold because she has combined narrative and visual art in story quilts that present Black women as empowered, multidimensional people. The concept of creating narratives through art as self-definition for Black women was further investigated through narrative inquiry and arts-based research.

Methods

My methods for this study are based on both narrative inquiry and arts-based research.

• Narrative Inquiry — “a way of understanding experience...the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives...stories lived and told.” (Clandinin, 2000, p. 20)
  • Specific methods will go here
  • ...
  • ... 

• Arts-based research — “the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience” (McNiff, 2007, p. 29)
  • Specific methods will go here
  • ...
  • ... 

Background

This study was exploratory and heuristic. I started off with a question very personal to me: Why are there so few Black women in the art program at my university? I discovered that finding the answer would not be as simple as distributing surveys; I would have to dive into the history of Black women in the arts. As I examined the history, I noticed a recurrent theme: Black women creating narratives through art as self-definition. This became my research topic.

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 themselves” (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, who makes story quilts telling her story and larger stories of Black women (Koppman, 1981), 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, Ringgold (1996) deals directly with a controlling image of Black womanhood—Aunt Jemima. 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 review of the work of Faith Ringgold led into arts-based research and narrative inquiry about Black women who have created narratives through art as self-definition.

Results

Building on a constructivist understanding of creating narratives through art as self-definition for Black women, I found that:

• Self-definition does not necessarily mean presenting oneself as perfect; it often means presenting oneself as a complex, multifaceted being with the freedom to express a range of emotion.

• Black women’s self-definitions are unique, while contributing the collective self-definition of Black womanhood as a diverse and empowered.

Discussion

• This research is a starting point for further inquiry into Black women’s empowerment through art.

• This research has equipped me with the background knowledge to interview Black women artists about using art as empowerment.

References


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• Collins station
• Ringgold stories
• Clandinin station

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