

The Pennsylvania State University

School of Visual Arts

Art Education Program

**PLEASURE (RE)COLLECTED BY YOUNG BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS
IN THE VIBRATOR PROJECT**

An Action Research Project in Art Education

by

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ABSTRACT

As action research, The Vibrator Project chronicles a collective learning experience of young Black women and girls ages 14-21. By way of dialogue with the study participants, we investigated the sexual narratives in their art, and I analyzed participants' perceptions of hypersexuality, unplanned pregnancy, and significant life choices influenced by racialized-class disparities. *Pleasure (re)Collected by Young Black Women and Girls in The Vibrator Project* provides insight into the action research design and methodology of this study in which each participant constructs and examines her own sexual narrative.

This study is a narrative inquiry that should serve as a scholarly contribution to the fields of Art Education, Women's Studies, Girlhood studies, Sexuality Studies, Black Studies, and Mental Health Studies. More than eighty participants have played a role in this study, seven of which participated in one-on-one interviews about their experiences. This study takes into consideration programming that has been facilitated with young Black women and girls over a two-year span.

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Without the support of my loving mother, the village of brilliant women who raised me, my father, and stepfather, I would not have been able to take advantage of the opportunities I have been awarded in my life. Such opportunities have given me a solid foundation, and paved the way for grand educational pursuits.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to Investigating Self-Knowledge of Sex, Sexuality, and Pleasure Among Young Black Women and Girls

I designed the study *Pleasure (re)Collected by Young Black Women and Girls in The Vibrator Project* to investigate the self-knowledge of young Black women and girls regarding their perceptions of sex, sexuality, and pleasure. In examining art-centered self-esteem programming with sexually active young women and girls designed to elicit self-awareness, I have been introduced to innovative ways of working with Black women and girls and been provided insight into a sexual culture that has been ill-perceived by society and therefore unaffected through any theoretical lens. This study is an analysis of young Black women's and girls' sexual self-knowledge. The activities of The Vibrator Project, journal reflections observing The Vibrator Project workshops, and records of one-on-one culminating interviews with the project participants, have functioned as the data for this analysis. I particularly sought to investigate how my art-centered self-esteem initiative has engaged young Black women and girls in valuing their body and considering their futures.

A decade of work and program development with Black women and girls have become the impetus for a research endeavor with goals to design teaching methods as social activism that combat an epidemic of unplanned pregnancy and ignorance with respect to the body, reproductive health, and sex and sexuality. Sexuality as it relates to childhood has become an increasingly major theme in my personal and professional work with young Black women and girls. As a result, I have pondered over my own childhood

and upbringing, and attempted to construct a personal narrative around sexuality. I have considered not only experiences, but also elements of visual culture and mass media that may have influenced my sexuality or my feelings about sex. I have compared these findings to models of moral panic¹ currently being erected around women and girls in contemporary society. What I understand is that while I wasn't sheltered from certain notions of sex and sexuality (i.e., love scenes in movies, TV shows, and books), there was an element of innocence that shielded me. I was not an ignorant person because I was a child, but still a *child* in my thinking. I realized from this personal inquiry that it is possible for young women and girls to be both sexual beings and child-like beings; and that it is the adult mind that is responsible for forcing lasciviousness onto the relationship between child and sex/sexuality.

Problematizing the Situation: Are Young Black Women and Girls Choosing to be Unintentional? — Kella's Story

I met Kella² in 2005 after moving to Savannah, Georgia to attend graduate school. In addition to school, I had landed my first professional job working as a Program Specialist for the Girl Scout Council of Savannah, Inc. I worked in housing communities, and schools that were deemed *at-risk* by bringing the Girl Scout program model to a non-

¹ Mauro and Joffe (2009) have studied a model of moral panic that emphasizes the restructuring of sexual policy in the United States during the Bush administration (2001-2008). The George W. Bush Administration marks the beginning of the newest wave of “political dominance by sexual conservatives”. (Mauro & Joffe, 2007) In addition, Janice Irvine (2009) theorizes “sex panics and the politics of emotions” as it relates to the concept of childhood innocence in United States culture and society.

² This is a Penn State Internal Review Board approved study that utilizes pseudonyms in the place of participants' actual names.

traditional³ audience of girls and their communities. I was a Girl Scout professional by day, and a photography student by night.

Kella was in the eighth grade and a member of the Girls Scout Troop at Fred Wessels⁴ Community Center. Not long after our meeting we formed a closer bond, making plans outside of Girl Scout meeting time. Kella found that she was able to confide in me as mentor and felt there was much to be gained from the two of us sharing such a bond. Her mother was happy and comfortable to know that someone like myself had taken an interest in Kella. Soon after, I became a close relative to her family. Her mother often times, would call me to ask for advice or interference on typical concerns about Kella and her “coming of age”.

In a particular instance, Kella’s mom called a colleague and me to express her distress over learning that Kella was sexually active. She begged for assistance with talking to Kella from a concern for unplanned pregnancy, sexual transmitted disease, and other possible consequences of sexual intercourse. After talking to Kella about this development, I was assured of her well-being because she felt she was acting safely and knowledgably in sexual activity. However, Kella revealed that she felt ignored by her family, being stuck having to babysit her three younger siblings and a host of cousins and friends almost every night while her mother went out. She felt disrespected and misunderstood. Kella admitted to *choosing* to become sexually active at the time that she had because she resented her life and wanted something that was her own. At that time

³ In my position with the Girl Scouts of Historic Georgia, Inc, I managed Girl Scout programming that falls under the category of “flexible delivery”, meaning the non-traditional way. This includes programs such as Girl Scouting-- in the school-day, programming in housing communities, after-school and alternative school programs.

⁴ Fred Wessels Homes, a neighborhood community of the Savannah Housing Authority established in 1938

she also divulged one of the biggest secrets of her life. She (and a female cousin of the same age) had been molested by a former boyfriend of her mother's when she was younger. She used the opportunity (of in opening up about her sex life) to ask a favor of my colleague and me. She wanted her mother to know this information and she needed someone to be there with her when she told her mother.

It is important to my research that I disclose the details of this particular story because it is necessary to understand the intimate nature of my relationship with Kella. She remained in the Girl Scout program until she graduated from high school, and throughout my relationship with her and her family; she and I remained connected on a close-knit level.

Over the years, amongst various camping trips and Girls Scout activities, it was not unusual for me to receive phone calls in the middle of the night with relationship concerns, or requests to simply spend some one-on-one time when Kella either needed some time away from her family to clear her head or just some individualized attention. When Kella told me that she was pregnant the summer after she graduated from high school, I was more than saddened. I was devastated. I could not understand how she, a girl I had known and been close with over five years, could have made such a mistake. Most importantly, I was clear as to the information and education to which Kella had been exposed. I knew that she understood and had access to information about contraceptives, safety, and pregnancy prevention. What I did not understand was how this pregnancy could be considered *unintentional*.

Kella was not the first, nor the only young woman I had known to become pregnant in that year alone. I started using the term *epidemic* to describe the bleak

outlook that was facing me in working with young Black women and girls in Savannah. This epidemic prompted me to contemplate my understanding of the women's and girls' lives with whom I was working. I understood that Kella's mother had given birth to Kella at the age of seventeen after which she had three more children and was raising them as a single parent. I realized that the lives that Kella and other young women had found themselves *mistakenly* shaping mirrored that of their mother's and the existences they had always known.

I pondered why these young woman and girls were not working harder to achieve different lives, why they did not want more, why they could not seem to connect the dots between the places where they were in life and the places where they claimed they wanted to be. I also pondered over what life-advancing options were available to people like Kella and her peers in Savannah, Georgia. I pondered how girls like Kella could want to go to college, be doctors, lawyers, and psychologists, but did not also understand that becoming a mother within their socioeconomic means might be a grave interference to those aspirations. I did not understand. I wanted to uncover the answers.

I began to consider that girls like Kella did not have the answers either, that they were not being exposed to the ways that they could be gratified in their lives beyond being a mother. So, beginning with the girls and their sexual encounters, particularly with boys, I began to consider what these encounters might be like. Were they even pleasurable? Or were girls' sexual encounters just a means to motherhood? I wanted to know if there was in fact a difference between women and girls experiencing pleasure, and those who were not. How might pleasurable experiences, or the lack thereof affect a

woman's or girl's goals in life? How might she be transformed if gratification was a consistent expectation in her life?

Background: Framing the Issue with Black Female Sexuality(s) and Identifying a Need for the 'Personal Sexual Narrative'

The theoretical framework for The Vibrator Project action research project is premised on acknowledging that the sexual understandings and experiences of young Black women and girls do not fit within educational practices in which *prevention* of pregnancy and disease is the focus of the education rather than *pleasure*. The impetus for this action research project encompasses the concerns that individual and societal expectations of heteronormativity disproportionately influence the sexual experiences of youth, that sexual education, beyond biology, typically centers on prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, that the absence of a discourse around pleasure within formal and informal sexual education has not prepared young Black women and girls to develop a fulfilling sexual identity, and that sexual experiences inform young Black women's and girls' confidence, self assurance, and gratification, or lack thereof.

Within The Vibrator Project's theoretical framework, heteronormativity is conceptualized as more than the opposite of homosexuality or any lifestyle related to homosexuality. Heteronormativity is a concept in which value is placed on

heterosexuality as patriarchal lifestyles.⁵ The precedent of heteronormativity is a narrative that affects all women, particularly Black women and girls. Dreams of being swept off one's feet, married to a prince (a husband will suffice), mothering the children born of that union, and subsequently living happily ever after are pervasive expectations for girls within the dominant social paradigm. Modern society models what is acceptable and highly respected after this paradigm. Just as marginalized groups have always had to work harder to fit the dominant social paradigms, so do Black woman and girls to be viewed as acceptable and to be respected in their communities. A heterosexual union within a nuclear family unit is perceived as a commodity that would make *success* more accessible to Black women. The marginalized status of both womanhood and Blackness make these levels of *success* even more difficult to attain for Black girls than their White counterparts.⁶

Heteronormative ideals dictate that traditional sexual education accessible to youth is rooted in fear and focuses on the prevention of social situations that are not respected (i.e., mothering/fathering children out of wedlock, contracting a disease, contracting HIV/AIDS, enjoying a promiscuous lifestyle). Traditional sexual education models rely on science to teach about the biological aspects of sexual intercourse, and to provide students knowledge about the transmission of infectious diseases related to sex. This normalcy unduly targets Black women and girls because it is assumed that they are at

⁵ The construct of heteronormativity is formed from patriarchal ideology and practice. Michael Warner (1991) describes heteronormativity as a culture that sets a standard of normal relations in which men are privileged with power for self-determination while the female partner is subordinate in the heterosexual relation. Michael Warner is credited for coining the term *heteronormativity*. (Warner, 1991)

⁶ See Appendix A for Figure 1. This reference is a photographed screenshot taken from Facebook of a young women project participant who is currently pregnant. This photograph collage (July 8, 2013) exemplifies how she wishes for her lifestyle to be accepted as a success. She presents these desires exhibitions such as this one of the family that she has constructed.

high-risk for unplanned pregnancy and disease transmission more so than their White counterparts; consequently creating an urgency to tame a perceived hypersexual nature. Alternative notions of education that concern sexuality such as discourses around pleasure are scarce among Black women and girls because they are in conflict with the assumption that Black female sexuality must be constrained.

Understanding what influences one's experiences of pleasure can be seen as a step in furthering self-identity, and an accomplishment towards self-confidence, self-assurance, joy and gratification for Black women and girls. Developing an educational model for Black girls where *pleasure* is at the center redirects the conversation being currently engaged upon in which Black female sexuality(s) is under attack and honest means for experiencing pleasure are therefore restricted. The *personal sexual narrative* can give validation to the lives and experiences of Black women and girls and replace the dominant social narrative. The *personal sexual narrative* can also provide Black women and girls with more options to create the lives that they may want despite the demands of the dominant social paradigm

Significance of the Study: Challenging Pervasive Visual Culture Narratives that

Surround Black Women's and Girls' Sexuality(s)

From representations in history that positively stretch back further than the account of Saartjie Baartman (the Hottentot Venus) to present symbols of Black female sexuality that have become inescapable in mainstream media such as in hip-hop videos and even the story of Anita Hill, it is apparent that the interpretations of Black women's and girls'

sexualities have been understood as less than desirable in visual culture. Considered an uncontrolled female sexuality, Black women have been viewed as not only lacking, but also wild and untrained, and placed in juxtaposition to the Western ideals of beauty, purity, and virtuousness. As a result, Black women and girls are either portrayed in visual narratives as oversexed objects, or without sexuality at all—asexual.

The life and story of Saartjie Baartman⁷, ceremoniously marks the beginning of a long history of the exploitation and the objectification of the Black female subject.

Saartjie Baartman or Sarah Baartman, also known as the 'Hottentot Venus', was taken from her South African, Khoikhoi home (where lived as a servant) in the 1800s by Dutch settlers to Europe to be displayed as a freak show attraction (scientific curiosity).

Baartman's appeal was that her large buttocks, breasts, and atypically shaped vagina were so drastically different from European societies' perceptions of a normal female body.

She lived a short life due to being mistreated, malnourished and scantily exposed on a consistent basis. After Baartman's death a body cast was constructed of her body, and her genitalia and breasts dissected and put on display at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1974. (Holmes, 2009, p. 37)

The tragedy of Saartjie Baartman's life need be remembered in critical discussions that deconstruct Black women's and girls' sexuality pervasive in visual culture. Saartjie Baartman, her life and body, decidedly mark the beginning of a long history in which such objectification and dismissal of the Black female body has turned to normalcy.

Baartman's life story still exists today and lives in all women and girls. Her struggle for acceptance and recognition remains a piece of Black female sexuality and how it is publicly sanctioned.

⁷ Saartjie is considered to be the name used by the subject. (Holmes, 2009, p. 10)

Relatedly, the United States mass media's reaction to Anita Hill's testimony supporting sexual harassment allegations against Supreme Court appointee Clarence Thomas substantiated that beyond the roles of *object* or *asexual*, Black women are untrustworthy and trouble makers. Anita Hill's allegations disrupted the [racial] gender dynamic in political discourse. The disclosure of her experience cast an unflattering light on Black womanhood in USA news and media. She was an unknown—Black woman, bearing the weight of both racial and gender repression. Her testimony upset a delicate, yet well-constructed balance rooted in more than 200 years of United States history. Hill (1995) writes:

In going before the committee I came face to face with a history of exclusion from power. Notwithstanding many advances over the past three decades, it is hard to deny that as a group African Americans, and in particular African American women, at best can only associate with or approach power. (Hill, 1995)

Hill along with Black women, then and now, recognized her position and what it meant (or what it did not mean) to her audience(s). She started out with more people against her than *for* her, which made her testimony one of the most despised representations of Black womanhood as well as Black female sexuality within visual culture.

It is the Black female body as well as its sexual nature that have been mutually marginalized in the dominant visual culture. The stereotypical images⁸ rampant in popular culture that include the Mammy, the Aunt Jemima, the Tragic Mulatto, the

⁸ The archetypal images of the Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Tragic Mulatto, Sapphire, and Jezebel are negative characters utilized in the history of United States visual culture as simplified representations the Black female subject.

Sapphire, the Jezebel, and the Black Best-friend or Side-kick all relegate that Black woman's and girl's sexuality as shameful or unremarkable. The need to challenge these universal themes comes from the desire to witness and consume representations of Black female sexuality that are diverse, full, and comprehensive.

***Context of the Study: Arts-based Action Research, Collective Learning and
Explorations of Childhood Memory***

The Vibrator Project is an action research project that I designed⁹ to facilitate collective learning¹⁰ experiences with young Black women and girls in regards to sex, sexuality, and pleasure. I wished to investigate the practices that inform young Black women's and girl's sexual identity, pregnancy plans, and perceptions of other significant life-choices. *Pleasure (re)Collected by Young Black Women and Girls in The Vibrator Project* is an analysis of the young women's and girls' personal sexual narratives conveyed through their art and writing in The Vibrator Project, and their storytelling about those experiences (through one-on-one interviews).

⁹ The Vibrator Project, created by me, was designed in conjunction with my position as an instructor for a gender-specific outreach program called *Women on the Rise!* The Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA) hosts the *Women on the Rise!* program.

¹⁰ *Collective Learning* refers to an experience that encompasses an active engagement between the people, skills, and talent within a given learning process.

Collective Learning

The Vibrator Project employs *collective learning* in which young Black women and girls are simultaneously teachers, students, and audience. Participants act as *teachers* by facilitating the (re)collecting of their own stories, and as *audience* members they *learn* from the collection of stories and artistic expressions of others in the group. Collective learning can occur when participants recognize that their personal narratives share recurring themes with others' narratives (Thomas & Brown, 2011). Through the lens of the camera and other artistic media utilized throughout, I designed The Vibrator Project to be a productive individual as well as collective learning experience.

Memory

An arts-based methodology of memory (re)collecting has had a provocative and lasting impact on me and on my on-going work in The Vibrator Project. Memory work in The Vibrator Project was facilitated in order to chronicle the construction and examination of the young women's and girls' personal histories and experiences as they relate to sex, sexuality, and pleasure. From this memory (re)collecting, young Black women and girls who have been involved in The Vibrator Project for six months to two years have had the opportunity to develop strategies and tools that honor her own physical and emotional desires.

Constructing a personal model for pleasure has proven to be a healthy path to self-discovery as well as to counteracting unplanned pregnancy, risky sexual behavior, and emotional underdevelopment. Memories about first encounters with sexual pleasure, i.e., emotional satisfaction, have contributed to the self-esteem of young Black women and

girls in The Vibrator Project. Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (2002) support this notion in their reference to author bell hooks' (1994) commentary on memories from her past:

Using these images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye (hooks, 1994, p. 53). Far from being some sort of useless longing, hooks regards this memory work as being in the service of working towards and understanding of the present and the future. (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 54)

Through examining the past, retracing physical and emotional desires up to the present, young Black woman and girls in The Vibrator Project have been able to better establish avenues of critical thinking about race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as explore issues of identity and belonging with respects to the politics of reproduction, gender inequalities, and family.

As author Toni Morrison writes, "Rememory (the act of deliberate remembering) is a form of willed creation. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared that particular way" (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 62) On the (re)discovering and telling of a personal narrative, young women and girls with whom I have worked in The Vibrator Project have begun to arrange the details of not just their sexuality, but the ingredients that make pleasure and their desires attainable. These young Black women and girls having the tools necessary to shape their own desires, makes it less likely that they fall victim to someone else's wants or ill-considered impulses including an assumed heteronormative lifestyle.

The participants and I have relied on the concept that “Memory is mediated by both the ‘critical space’ within which one experiences a particular event as well as by the ensuing period of time” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 59). Therefore what happens as a result of a given event in one’s life is just as important (if not more) as said event. Engaging with *memory* as a part of The Vibrator Project means working to evoke memories of people, moments, spaces, and experiences that have occurred throughout our lives to recognize, understand, and to be fully self-aware. This is accomplished through group discussion, individual interviews, creative writing, and art-making so as to employ the use of image as narrative.

Claudia Mitchell and Jaqueline Reid-Walsh provide a thoughtful analysis that upholds memory work as an extensive means for crafting a strengthened autonomy:

What differentiates memory work from simply collecting accidental memory accounts, testimonials or confessionals centers on the word ‘work’, and the fact that the person remembering is the one who ‘works back’ or ‘works through’ the memory, engaging in what the novelist Toni Morrison describes as ‘deliberate remembering.’ ... In approaching memory as a deliberate or purposeful act, the various methodologies that [we] discuss here—ranging from what [we] call “first/second draft writing” to a strategy for working with photographs—fit with the distinction bell hooks makes between ‘nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless act, and that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present’ (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 62)

Mitchell’s and Reid-Walsh’s (2002) study has inspired activities in The Vibrator Project such as the *family structure map*, the *pleasure timeline*, artist explorations as well as

discussion prompts utilized for commencing a *memory quest* for each of the young women and girls involved. Records of these activities have been kept through my own journaling. In addition, the young women's and girls' art work from the individual artist projects, have not only provided the material for me to investigate The Vibrator Project as a collective learning space, but in turn, makes The Vibrator Project a living scrapbook authored by the project participants.

The activities in The Vibrator Project are concentrated around the act of the purposeful remembering-- *rememory*¹¹ of past experiences as a path to self-discovery. In turn, *rememory* is more than a journey to the past but an enlightenment and means to understanding the present moment. With such an understanding, with a strong grasp on the personal narrative, young Black women and girls uncover the capacity to own their own experiences. Such a capacity gives weight the personal narrative and it is deemed just as important as the dominant heteronormative narrative.

On the Value of Ethnographic Studies: Why Black-Girl- Storytelling Matters

Celeste Kearney's (2011) edited anthology, "Mediated Girlhoods" reinforces the notion that the traditional avenues for communication such as journaling and letter writing are but a small part of a vast repertoire for expression at the finger tips of girls

¹¹ Rememory is a term created by Toni Morrison. It references a primal scene-- an outlet and effective use for self-discovery through re-living a memory. (Rushdy 303) .The rememory is a psychological and narrative tool, because it helps narrative worlds make recreations of past memories that need to be reiterated for a bigger impact or significance for the story being told. (Rushdy 304)

today. Jane Greer(2011) remarks that “[t]he ability to write was not a universal skill among young women: Girls from racial and ethnic minority groups and those with few socioeconomic resources were less likely to be print literate” (Kearney, 2011, p. 222). Sadly, this remains the case today for Black women and girls. Arts-based action research and uses of memory work served these young women’s and girls’ need for expressive outlets, while also helping to establish their autonomy as they relate to the outside world.

Ethnography is described as a holistic study, which includes history, and an analysis of the terrain, the climate, and the habitat that makes a substantial contribution toward the understanding of the social life of humans. An ethnographer strives to observe “the world from the point of view of the subject (not the participant ethnographer) and records all observed behavior and describes all symbol-meaning relations using concepts that avoid casual explanations” (Wikimedia Foundation, 2013, 2). The craft of ethnography expresses a “credible reality” (Wikimedia Foundation, 2013, 2). Black women’s and girls’ stories are inexplicably absent from mainstream narrative or educational model within United States culture (add citation to support claims that go beyond claims that can be made from data analysis). More importantly than apprehensions concerning literacy, Black women’s and girls’ stories are not just lacking in the cultural narratives in the United States, but also in the world. Without the authentic accounts of Black women’s and girls’ perspectives and experiences, the governing way of life is rendered inauthentic, in itself.

CHAPTER TWO

Contextualizing a Black Female Subjectivity through History, the Body, and Black Female Sexuality(s)

This chapter will introduce a portion of the arts-centered programming that has been facilitated with young Black women and girls about Black women's history. It is meant to highlight young women and girls' interaction with the subject matter, as well as to demonstrate the process of art making that has occurred within The Vibrator Project. The chapter gives insight into young women's and girls' thinking about their own bodies, the history connected to Black bodies, and how such a history dictates current perceptions of Black female sexuality(s). Young Black women's and girls' negotiations between these histories and current representations of Black female sexuality(s) in visual culture are laid out through a layered data analysis¹² formed through observation of several participant groups within The Vibrator Project, notes from my personal journal, written and verbal feedback from the participants, in addition to one-on-one interviews with project participants.

¹² Layered Data Analysis refers to a data analysis methodology in which one disassembles assumptions through a planned enactment, reflects, and reassembles those assumptions to communicate discoveries. This method is meant to serve as critical action research that "confront[s] social inequalities and seek[s] transformative social change toward global ecological visions of peace and well-being". (Keifer-Boyd, 2009, p.10) This method has been utilized to analyze data collected in The Vibrator Project because of its correlations to the artwork, creative writing, and verbal accounts formed by the young women and girl project participants.

Negotiating Womanhood

It is pertinent to the learning model of The Vibrator Project that women and girls understand how Black women have continued to negotiate their acceptance and recognition in many facets of the worlds in which they live. The acknowledgement of Black female subjectivity remains in negotiation within the dominant social paradigms of sex, gender, race, class, and socioeconomics. Therefore, all facets of life are affected. The physical arenas of education, media and entertainment, and occupational crafts are all implicated.

“Ain’t (Ar’nt) I a woman?” serves as a wretchedly powerful phrase and question. Although similar to “Ain’t I human?” or “Ain’t I pretty?” this question suggests that the Black woman remains in torment over this refusal of acknowledgement of an essential state of her being—womanhood. She has the ability to reproduce, she grows breasts, her vagina allows for the physical act of intercourse; but yet she still asks this question. It is recounted that Sojourner Truth, during her illustrious speech, bore her breast when making the plea, “Ain’t I a Woman?” The image of a 19th century Black woman and ex-slave, speaking to a crowd of presumably White women at a women’s rights convention remains stellar in itself. But, to imagine her expressing such passion and rage that she would bear her breast is astonishing, however modest the actual gesture may have been. Truth’s actions prove just how profound and multifaceted this emotion was, and still is for so many women of color.

The idea of *true womanhood* is grounded in Western, White, heterosexuality. As a result, the Black woman remains in negotiation over her own womanhood. She, along with the rest of the world considers her womanhood fractured, incomplete, and

inconsistent. She maintains an introverted view of womanhood and her worth. When the Black women's story is in the hands of one who is oblivious to her womanhood and worth, she is predestined to be misunderstood, her image fated to be tarnished and devalued.

Arts-based Methodology: Engaging Young Black Women and Girls through the Artwork of Shoshanna Weinberger

The name of artist Shoshanna Weinberger is one that never seems to be forgotten among young women and girls with whom I have worked. A remarkable outcome of the one-on-one interviews conducted with participants of The Vibrator Project is that each participant introduced to Weinberger's artwork can without a doubt articulate the influence of that workshop on her life. Even if one cannot remember Shoshanna Weinberger's name, she can remember exactly what this artist inspired her to create. She can most definitely remember how that interaction made her feel.

To begin work on engaging young women and girls in critical dialogues about body image, representation, and culture, a lesson and workshop was introduced to The Vibrator Project participants on the work of artist, Shoshanna Weinberger.¹³ In this workshop, participants took part in a hands-on art and creative writing project inspired by the work of Shoshanna Weinberger, an artist who explores the legacy of colonialism on sexual representations of women of color. Through learning about her work, the project participants were introduced to Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. This was the first

¹³ See Appendix B for Shoshanna Weinberger Lesson Plan.

time the young women and girl project participants had been introduced to the life and story of the Hottentot Venus. In addition to conversations that were facilitated about the exploitation of Saartjie Baartman, and how the treatment of her body has contributed to the hyper-sexualization of the Black female body throughout history, I facilitated a hands-on art project in which the project participants had the opportunity to create watercolor paintings inspired by Weinberger's artistic style. A second part to the project turned the hands-on portion into an opportunity to consider the subject matter through sculpture. Participants were given a plethora of multi-colored bras, panties, bathing, and costume jewelry beads, and asked to create three-dimensional Shoshanna Weinberger-inspired works.

Through instructor evaluations¹⁴ and notes from my personal observations and journal entries, I learned that the project participants¹⁵ were especially engrossed with learning about the life of Saartjie Baartman through the artwork of Shoshanna Weinberger. The young women and girls seemed to be absorbed with the open forum to discuss this tragic part of history of which most had never before been introduced within their formal educational settings. There have been many mixed feelings as the young women and girls attempted to digest the information all-ranging from intrigue to utter disgust. Personal journal entries and observations suggest evidence of a keen sense

¹⁴ After each Vibrator Project workshop (In conjunction with MOCA's Women on the Rise!) each facilitator completes a session evaluation concerning the events of the workshop to reflect on how participants responded to the artist and hands-on project, and to get an overall *feel* for the students' responsiveness to the activities of the day.

¹⁵ Groups, where the lesson has been implemented, include young women and girls that range from 10 to 24 years of age. The groups are comprised of programs that are served by the Women on the Rise! program of the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA) and involve young women and girls from various Miami-Dade County girl-serving organizations. Those organizations include the G.E.M.S. Camp at the Women's Park, Camp Honey Shine, Breakthrough Miami's Summer Institute, The Alliance for GLBTQ Youth's Summer Girls Group, AMI Kids/ Wings, and Pridelines Youth Services.

enlightenment for the project participants.

Making Room for Black Girlhood

For Black girls especially, this lesson has proven to be a monumental tool for engagement. The story of the Hottentot Venus is not one found in history or social studies books in primary or high school. It is even unlikely that one would learn about her in a college setting unless enrolled in an Africana or Women's Studies course. The Shoshanna Weinberger lesson has been one of few opportunities for Black girls to learn about someone who resembles who they are—skin color, hair, and body-build in any educational setting. The life and story of Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus has presented Black girls with the opportunity to practice a learning model that is more recognizable to their own history(s), experiences, and relationships.

Below are results from the layered data analysis that I performed from my observational notes taken during group sessions in which the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson was facilitated. This analysis is presented in the form of prose writings and accompanying reflective examinations.

Camp Honey Shine¹⁶

the older girls, the orange group

the usually stank girls are intrigued and appalled by Shoshanna's mangled,

discombobulated bodies, strange fruits, freaks

They make amazingly beautiful artwork

¹⁶ Prose created from personal journal excerpt and observation from observation of the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson at Camp Honey Shine, July 17, 2012

are uninhibited by the intimate-nature of the project

The light blues,

expressing less and less comfort with the subject matter

The royal blues start out abstract, play with color

they slowly became more comfortable (after a message from me that eased their fears),

allowed themselves to throw in a floating breast here or there

within their compositions.

Teal, the last group

is not at all comfortable with such a subject

few would even draw her parts

This group produces rainbows and suns, abstract

Lot's of writing, empty phrases

"sexy body"

Watching=Discomfort

Listening= Challenging

Non-black girls, no matter her Honey Shine-assigned color

Met more difficulty in their making,

in their considering Saartjie

Instead some made faces

Caucasian faces

with golden blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and batting eyelashes.

Eventually, however

She provokes them

ALL of them

Or THEY provoke them

to inquiry,

for more

Who is SHE?

Who created her image?

Who is telling her story?

Despite issues of discomfort among the groups, the lesson creates an environment in which girls can talk with ease about their own issues concerning skin color, and how their hair and bodies move within patriarchal and White subjugated society. Many are eager to engage in discourse about popular celebrities such as Nikki Minaj, Lil Kim, and Jennifer Lopez, not necessarily because they are fans, but because these are subjects familiar to them and easily recognizable. They can connect with themes in which

womanhood [of color] is at the center. In these conversations, Black girls can understand themselves as experts. Black-girl colloquialisms are not considered improper, unladylike, or unprofessional in this space because Black girlhood is welcomed and made comfortable.

Breakthrough Miami Summer Institute¹⁷

Girls are shocked, disturbed, confused

Girls seem afraid

to paint

to touch the paper

Non-Black girls retreat

Very few answer questions, offer knowledge or experiences, verbally respond

The one that is scared for me to even approach, she paints the Virgin Mary.

Eventually

“eventually” seems to be the key

they draw and paint freely

they engage

they are inspired

they meet Shoshanna

¹⁷ Prose created from personal journal excerpt and observation of the Shoshanna Weinberger workshop at the Breakthrough Miami Summer Institute, July 20, and July 27, 2012

I dare to show up for part 2

They

the Girls

They make me so happy

They pulled me out of my dismal mood

Conversations are on point

accents and attitudes change

Black-girl-stankness emerges

the kind that I like to bare witness to

I really loved it

“If Lil Kim wants to act and dress the way she does, then she should be able t

Same goes for strippers! I’m just sayin’.”

says one

I loved it

I love it

They behave like they want to be in the space

Openness is present

open-mindedness

I really like it

they remembered

they shared.

Managing Discomfort and Leaving Room for Anger

With such a sensitive subject matter as the life-story of Saartjie Baartman, discomfort generated among young Black women and girls is something that is inevitable. It is not unusual for participants receiving this information for the first time to reject it. After all, it can be harder in many cases to accept such a tragic truth than it is to pretend it does not exist.

The young women and girls who found discomfort with Shoshanna Weinberger's artwork or what it represented for them, also had a difficult time engaging in honest conversations about their feelings or life-experiences. This could be in part due to trauma the woman or girls had experienced in their own life or due to their sheer refutation of the information. This discomfort often times manifested itself as anger, destructive acts with the hands-on project materials, or complete disregard for participating or producing in the workshops. Fortunately, feelings of anger and confusion have been accepted as honest, reactive expressions to the work. I (along with any colleagues that participated with me in facilitating this lesson) were sure to provide time and space for any participants who did not wish to engage with the subject matter. Additional assistance and guidance was offered on many occasions to those who needed to vent. For others, the paint, brushes, paper, material, and stuffing have been employed as therapeutic tools to help express their

sentiments.

Wings^{18 19}

Crystal and I arrive to eight girls sitting in the living room of the dorm

who immediately ask if we can stay

in the living room, that is

“Do we have to move to the T.V. room?”

We have to move

“You all know we need the TV”

we cannot fulfill their one request

so they file in

We begin with Shoshanna’s name

“Weinberger.”

stankness exudes

a thousand questions spill before I can even give sufficient explanations

Crystal moves to the first image in the slide-show

¹⁸ AMI Kids/ Wings is program facility for pregnant and new mothers that are presently incarcerated. Women on the Rise! provided arts programming for the young women and girls at the Wings program facility from January 2012 through May 2013.

¹⁹ Personal journal excerpt and observation of the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson at the AMI Kids Wings program facility, August 20, 2012.

and before I can finish speaking,

it seems to send them off.

I never get to finish the back-story.

Navigating a Challenging Atmosphere

G.E.M.S. Camp at the Women's Park²⁰

Roaming girls in purple shirts

attracted to the Crystal's, Lupitas, and Jillian's--their own, their could-be-sisters,

primas, aunts

Smartness

crunkness

girls live here, work here

Summer block parties of D.J's., merengue, pizza, and sweet cake are a regular

things.

things like Vivian's (the director) birthday celebration are a priority

there is enough for all to partake, even us as guests

Spanish-speaking grown-ups who resemble mamas, tias, y abuelitas

²⁰ Prose created from personal journal excerpt and observation from a Women on the Rise! program session with the G.E.M.S. Camp at the Women's park, July 11, 2012.

clean up after girls like mamas and abuelitas.

My initial visit to the G.E.M.S Camp at The Women's Park left me attentive to the different needs of this group of Latina girls. While I had some concerns about behavior and short attention spans, I also recognized that this group had a cultural point of reference that was different from my own. Due to the nature of the group being large and difficult to manage, I was reluctant to continue my participation in the group just as much as I was reluctant to introduce the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson to the participants.

The Shoshanna Weinberger lesson being introduced to this group of girls was a point of clarity, a turning point for not only myself, but also the other facilitators working with the program. The Shoshanna Weinberger lesson proved to be appealing. The interaction lifted a veil and was able to reach a group that was withdrawn and apathetic to other forms of structure. Girls were elated in having the opportunity to comfortably and safely explore the female body as well as their own. Through sculpting breast-like forms from pantyhose and batting, stuffing bras and panties, and hog-tying one another as life-size Shoshanna-inspired statues, a comfort-level with the body became tangible, rather than simply intellectual or emotional as it had been in their paintings. The girls' comfort level amongst themselves, with their self has made it possible for them to be more vocal, more confident in offering their ideas.

G.E.M.S. Camp at the Women's Park (Shoshanna Weinberger)²¹

They remembered

they remembered everything

²¹ Prose created from journal excerpt (August 1, 2012) and observations from the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson, part 2 with the G.E.M.S Camp at the Women's Park.

they were lectured slightly before we began (by the camp director)
but that's not why I think they behaved better
they did because they remembered
The "body language"²² was amazing
I heard beautiful poetry
I learned about "exploding ovaries"²³
they girls were amazing
and elicited laughter from all in the room
We bonded over bodies
differently sized, and abled bodies
and attempted to squash some of our major insecurities by our stuffing bras and
underwear
thank you
Shoshanna.

Realizing Black Female Subjectivity in LBT Arenas

***The Alliance, South*²⁴**

These are so smart

beyond smart

²² Body Language is a creative writing activity prompt from the Shoshanna Weinberger Lesson Plan (See Appendix B.)

²³ "Exploding Ovaries" is an expression used by one of the participants to describe her excitement and extreme sexual attraction to the boy band, *One Direction*.

²⁴ Personal journal excerpt and observation of the Shoshanna Weinberger workshop with The Alliance, July 24, 2012

Enlightened

We open with “Just Because”²⁵

they are used to checking-in

one one another

That is a must

They give each other advice

care

they are appreciative

to learn about Saartjie Baartman

to connect with the work of Shoshanna

They produce

the work is beautiful

the work is provocative

In an interview with Vibrator Project participant, Quen, she recalls her paintings made during the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson and hands-on workshop as the most memorable experience she has had in the group. While she does not remember the artist's

²⁵ Just Because is an activity prompt used by the Women on the Rise! (WOTR!) program to break the ice within individual groups. Just Because is practiced when opening any WOTR! group meeting or program. The activity is performed by participants filling-in the blanks of the following prompts: “Just Because I’m... doesn’t mean that I’m... My name is... And I am...” The activity concludes with each participant having the option to read her “Just Because” aloud. The Just Because activity has been adapted from that of the SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths) Black girl-centered program in Chicago, Illinois- area, founded by Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown.

name initially, she remembers “a bunch of nipples and hands, and hair” (April 30, 2013). She comments that she “loved her work because it showed the female body in a way I had never seen before” (April 30, 2013). Quen admires Shoshanna Weinberger’s artwork as “something different from what I normally see;” and attributes transitions in her own art renderings to studying Weinberger’s style. She speaks in depth about her newfound comfort with drawing parts of the body such as hands instead of just trees and landscapes as she had done in the past. As we look at her artwork together, we laugh as we notice that *hands* have become a signature part of compositions.²⁶

My observations reveal that there is a different level of connection with the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson that happens within the LBT young women and girls with whom I have worked. The young women of The Alliance for GLBTQ Youth and Pridelines Youth Services tended to have a more emotionally mature response to the life-story of Saartjie Baartman and were able to connect to Shoshanna Weinberger’s artwork on a more intimate level. To them, Shoshanna’s perspective has been more relatable to their individual life’s experiences. As young women who were not only older, but more comfortable being vocal about their sexuality and even the trauma they had experienced, the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson created a space in which they could dig deeper into understanding their own life events that may have caused anger or rage as well as love and pleasure.

²⁶ See Appendix C for examples of Quen’s Shoshanna Weinberger-inspired paintings.

CHAPTER THREE

Telling Our Truths: Art Practice, Creative Writing, and Environment as Critical Therapy

Chapter three focuses on the role of art practice in the Vibrator Project and how young women and girls utilize art-based skill as a tool for communication as well as reflection. By way of exploring women of color contemporary artists, and learning the practice of multiple media art skill, project participants have been able to create a living scrapbook reflecting their identity referred to in this study as the *personal sexual narrative*. This chapter will chronicle the project participants' task of determining the personal sexual narrative as well as how the quest has proven to be a needed form of therapy that continues to be highly valued by those surveyed.

Sex-positive Approaches to Learning: Developing a Personal Sexual Narrative

I consider the concept of a *Personal Sexual Narrative* to be a fundamental part of The Vibrator Project. The *Personal Sexual Narrative* encompasses all of the aspects—history, experience, and desire that an individual brings to an intimate relationship. In this respect, a personal sexual narrative cannot be assigned to an individual by an outside person or entity (i.e., school, religious practice). A personal sexual narrative is not learned in school. The elements of an individual's personal sexual narrative are parts that already exist. These parts can be gathered and composed by every individual.

To begin the process of composing the *Personal Sexual Narrative*, I ask young women and girls in The Vibrator Project to investigate their knowledge by answering the questions *what is sex?, what is sexuality? what is pleasure?* Instead of being required to answer the questions in essay form, or by reciting pre-established definitions, the participants are given the freedom to sculpt their responses using play dough in addition to writing, drawing or vocalizing. This option allows the participants to acknowledge the sensory as a valid way of describing thoughts (i.e., *How does sex feel? What does sexuality look like?*)²⁷

In one-on-one interviews, participants acknowledge where they are in the processes of understanding their personal sexual narrative. Participant, Molly expresses that who she has been in friendships has contributed to her personal sexual narrative. “My whole idea of a friendship was me giving,” she says. She says that a part of composing her personal sexual narrative meant realizing that she does not want that type of relationship anymore. She also realizes that she has become a “thinker,” an “over analyzer,” and how this may be the cause of her not enjoying herself in sexual relationships. “Every move I overanalyze--how does that make me feel? Why does it feel that way? Is this something that stems from my past? I just come up with more and more questions” (April 30, 2013).

Molly acknowledges that even though she might not have the answers to all of her questions, the questions alone are helping her to uncover a sexual identity that she can articulate. By asking the question “am I just sex?” she acknowledges that there is an alternative to *being just sex*, and that that feeling is different from how she would like to

²⁷ See Appendix D for examples of the participants’ responses to *What is Sex? What is Sexuality What is Pleasure?*

feel. She recognizes that being molested as a young girl also contributes to her feeling like *just sex* in relationships, and also admits to this being the reason that she objectifies others in sexual relationships. When I ask why she believes this happens, she replies, “Because I objectify myself.”

Interviewee Stella also chimes in on the subject matter when she says, “I’m definitely not the same as when I first started [The Vibrator Project]. She notices that she is more relaxed, willing, and wanting to talk about sex now. When she says “I [am] more confident to speak up and not fake it till I make it? I will not stroke their ego;” she is admitting that she had been acting in that way before now. When prompted to tell me why, she answers “because of fear. I require her to provide more, and she offers, “fear of hurting [them], “fear of [them] leaving, fear of having my sexual tolerance be too high, fear of accepting that is was to high” (July 10, 2013). This commentary surprised me because it was the first time I had heard a participant speak in this way. When I asked Stella to explain in more detail she responded, “Like I prefer clitoral simulation as opposed to penetration. The less I talk about that, what I want, then I don’t have to be concerned with explaining it to someone else” (July 10, 2013).

Listening to Stella’s train-of-thought provoked me to reconsider how I interpreted some of Molly’s remarks previously. Stella’s ideas about not wanting to have a “high [sexual] tolerance” made me understand that the young women had been dismissing their own sexual desires (or ignoring that they existed). Using expressions such as “over analyzing” or “high tolerance” were justifications so as not to take responsibility for the absence their desires from sexual relationships. Molly asking herself the questions- *Am I*

just sex? Why does that feel that way?—serve as initial steps in composing personal sexual narratives.

(re)Collecting Memory

Activities that engage participants in The Vibrator Project with memory (re)collecting involve *The Family Structure Map*, *The Pleasure Timeline*, and studying the work of artists that use their own memories and experiences to make artwork. The *Family Structure Map* is an activity in which the young women and girls are given drawing paper and coloring materials to diagram for the group (however she wished) her family structure throughout her childhood. The group spends about twenty minutes depicting the family structure in which they were a part growing up; and then shares their investigations aloud with the others. In the sharing of their investigations they are able to connect to their findings on an even deeper level than they had while drawing. The process has not only proven to be significant for each girl, but also an exhilarating experience to speak about her findings, share her success, and read and feel the reactions from her peers.

Similarly, the *Pleasure Timeline* contributes to the memory work being performed by the group. The *Pleasure Timeline* (or map) consists of each young woman examining her past and making connections with experiences of pleasure from as far back as she recalls. Each girl has the authority to decide what constitutes as pleasure (although I, as the facilitator, did provide some examples). They are provided watercolor paints to depict their timelines; and given the freedom to interpret the concept of *timeline* as they see fit. In the end, each girl's timeline looks drastically different from the next one's. The ways

in which the contents of the timelines are expressed are also quite diverse. Besides researching their own experiences from the past to the present, the girls also gain insight from hearing how their friends and peers resolved the question surrounding experiences with pleasure. (See Appendix D for examples of Pleasure Timelines.)

Stella, in a one-on-one interview with me, recalls that another member of the group, Dani, (whom she had known previously through school) admitted that after the sharing of the pleasure maps, her impression of Stella had changed. Stella says that Dani told her that while she did not “dislike” her, she also did not really know or understand her “whinny” behavior. Dani told Stella that it wasn’t until she learned of her family background, her mother’s passing away, and the ways in which she understood the role of pleasure in her life, that she realized how much she and Stella were alike. She did not realize that there would be so much of Stella that she understood.

Studying the work of artist Tracey Emin, is the activity that participant Anna speaks about in detail. Anna’s quilt piece, made during a session of The Vibrator Project, is made of red felt rectangles bearing denim cut-outs of letters forming the words *giving my all of nothing*. Tracey Emin's quilt creations provoke a duality in emotion and awareness for its viewer(s), and Anna connects with this concept.²⁸

Emin's pieces are mostly large hand-worked quilt hangings that bear expressions of love, anger, strength, and defiance that relate to her personal history with sexual trauma. The expressions in her work range from simple and sweet, to vulgar idioms of extreme anger and resentment. The products are quilting works nonetheless and address women's history as domestics in not only *the home* but within the *community*. Domestic

²⁸ See Appendix F for an example of Anna’s Tracey Emin-inspired artwork.

labor such as quilting was not just an activity that aided in maintaining *the home*, but it has been a source pool for community, conversation, and relationship building amongst women for generations. Tracey's use of this household item triggers a familiar situation for its viewer while simultaneously confronting him or her with the challenging and provocative subject matters of abuse and objectification—dangers that women commonly face worldwide.

Reluctantly, I also presented this workshop on Tracey Emin's work to a group of middle school-aged participants. Beyond just the subject matter that Tracey's work addresses, I was concerned about having to share with them Tracey Emin's history and experience with sexual trauma that has influenced a great deal of her work. I decided to move forward with the lesson despite my reservations, ultimately citing that they would enjoy the community of the quilting activity and that I would keep the risqué subject matter to a minimum if at all possible. To my surprise, the girls delved in with unrelenting curiosity, questions, and personal anecdotes. They wanted to know if they could express their own anger with the use of vulgarities, and set off enthusiastically with the quilting instructions I had provided them. The conversations and questions continued as they worked. Discussions of rape, promiscuity, and women's bodies being objectified were but a few of the main topics. *Whose fault is it really? And could she really have "brought it on herself?"*

Tracey's work has been successful in engaging the young women and girls of The Vibrator Project in memory (re)collecting through familiar activities, with familiar instruments. Just as Tracey Emin's quilting has brought women together through kinship and commonality, so did it with even the younger participants of The Vibrator Project.

The concept of *double-coding* that comes out of the workshops featuring Tracey Emin's work remains prominent especially in working with Black women and girls in The Vibrator Project. Utilizing the quilting materials in this shared environment has allowed for the young women and girls to explore their more painful memories in a way that are soothing and non-intrusive. The ability to craft and converse simultaneously is more than a ripe environment for memory (re)collecting, but also an act of evoking cultural practices from the past.

Record Making and Creative Writing

One of the aspects of The Vibrator Project that came about organically was the impromptu writing and sharing of poetry within the collective. Many participants hold an interest in creative writing and would often times want to remark on thought-provoking things about the group through spoken word-style poetry. I was even inspired by the group to host an open mic night in which they could exhibit their talents.

The very first day that participant Brenna took part in the group, we were creating *Pleasure Timelines*. She tried to follow the assignment guidelines and to draw her map, but as she found it increasingly difficult to express herself, she decided that writing would best convey her thoughts and emotions concerning the topic. As the group shared their works, she graced us with a piece she had created on the spot:

My sexual voyage is explicitly mine

I birth pleasure through my fear and curiosity

I fuck gods...transparent beings

that create reactions within me
 Suck my frustration Bite my fear
 Swallow my insecurity...My eyes
 orgasm my words bleed through
 my quivering lips
 Fuck the ignorance with me
 Lick me as deep as my
 beckoning spirit
 Cling to me Moan to me on beat
 And drive me to the edge of my sexuality
 Dare me to jump off
 Jump off I'll be your jump off
 Die in me and make me resurrect
 in your screams
 squeal for me hurt me
 Love me sexually
 And introduce me to myself
 inside of me (November 13, 2013)

Stella recalls in her interview session that learning about lesbian poet and activist Audre Lorde is the most memorable and inspirational experience that she has had. She says "I walk around with that poem on a daily base. I go back to it and critique it and add things to it" (July 10, 2013). About a poem that she wrote in honor of the late poet for the

groups open mic night she tells me that ‘[This is] my first poem to an open audience. Because I was able to write something like that about someone I had never met and get that kind of response, this is something that I will never forget’ (July 10, 2013).

In the same light, participant Quen says, “the outlet I use a lot is writing and poetry” (April 30, 2013). She admits that although it’s very vulgar, very explicit, she is able to be herself. “What’s the point of writing is you can’t write what on you mind,” she declares. She knows that writing helps her to explore a lot more. “Because I’m quiet,” she says “it gives me another voice.” “Poetry. Taking pictures. Those are my best modes of expression.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Image as Narrative: Why Photography is Still a Big Deal for Black Women and Girls

The photographic work of Zanele Muholi is by far, one of the most remembered topics amongst interviewed participants of the Vibrator Project. South African artist Zanele Muholi has dedicated her photographic inquiry to documenting the lives and plight of lesbian and queer women in South Africa. Muholi's portraiture, while striking and innovative, also serves to promote social justice and to expose the victimization of this marginalized group in her home country. In my speaking to participants of The Vibrator Project through one-on-one interviews, I have learned that the medium of photography as a mode of expression is one that many participants connect with the most.

With social media having become a permanent part of modern social interaction, the photographic image has thus become even more of a tool for communication. Social networking sites such as Instagram allow for one to communicate information about themselves and their lives simply through a photograph. A photograph, often times, is required to communicate one's whole story, particularly the parts deemed noteworthy. The interviewees who have been impacted by Muholi's photographs have not been impacted simply because of an attraction to her craft of photography; but have been impacted because Muholi presents a clear path, for young Black women especially, to frame their lives, curiosities, and struggles; and to use that product as instrument to convey their knowledge to the world.

The Vibrator Project participants have been introduced to Zanele Muholi through her photographic works, her writing and acclaimed documentary, "Difficult Love".

Muholi's provocative representations of lesbians and gender non-conforming beings elicited discussions that required the young women of the group to challenge themselves and stretch the boundaries of what they considered to be acceptable in terms sexuality and gender expression. These discussions ranged from heated debates to moments of enlightenment and resolve. Some participants expressly relished in developing their own portrait concepts, while others enjoyed being the portraiture subjects. These workshops have provided the young women project participants with the skill to design, frame, and capture narratives according to their own vision and understandings. Photography makes this a valid perception.

In her interview session, Quen tells me that she not only remembers Zanele Muholi's artwork, but also uses one of her images as a screen saver on her cell phone. She constantly finds herself talking about Muholi's work to her peers and presenting the artist's images to others. She is proud of Zanele Muholi. She is honored by this work.

Quen recognizes that even her photographic technique has improved as this artist's work has influenced her to take more pictures, to capture as many moments as she can. She says she loves to capture intimate moments of interaction between her partner and her and to post them on Facebook. She alters the color scheme and filters of the photographs as she wishes to exhibit the images in varying aesthetic qualities. She expresses being more comfortable "being out" to family and friends on social media because of her photography and ways that she has portrayed her relationship through social media outlets such as Facebook. Using art, Quen says that she expected that people knew more about her than they did. She hadn't been closeted and often times expressed sexuality freely through social media in which many friends and family members were in

view. It was not until someone would make a comment about one of her photographs saying, “I didn’t know you were gay that she realized how many people might not have been aware. “People don’t read,” she says. But through images they know. “Pictures make people wake up.”

Participant Anna, recalls Zanele Muholi’s work as “the photographer.” When I encourage her to offer more, to answer the question why the artist stands out. She offers, “Photography’s one of the things I love to do.” Anna, like many, remembers that “she’s a lesbian photographer” and that she’s involved with a White woman. She remembers where Zanele Muholi is from and that her picture taking is about more than beautiful portraiture. She remembers that Zanele Muholi is an activist.

When asked about her most memorable experience in The Vibrator Project, participant Stella responds with a question, “Can I go with pictures?” “I definitely want to go with pictures” she says. “I downloaded a lot of her [Zanele] pictures; and I made a collage on my phone.” Stella explains that she appreciates the artist for “embracing different aspects of beauty—some more masculine, some androgynous, some very feminine.” Stella’s favorite image of Zanele Muholi’s was that of she and her partner, one laying on top of one another. “She was at the bottom and her partner was at the top” Stella recounts, “a swirl cone.” Although she is reluctant to admit it initially, she retorts that the image might convey, “Black people are *always* being suppressed by White people.” She concludes her response affirming Zanele Muholi as “one of the most interesting.” (July 10, 2013)

In few spaces is a Black woman’s or girl’s voice given weight. Photographic images can anchor these voices by capturing reality and truth. Black women and girls

being able to physically see themselves is a tangible form of truth. Through exhibiting thoughts, ideas, and emotions in a manner such as Zanele Muholi, the photographic image can validate the presence of these women as having *been a witness* to life, especially their own. Through photography Black women and girls can process aspects of their life believed to be worth capturing, this model has proven to be affirming for a Black women. The photographer is distinguished in that she is able to tell a story with reality, tell the truth. Possessing the skill of photography sharpens the *eyes*, and allows for more to be seen. The Vibrator Project has served the this purpose for young Black women and girls, to elicit self-awareness, to *see* value in the choices they consider important, and to maintain the confidence needed to *capture* what they want.²⁹

²⁹ See Appendix H for examples Zanele Muholi-inspired photography by participants of the Vibrator Project.

CHAPTER FIVE

Positioning the Conversation: Art Educators Affecting Change in Girls' Education

Art education can play a key role in changing the culture of education, both formal and informal, for Black girls. Through ways that are more accommodating to the different strengths and interests that a student may bring to the educational setting, art education has the ability to reach students *where they are* and to acknowledge *who they are* with the use of innovative methods for understanding students and their learning processes.

Perceptions such as collective learning, arts-based social activism, and the study of public pedagogy as well as alternative pedagogical realms uphold a more straightforward path to engaging students of color, especially holistically and comprehensively. These models, unconventional pathways from many formal education models, all allow for the learner to possess agency in his or her own learning process. The tools of the art educator can best accomplish the goal of thoroughly educating a student.

Recognizing *the Collective*

In their book “The New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change,” Douglas Thomas and John Brown (2002) ask for a reconsideration of what is maintained as *personal* information versus what is *shared*, public versus private. As a result of this line being blurred between the two states, the world is being faced with conceive *the personal* in a new way. Thomas and Brown (2002) propose “a framework that has elements of both but involves intertwining and

remixing—rather than opposing—domains: the personal combined with the collective” (Thomas and Brown, 2002, p. 56).

We understand “the personal” to be what makes up an individual’s identity and gives him or her agency. This is something that can be private, “but does not [necessarily] exist in a vacuum” (Thomas & Brown, year, p. 56). “The public” on the other hand is a singular notion that refers to both scale and anonymity. “Collectives unlike the larger notion of the public are both contextual; and situated, particularly with regard to engaging in specific actions” (Thomas & Brown, year, p. 57). Collectives are spaces that are constructed by and for the individuals who participate in them and concentrate on common subject matters, areas of interest, or curiosities among its members. Members of a collective are afforded the opportunity to constantly be engaged with subjects in which they have a personal investment. An opportunity such as this one does not occur in the classroom or formal educational setting.

Within a collective space members’ contributions of *identity* and *agency* supply a fluid resource pool in which all are able to benefit. This mere fact allows for a transformation to occur between both the individual and the collective. “The collective is, in the most basic sense, a group constantly playing with and reimagining its own identity” (Thomas & Brown, year, p. 58). So, in struggling with this age-old dilemma of “public versus private,” we learn that it is actually the issue of “private” versus “the collective” in which we are grappling.

One example of the collective that we encounter is that of the blog. The blog is a collective space that is shaped by the expressions of one’s thoughts. Blogging, for many, becomes more than simply journaling but is in itself *journalism*. The field of blogging is

beginning to reshape the ideas of journalism. A blogger has the ability to “get away with less and afford fewer pretensions of authority” (Thomas & Brown, year, p. 65).

Information that is put out into the blogosphere has the potential to be highly scrutinized and requires the blogger’s astuteness and accuracy to be at the utmost level in order to produce success.

Another outlet in which the notion of the collective exists in is that of the social networking arena. Social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace allow for an individual to create an online persona and specialized site that is shared with other people that he or she chooses. This phenomenon “provides a means for truly harnessing the [idea] of the collective” (Thomas & Brown, year, p. 67). This is something that encompasses both the *personal* and the *collective* simultaneously because it reflects a person’s individuality and personal interests as well as is used as a tool to connect people that have similar interests and concerns.

The successful collective is an infinite information and creative source pool that is constantly being replenished by its members. Expertise and authority is not something that is held by one person, office, or position but rather is something that is shared and dispersed from the hands of one person to another. The collective as an educational site is flexible and pluralistic, making a comfortable and trustworthy environment where learning can occur for students of any background, level, or economic status. Formal education sites lack this flexibility and miss the mark at being able to provide this level of learning for all of its students. Boundaries arise in the formal educational arena, such as the need for certain supplies and access to technology in the home that have the potential to make a student feel “less than,” therefore hindering the promise of their individual

learning process. Within the collective, peer-to-peer interaction is held as the most important element; and learning occurs at the highest level as a result of this force. Collectives have the ability to shift and alter themselves according to the needs and environment of the people who are involved, according to the world in which they exist, they are capturing the essence of the new culture of learning and are infiltrating the learning process throughout many facets of life.

Through facilitating The Vibrator Project, I have been encouraged to examine my own life and everyday learning environments. I have tried to determine the collective spaces that exist for me and to understand how and what I contribute to them. I realized that I participate in collectives all around me. I realized also that those collective spaces are inspirational and feed different portions of my personhood. When I go to a Women's Studies conference, I don't only learn about and present on topics of women's studies. I have learned that what is most important about these occasions is that I am surrounded by like-minded people and I share certain portions of my thinking processes with everyone I am in contact. Although the panel sessions, and plenary lectures may hold importance to me, what is most valuable is the experience of networking with these like-minded individuals. When I receive support and feedback from work that I present on, I am inspired and I tend to think thoroughly and honestly about every bit because I know that these individuals understand a certain part of me and where I'm coming from that I cannot necessarily obtain in other areas of my life.

I recognize collectives in more non-formal forms as well. The collective that is my family unit—my mother, my grandmother, and aunts, we form a collective in which we contribute a certain element of security and feedback. Although it is often times

annoying, it is a space in which we are peers, and we participate in monitoring each other in dealing with family and life. I act in collectives in which cooking/eating is held with the highest of expectations where I might have other people in my life that healthy eating and a steady exercise regimen reign supreme. I am not able to share and contribute to every collective with the same information and support. The people that participate with me through different collectives are looking for different things. Each collective carries different expectations. They all help support and feed a different aspect of me nonetheless. The collective learning environments that inform my learning process(s) act as resource centers, libraries that tend to my educational needs from natural hair cares to historical interests. The collective(s) is a reflection of me and of I comprises me; and the essence of who I am is reflected through every part of the collective.

Black women and girls are starved for this kind of visibility. The marginalization that Black women and girls experience is reinforced within a learning environment where it is pre-established that one person has all of the knowledge and everyone else has none. All students, especially the Black girls, can benefit from the collective learning environment because she is immediately distinguished in her mere choosing to *show up*. *Who* she is and *what* she brings is not only sufficient, but necessary to the functioning of the group environment.

Distinguishing Pedagogical Methods Amongst Black Girls

Brent Wilson's (2005) investigation of a third pedagogical site, which is both teacher and student constructed, has prompted me to investigate the idea of the *educational space*, as a potential site for safe and healthy explorations of sexuality by

young Black women and girls. Wilson's (2005) article serves as an insightful view of a learning model that encouraged me to contemplate and accept the value of an educational experience structured with initiative(s) and motivation(s) of *the student* in focus.

I had a hard time trying to imagine this space. Despite this intriguing concept, I found it difficult to not simply *direct* educational experiences involving students in The Vibrator Project. Ultimately, I had to recall the opportunities in which I got to witness activities and practices of young Black women and girls (*students*) that I almost-loathed. I realized that the practices of these young Black women and girls that I loathed were the ones that they enjoyed the most and ones that made them feel the most creative. It also became clear that I didn't understand them or their creations as products of a third pedagogical site, and, therefore, could not value them for what they embodied.

In thinking about the self portraiture or posed photography that the young women and girls engaged in, I understood that this was a similar approach to a third pedagogical site as model for art education. Although to outsiders, these photographs may lack quality in terms of their conceptions of young Black women and girls, instead the participants in The Vibrator Project draw heavily on the popular culture familiar to them. The discussions in The Vibrator Project provide a forum to critique how the participants in the project want to represent themselves.³⁰ This stylized image personifies what she is trying to communicate as beautiful, the personality she wishes to exude, and the things that are of importance to her. In many cases, she explores wardrobe as costume, props, set/scene design, and camera angle to achieve the composition she desires. It is also the case that girls seek out the necessary equipment it would entail to produce and present these images to the masses (i.e., digital cameras, video cameras, and computers). The young

³⁰ See Appendix G for Figures 1 and 2.

women and girls successfully create the image of themselves they want to exhibit, and establish the images in the venue they deem appropriate (or create a new one). While facilities and equipment, opportunity of space and time, and encouragement by a teacher may foster third pedagogical sites of collective learning; direct instruction from a teacher or art classroom is not necessary. This concept is a major component in The Vibrator Project action research project. By way of artistic practice, young women and girl participants can claim the opportunity for unrestricted creative expression.

The artists, the artwork, and life stories that have been presented to young Black women and girls throughout The Vibrator Project principally motivated the experience of unrestricted creative expression. Open and honest dialogue also contributed to this unrestricted atmosphere. Thus the project participants were inspired, as discussed in the prior chapters, to begin to uncover a path to self-satisfaction in their lives. The women artists acted as role models to these young Black women and girls, giving them essential tools and knowledge for free and effective modes for expressing their desires unapologetically.

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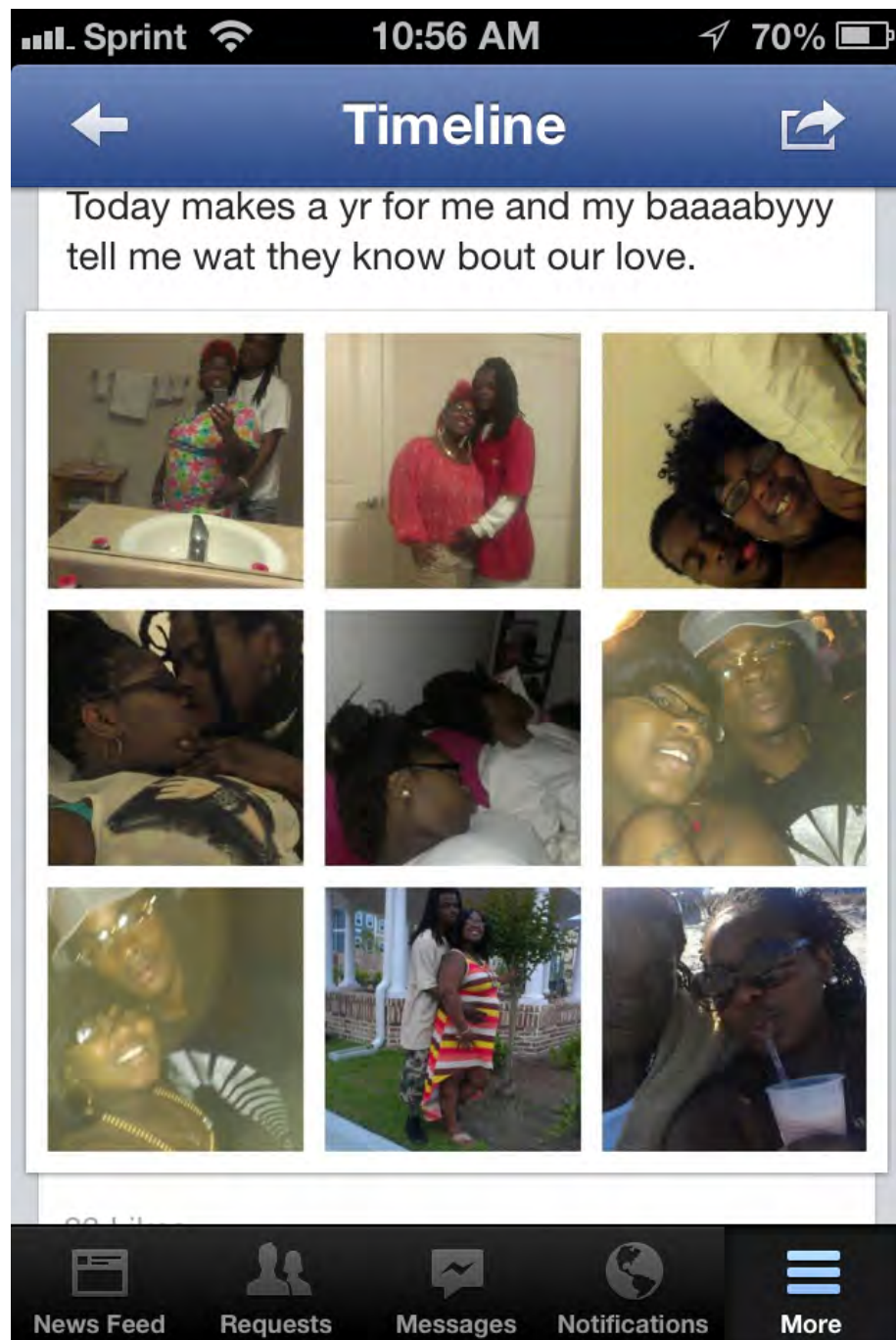
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APPENDIX A: Reference for Figure 1



*Fig. 1 Photograph of Participant;
Conceptualized and Styled by subjects
Photographer(s) Anonymous*

APPENDIX B: Shoshanna Weinberger Lesson Plan (P.1)

TEACHING INSTRUCTIONS: Shoshanna Weinberger

THEMES:

- The Hottentot Venus, Saartjie Baartman
- Objectifications of the Black Female Body
- Sexual Representations of Women of Color
- Legacy of Colonialism
- Abstract Illustration
- Water Color Painting

FEATURED WORKS:

Freak Show Series, Shells Series, Goldie Series, Strangefruit Series, and Cornrow Series
2010-2012

RESOURCES:

Links to images

- <http://www.shoshanna.info/>

DISCUSSION POINTS AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS:

- Generate questions regarding the portrayal of the “Freak Show” in images.
 - Why do you feel the artist includes the illustration of curtains or drapes?
What are these household furnishings usually used for?
- In many of the artist’s images, severed body parts or decapitated bodies are depicted. Why do you believe the artist depicts bodies in this way?
 - Do the bodies depicted represent a female or male? Explain.
 - How are the body parts related to sexuality?
- What types of clothing or accessories are the bodies/ body parts wearing? Why is this type clothing associated with sexuality?
- Introduce to the story of Saartjie Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus to the group.
 - Why do you think Shoshanna Weinberger would be interested in continuing a conversation around Saartjie Baartman in present-day America?
 - Are their present-day “Saartjie Baartman’s” that originate from African-American popular culture (i.e. Lil Kim, Nikki Minaj)? If so, what kind of attention so these women receive? Why?
- You may also generate questions regarding the use of color and texture in the images you choose to highlight any of the artist’s series

APPENDIX B (continued): Shoshanna Weinberger Lesson Plan (P.2)**HANDS-ON PROJECT: Shoshanna Weinberger**

The hands-on component for the Shoshanna Weinberger lesson is inspired by the *Strangefruit* series. The project focuses on Weinberger's use of abstract illustration through the medium of water-color. Students will think about how visual representations that contribute to ideas about the body, the black female body, hyper-sexualization, and the Hottentot Venus while making abstract water-color markings or markings that are representational forms of commonly sexualized body parts.

You images from any one of Shoshanna Weinberger's series to help inspire this work, as well as hyper-sexual images from popular culture.

Art Project

- Water Color Paper
- Water Color Paints or Water Color Pencils
- Metallic Markers (or paint)

PROCEDURE FOR HANDS-ON PROJECT:

- Allow students free range and an ample amount of time to draw and/ or paint abstractly using Weinberger's work as inspiration.
- You may replay the images or any video to refresh the memories of the students or to further motivate them.
- Feel free to play music that might be appropriate for stirring up emotions or concerns in relation to sexuality and the body image among African –American women.
- Remind students that they will want for their pieces to dry within the class period, so adding exercise layers of paint might prohibit this.
- Also, they should make marking using markers or metallic pens prior to painting with the watercolor paint or pencils because the dampened paper might impede them from making marker markings after painting. If they wish to use markers after painting they should once again allow time for the paint to fully dry before doing so.

APPENDIX B (continued): Shoshanna Weinberger Lesson Plan (P. 3)**CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISE: Shoshanna Weinberger****Body Language**

(Adapted from Ellen Jaffe's *Writing Your Way: Creating a Personal Journal* 2001)

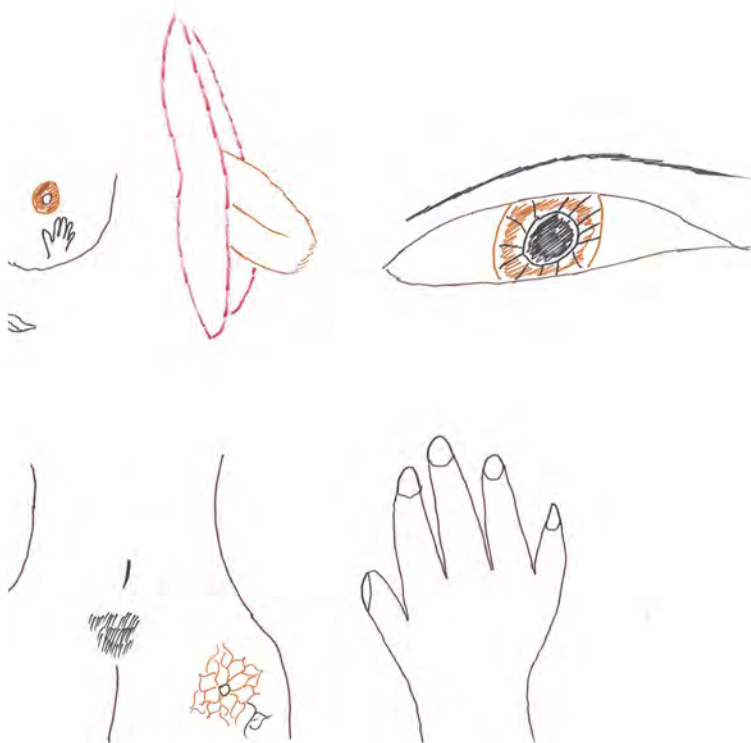
This project is inspired by Shoshanna Weinberger's use of the black female body as a sexual object in her work. Beauty ad's and representations of any female body in popular culture have often focused on sexualized parts of the female body such as breasts, abs, thighs, and lips.

In this exercise we will attempt to get to "know" our body by giving it different parts of it a voice. Choose a part of your body that you either like, or that you feel insecure about. It can also be an area where you are experiencing pain or illness. Write as if this part of your body is speaking— give it a voice. The writing can be a series of paragraphs, a poem, a letter from your body part to you, or a dialogue between the two of you.

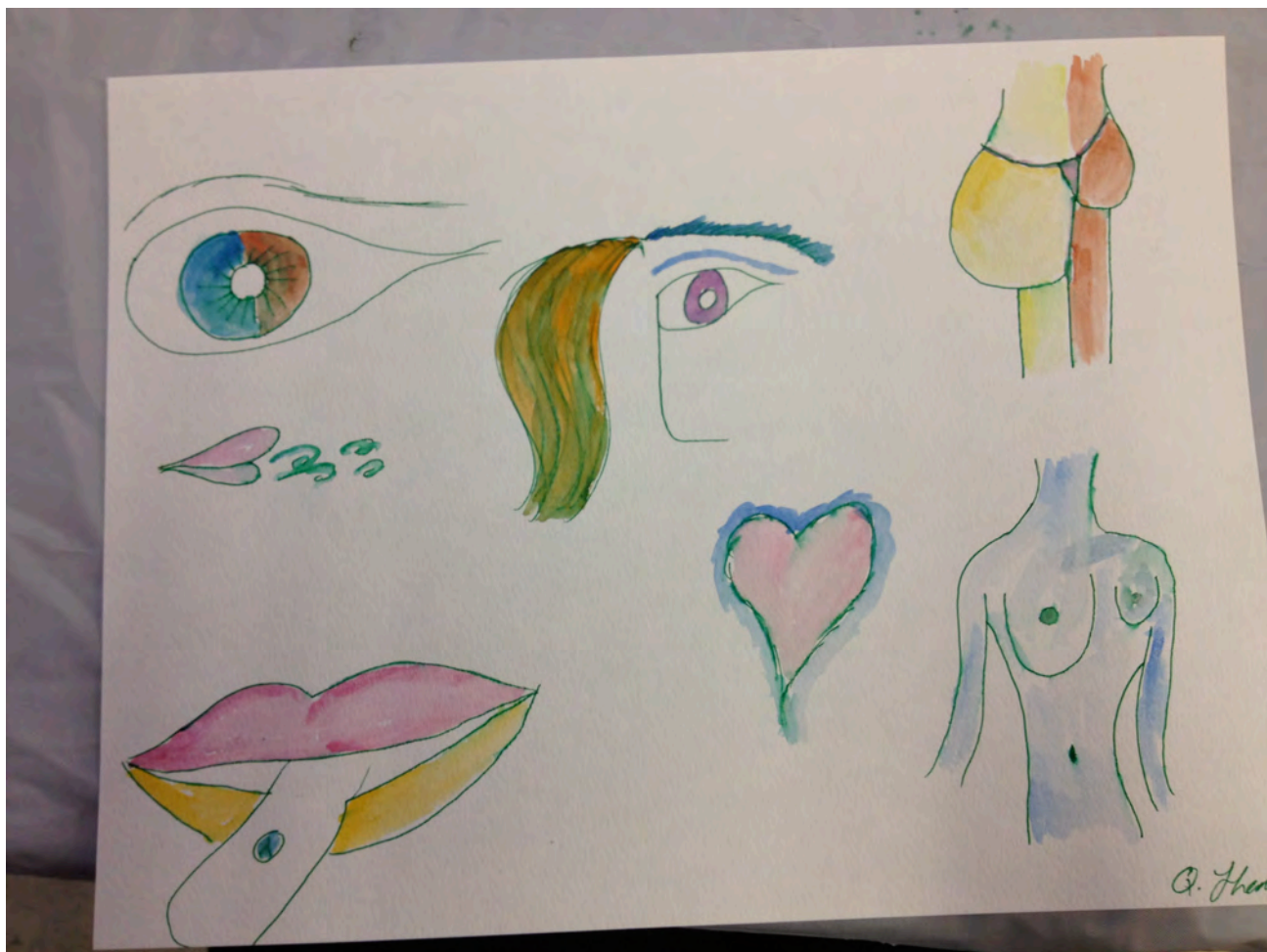
APPENDIX B (continued): Shoshanna Weinberger Lesson Plan (P.4)**APPLICABLE NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS (GRADES 5 -12):**

- NA—VA.5-8.1 (9-12.1): Understanding and Applying Media, Techniques, and Processes
- NA—VA.5-8.3 (9-12.3): Choosing and Evaluating A Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas
- NA—VA.5-8.4 (9-12.4): Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures
- NA—VA.5-8.6 (9-12.6): Making Connections Between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines [History / Anthropology]

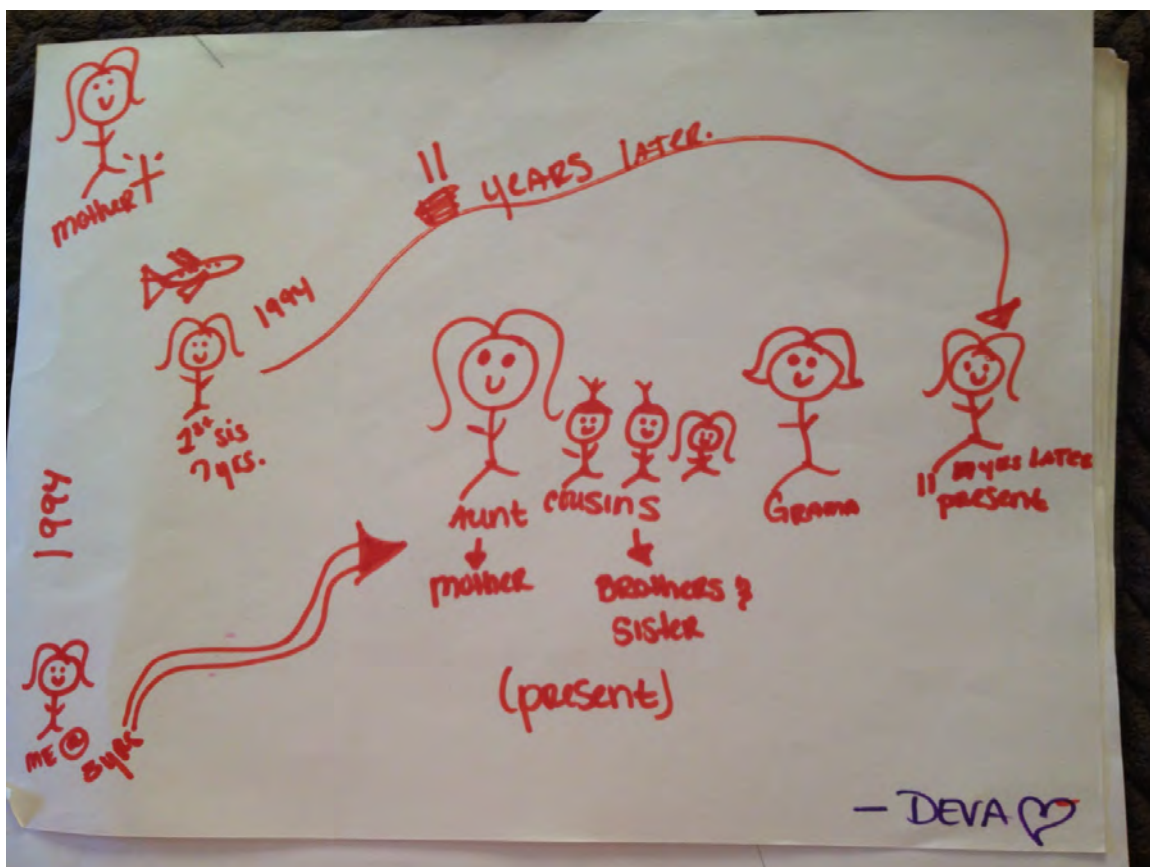
**APPENDIX C: Examples of Quen's
Shoshanna Weinberger-inspired Paintings**



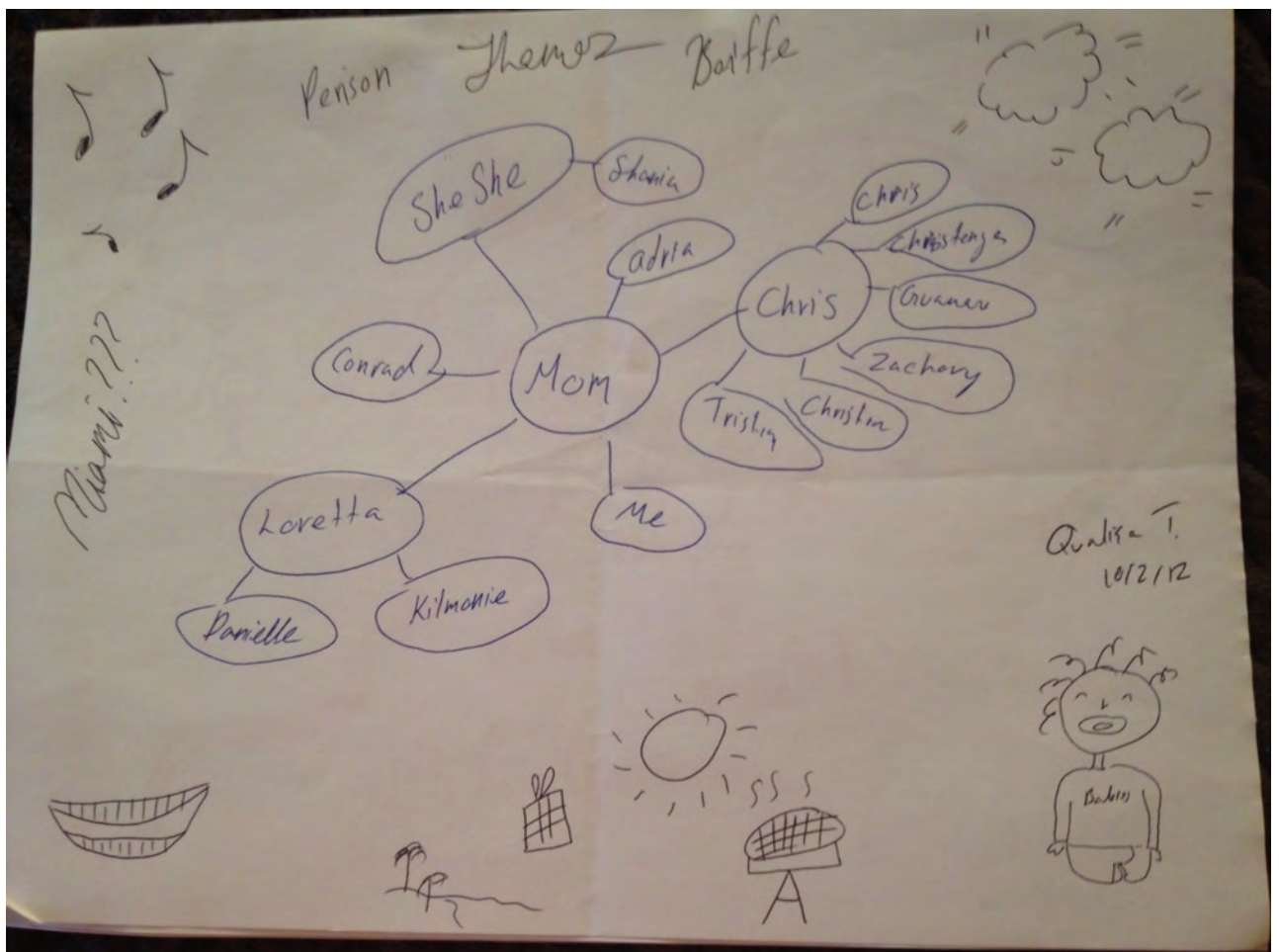
**APPENDIX C (continued): Examples of Quen's
Shoshanna Weinberger-inspired Paintings**



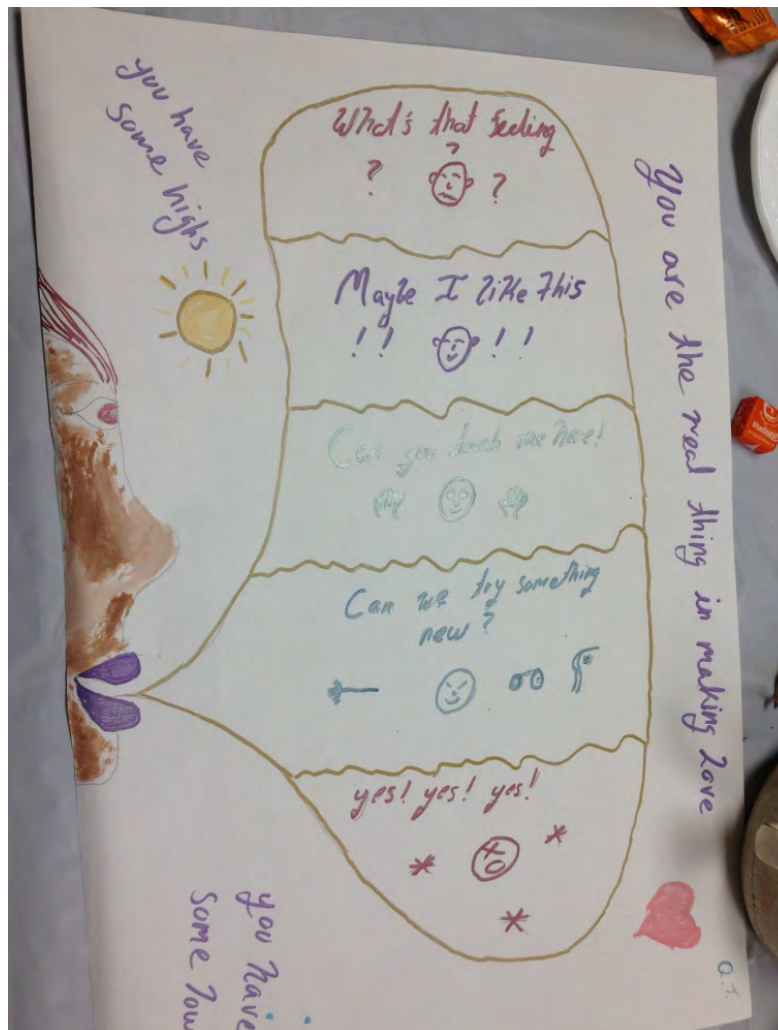
APPENDIX D: Examples of Family Structure Map



APPENDIX D (continued): Examples of Family Structure Map



APPENDIX E: Examples of Pleasure Timeline



APPENDIX E (continued): Examples of Pleasure Timeline



APPENDIX E (continued): Examples of Pleasure Timeline

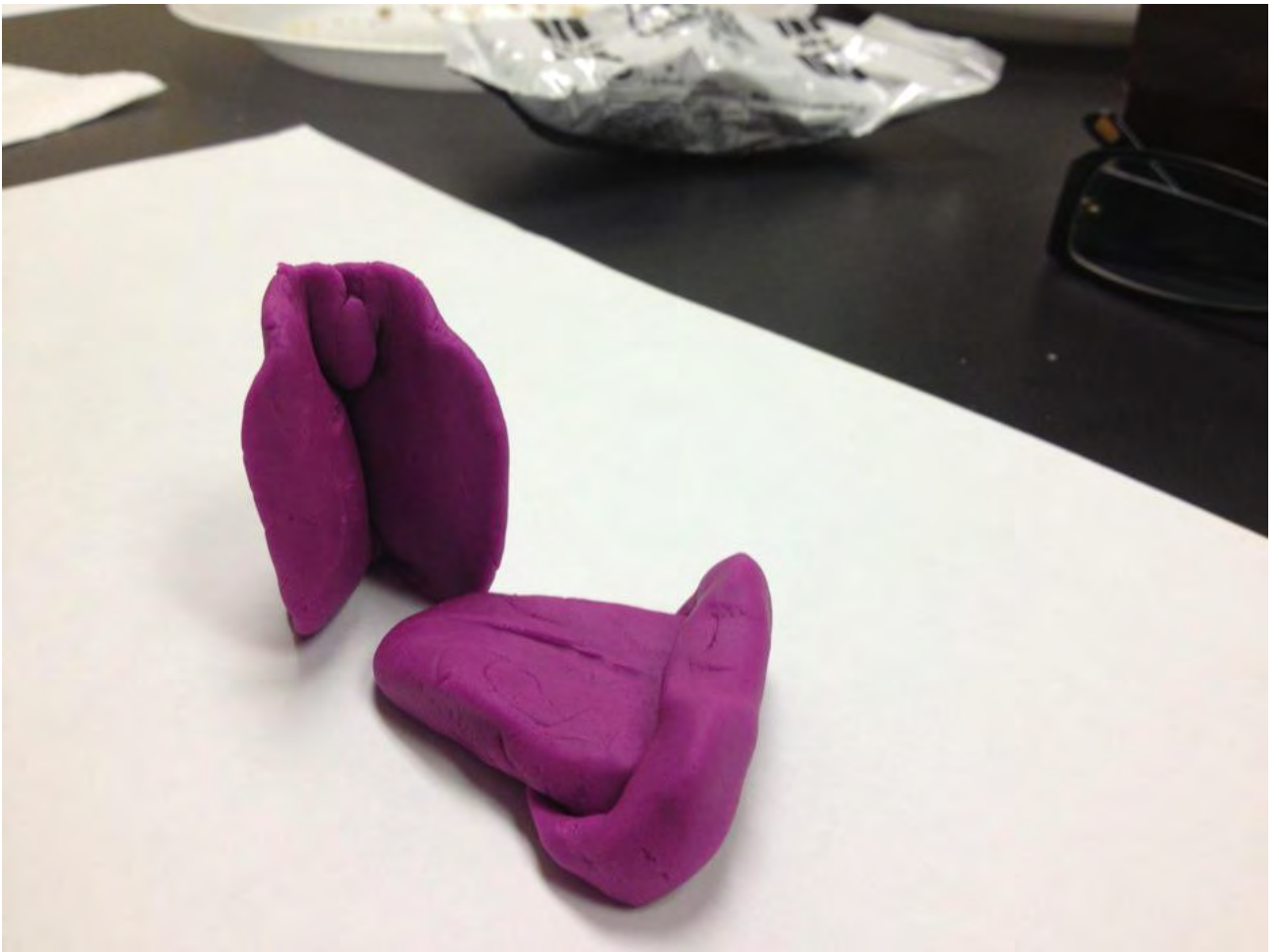
APPENDIX F: Example of Anna's Tracey Emin-inspired Artwork



APPENDIX G: Examples Participants' Responses
to *What is Sex? What is Sexuality What is Pleasure?*



APPENDIX G (continued): Examples Participants' Responses
to *What is Sex? What is Sexuality What is Pleasure?*



APPENDIX G (continued): Examples Participants' Responses

to What is Sex? What is Sexuality What is Pleasure?



APPENDIX H: Examples of Zanele Muholi-inspired Photography
by Participants of The Vibrator Project.




APPENDIX I: References of Figures 2 and 3

*Fig. 2 Photograph of Participants;
Conceptualized and Styled by subjects
Photographer Anonymous*



*Fig. 3 Photograph of participants;
conceptualized and styled by subjects;
photographer, Anya M. Wallace*

APPENDIX J: Internal Review Board Approval Letter

	Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research The Pennsylvania State University	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; font-size: small;"> ORP OFFICE USE ONLY DO NOT REMOVE OR MODIFY IRB# Doc.# The Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board Office for Research Protections Approval Date: Expiration Date: </div>
Title of Project:	Pleasure (re)Collected by Young Black Women and Girls in 'The Vibrator Project'	
Principal Investigator:	Anya M. Wallace 1601 NW 4 th Street Fort Lauderdale, FL 33311 (954)336-6454 amw402@psu.edu or anyamawallace@gmail.com	
Advisor:	Karen Keifer-Boyd, Ph.D. Professor, Art Education & Women's Studies School of Visual Arts, 210 Arts Cottage The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802-2905 Phone: 814.863.7312 Email: kk-b@psu.edu Web site: http://www.personal.psu.edu/ktk2	
<p>1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to...</p> <p>The purpose of this study is to investigate the self-knowledge of young women of color (ages 18-21) regarding their perceptions of sex, sexuality, and pleasure. I have facilitated art-centered self-esteem programming with sexually active young women designed to elicit self-awareness. I propose to systematically analyze young women's sexual self-knowledge through one-on-one culminating interviews with project participants of The Vibrator Project, an existing program that housed at Pridelines Youth Center. This study will provide my reflection on arts programming (The Vibrator Project) as liberating sex therapy that has been developed as a part of the Women on the Rise! girls outreach program. The program was developed to engage project participants in valuing their body and considering their future.</p> <p>2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to...</p> <p>Through my research study I am trying to learn what young women and girls think about pleasure. I am planning to hold a 30 minute to 1 hour interview with you that will focus on the program which you've been participating called "The Vibrator Project". In the interview I will ask for your opinions about the art work you've created as well as how your life experiences have influenced that work. We are going to look at images of your art, the artists that you've learned about in "The Vibrator Project" together and comment on them. I will record our discussion so that I may refer to it when I write my research paper. If you do not want your voice to be recorded you will be unable to participate in the study.</p> <p>I will scan or take pictures of the work that you have created in "The Vibrator Project" so that I am able to include them in my research paper.</p> <p>3. Discomforts and Risks: There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort.</p> <p>Discomforts will be minimized by your providing a pseudonym, the data being kept in only one secure place, and by being permanently deleted 5 years from the date of recording. If you do not provide a pseudonym, one will be created for you.</p> <p>4. Benefits: The benefits to you include...</p> <p>Increased self-knowledge and the benefit of contributing to publishable work in the field of Art education and/ or Women's Studies are the potential benefits to individual participants of the proposed research study.</p>		
Page 1 of 2		