An African American Cultural Critique of Weight, Race, Gender and Class Using a Semiotic Analysis of Queen Latifah’s Film Roles

Angela Denise Prater

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AN AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL CRITIQUE OF WEIGHT, RACE, GENDER AND CLASS USING A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF QUEEN LATIFAH’S FILM ROLES

by

Angela Denise Prater

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts Department of Communication

Western Michigan University Kalamazoo, Michigan August 2004
AN AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL CRITIQUE OF WEIGHT, RACE, GENDER AND CLASS USING A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF QUEEN LATIFAH’S FILM ROLES

Angela Denise Prater, M.A.
Western Michigan University, 2004

This project examined the interconnectedness of race, gender, class and the physical body as interrelated marginalization factors in media representations. Using the feminist body image literature, critical/cultural theory and Black feminist thought this study examined the significance of weight as a marginalization variable interdependent with race, gender and class. The motion picture character portrayals of the iconic figure Queen Latifah are subjected to a semiotics analysis, a traditional method in critical cultural studies to examine media representations. This analysis is informed by the cultural standpoint of the author as an overweight African American female. This study revealed that Queen Latifah’s film roles reinforce, re-image and resist traditional stereotypes of the Mammy and Jezebel and suggests that Hollywood has developed an emerging stereotype of the female buck.
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Angela Denise Prater
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

...It is a sex object if you’re pretty and no love or love and no sex If you’re fat get back fat Black woman be a mother grandmother strong thing but not woman games woman romantic woman love needing man seeker dick eater sweat getter fuck needing love seeking woman

Woman Poem
Nikki Giovanni

hooks (1992) describes this poem as a “cry of resistance urging those who exploit and oppress Black women, objectify and dehumanize them, to confront the consequences of their actions” (p. 65) and she urges every Black female to face herself and to realize the forces that she must struggle against in order to achieve self-actualization. hooks (1992) further argues that African-Americans as a whole face a dilemma. Black people would rather look away from their present condition than become angry or militant because consciousness of their oppression is so painful. At the same time, it is only through increased awareness that African Americans can begin to see clearly, to resist these forces, and to work for change.

These forces of domination are created by the White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy (hooks, 1992a) and arise from a hegemonic process, such that those in power secure

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the unconscious consent of the marginalized to the system that oppresses or subordinates them. This ongoing domination and subordination occurs through control of cultural resources such as religious, political, social, educational, and media institutions by those few who hold power (e.g., Dines & Humez, 2003; Fiske, 1994; Hall, 1997; Kellner, 2003a, 2003b). In the United States subordinated citizens are usually referred to as the disenfranchised or the marginalized, those who have been defined as "other" by society; their marginalization reflects their degree of difference from the center described as "the mythical norm defined as the thin, young, heterosexual, financially secure, White Christian male" (Ford & Yep, 2003, p. 243).

Categories of marginalization such as race, gender, sexuality, physical appearance, age, ability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and other identity markers have been viewed as distinct factors contributing uniquely to the experience of disenfranchisement in the larger culture (e.g., Dines & Humez, 2003; Ford & Yep, 2003; Orbe & Hopson, 2001; Purnell, 2002; Xiao & Heisey, 1996). However, Black feminist scholars such as hooks (1984, 1990, 1992, 1996) and Collins (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Collins, 2000) have called attention to the examination of the complexities of intersecting identities for members of
marginalized groups. These scholars argue that examinations of the experiences of African American women from a race standpoint or a gender standpoint can not capture the experience of being African American and female. In short, for African American women, their potential for marginalization is magnified and complicated as they may face subordination and oppression as a result of any one of these factors or any complex combination of these factors (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992a, 1992b). Hence, race, gender and class are interconnected marginalization factors of oppression and as such need to be examined in all their interrelated complexities (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1996; Houston, 1992).

Marginalization and the hegemonic forces that create dominance and oppression have been studied by scholars interested in organizations (e.g. Spellers, 2000), interpersonal relations (e.g. Bell, Orbe, Drummond & Camara, 2000), and in media’s role in the perpetuation of these dynamics (e.g. Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; hooks, 1992a, 1996; Macdonald, 1995; Orbe & Strother, 1996). The intersection of race, gender and class in popular culture with an emphasis on media representation of marginalized groups has captured increased research attention in recent years (Collins, 2000; Dines & Humes, 2003; Dyson, 1993;
Fiske, 1989; hooks, 1992a, 1996, 1997; Merelman, 1995). The examination of media products continues to be a significant field of study because media products (i.e. radio, television, film) give us a sense of our identity, sex, ethnicity, race, nationality and the notion of what it means to be "us" or them (Kellner, 1987; Merelman, 1995).

Since the media are so pervasive in society, when they replicate dominant ideologies, the consumer may absorb these messages and images as something they already know to be real and true, hence, passively consenting to and perpetuating the hegemonic ideology (e.g., Holtzman, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kellner, 1987, 1995). Thus, critical cultural intellectuals aim to criticize mainstream media and its representations as it creates and recreates images of dominance, repression and oppression.

Hollywood films are one product of the media culture that contribute to the social construction of identity though the representation of markers such as race, gender, class, social-economic standing and physical appearance (Kellner, 2003b). Cripps (1993) suggests that movies play a significant role in the marginalization of the subjugated "other" creating hegemonic ideological stereotypes of individuals or groups in society such as African Americans and Latinos. African Americans are among the oppressed
groups that researchers examine through critique of their media representations in film and other media (Bogle, 2001; Coleman, 2003; Dates & Barlow, 1993; Dyson, 1993; Entman & Rojeck, 2000; hooks, 1992a; Merelman, 1995). The representation of African American women specifically has been an important focal group for media critique since their oppression can be expressed as race, class and/or gender oppression (Cloud, 1996; Gaither, 1996; Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; hooks, 1992a; McKible, 1994; Orbe & Strother, 1996; Roberts, 1994; Shelton, 1997; Splawn, 1997; Storhoff, 2002; Thaggert, 1998; Williams, 1993; Zook, 1999). However, few media representation studies of African American women have considered marginalization through physical appearance, especially the subjugation arising from weight.

A wealth of body image literature examines issues such as obesity, eating disorders and identity issues among White, Latina, and Black adolescent girls and women (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Duke, 2000; Goodman, 2002; Hendriks, 2002, McDonald, 1995; Root, 1990). The primary concern of these studies is the objectification of the female body and the "fat obsessed" culture in America that believes the ideal figure for women is a "boy with boobs" (e.g., Bordo, 1993;

Most of these studies cite the media as a factor contributing to this obsession with body image among American women. Some have argued that the media are so pervasive in society it creates a hegemonic ideology, based on "the thin ideal" for physical appearance (Brooks, 1993; Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Dorenkamp, McClymer, Moynihan & Vadum, 1985). While historically Hollywood has linked physical culture (i.e., weight) with stardom (Addison, 2003) the media representation of physical appearance and weight for African American women in film as a specific point of critique has been minimally addressed (McDonald, 1995).

To date, there are relatively few major African American stars in major studio productions and only two of the ten African American box office stars are women. According to Collier (2003), Queen Latifah and Halle Berry are the two Black female moneymakers for Hollywood films. hooks (1994) suggests that mass media undermines the efforts of decolonization by having biracial women dominate the depiction of Black folks. While both Queen Latifah and Halle Berry have lighter skin, Halle Berry has distinctly Eurocentric features. On the other hand, Queen Latifah has
a primarily Afrocentric physical appearance which may lead to an increased susceptibility to marginalization in her film portrayals. Clearly, weight/body size may be a confounding factor with race, gender and class in the film portrayals of African American women. Thus, the aim of this project was to view marginalization as a multifactored, interconnected experience for overweight African American women in film.

This study is rooted in three research areas, critical/cultural studies, Black feminism and media representation studies. Through a semiotic analysis of film characters of Queen Latifah, the goal was to uncover the degree to which Hollywood represents her as conforming to or moving beyond the stereotypical roles that overweight African American women historically have occupied in American films and thus, contributing to stereotypes in the larger society.

Specifically, this project examined how the representations of race, gender, class and weight as portrayed by Queen Latifah’s characters may be fostering or naturalizing hegemony in larger social structures. Thus, this study should provide insight into these representations and offer a starting point for other media critiques that explicitly examine the depictions of
overweight African American women in media culture. As all critical cultural scholars ultimately aim to do through the exposure of negative representations, the objective of this study was to examine and potentially reveal a system of cultural ideologies of overweight African American women in mainstream Hollywood films. If these ideologies exists, then the goal would be to begin a critical discourse that would work toward exposing negative images and create a space of resistance and call for more positive images of overweight African American women in mainstream Hollywood films.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the extant literature regarding gender, race, class, and body image in the area of critical cultural/media studies. This chapter is divided into four main sections. First, critical cultural studies are presented as the larger framework for this study with an emphasis on hegemonic forces and ideological positioning. Second, media representation studies of the role of the media in the ideological positioning of race, gender and class are reviewed. Next, an examination of interconnectedness of race, gender and class as informed by Black feminist thought and the critique of bell hooks is provided as theoretical grounding for this study. The last section of this chapter focuses on the marginalization of the African American female body in the media.

The Critical Cultural Tradition in Media Studies

This research project draws from a critical cultural paradigm. The goal of researchers within this framework is to examine and critique the ways in which power structures including social, political or media organizations oppress, subordinate, and marginalize citizens through culture and ideology in order to maintain power and domination.
Critical scholars aim to resist and to change the existing power relations. This section will provide a review of critical theory and critical cultural studies.

Critical Theory

Critical thought is a paradigm defined by particular assumptions, worldviews and ways of understanding the world, organizations, and communication that employs a combination of a social/cultural analysis, explanation, and interpretation with social/cultural critique (Littlejohn, 1999). Furthermore, critical scholars emphasize and explore the complex relationships among communication, power, identity and the process that privileges certain groups over others (Mumby, 1997). Mumby (1997) describes the critical paradigm as a discourse of suspicion where "surface level meanings and behaviors obscure deep structure conflicts, contradictions, and neuroses that systematically limit the possibilities for the realization of a genuinely democratic society" (p. 9). Mumby (1997) identifies critical theory as a rearticulation of the modernist project represented by the Enlightenment movement when rationality and science were combined to help humans understand their experience with the world around them as a
way of emancipation. Critical theorists both expand and challenge the enlightenment project. The philosophical foundations of this more recent critical paradigm are Neo-Marxist and are manifested through two streams of thought. Neo-Marxism, arising from the Marxist tradition, critiqued the reliance on positivism and the move toward a more rational understanding of the world. Critical theorists ascribe to a social constructionist view of the world, which suggests that humans construct reality through language, myths and other symbolic means (Littlejohn, 1999). Further, Neo-Marxists of the Frankfort School also critiqued the systems of reason and rationality as mechanisms for understanding the links between capitalism, politics, culture and epistemology, contending that enlightenment can be self-destructive (Mumby, 1997). Finally, they challenged the logic of capitalism, questioning the explanations of power and domination through a hegemonic economy. Instead, the Neo-marxists argued that the suprastructural dimensions of power such as culture and ideology functioned hegemonically (Mumby, 1997).

While modernist thought presents the enlightenment as a form of emancipation, neo-Marxists (critical modernists) from the Frankfort school were more skeptical believing
that full enlightenment could lead to disaster as rationalization promotes the proliferation of bureaucracy and ends in barbarism (Braaten, 1991; Mumby, 1997). As such, the critical emancipatory goal is seen as an extension of the enlightenment project as critical theorists acknowledge technical rationality but want to advance practical and emancipative ways of knowing as in the work of Habermas (1984, 1987).

Habermas reconstructed the enlightenment project centered on a linguistic model of communication (Braaten, 1991; Mumby, 1997). Habermas critiques modernist technical rationality where the scientific hegemonic form of study is seen as undermining self-critical intervention. Habermas preserves the links to emancipation and modernity while demonstrating that these relationships have been distorted by "identity logic", thus our sense of selfhood and community has been overwhelmed by economics and power (Mumby, 1997).

Mumby (1997) explains that Habermas replaced the technical rationality of economic power and domination with practical rationality which is oriented toward reaching understanding, and emancipatory rationality which is oriented toward self-reflection, and emancipation from forms of oppression within one’s lifeworld. Practical and
emancipatory rationalities are ethically and politically situated forms of rationality that demonstrate how communication is a principle element of understanding truth and are a means for exercising power and domination in society (Mumby, 1997). Thus, critical theory is a theory of rationality and society which links the past, present and future when examining power, domination and the oppression of others. Critical scholars contend that the suprastructural (e.g., politics, economics, race, gender, discourse and culture) forces of power and domination are reproduced and perpetuated by hegemony.

Hegemony is typically defined as the process by which those in power secure the consent of the socially subordinated by making the system that subordinates them seem natural through their control of religious, educational, and media institutions, thus giving them a fixed appearance (Gramsci, 1971). According to Gramsci (1971), such consent is never secured once and for all, but must continually be sought and resisted through subversive (counterhegemonic) cultural work. The primary aim of Critical theorists is to empower marginalized citizens such that they would resist oppressive forces of hegemony with emancipation as the goal (Mumby, 1997). They further argue that ideology and culture are primary factors of capitalism
resulting in exploitation of the working class and subjugated others (Agger, 1998). Through raising consciousness of these suprastructures, people can begin to change their social conditions. The oppressed can be responsible for their own liberation and work for the sake of future emancipation for others (Agger, 1992, 1998; Mumby, 1997).

Therefore, critical theorists critique, review and analyze larger systems of domination that marginalize certain groups based on things such as race, gender, class (hooks, 1994; Kellner, 1995; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). In essence, all critical theorists from the Neo-Marxist tradition understand economic oppression to be a larger cultural and ideological struggle. Thus, they are primarily concerned with the study of power in the form of hegemony within a society whether in organizations, mass media or other forms of communication (Chandler, 1999; Hall, 1997; Kellner, 1995).

The primary aim of critical theories is to raise consciousness of power and domination of the cultural ideologies in society’s organizations, mass media and other forms of communication. Critical theorists want to achieve this by teaching individuals and groups in society critical reflection, so they can understand and resist oppressive...
forces to work toward decolonization and emancipation. One specific body of work within the critical paradigm is critical cultural studies.

Critical Cultural Studies

Scholars in Critical Cultural studies attempt to reveal culture and society through examination of the specific and complex relationships among the mass media, ideology, systems of meaning, and identity (Kellner, 2003b, 2003a; Mumby, 1997). The central concern for critical cultural scholars is understanding how those who have power and the means to control media production, also control the creation and dissemination of a particular set of ideas through the mass media (Hall, 1997). These mediated images, concepts and premises provide a version of reality which contributes to the development of individual cognitive maps through which we make sense of social existence (Hall, 1997; Holtzman, 2000; Kellner, 1995, 2003). Further, these media images help to forge our identities and help to shape our values and view of the world. According to critical cultural scholars that worldview is heavily influenced by the dominant ideology of those in power. Hence, the mainstream media functions to reinforce and hold together the established social order (Kellner, 2003a).
Critical cultural scholars then, are concerned with hegemonic ideology as they examine media as a system through which culture is produced and consumed (Dinez & Humez, 2003; Hall, 1997; hooks, 1996, 1997; Kellner, 1995, 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003; Motzkus, 2003). These scholars aim to uncover the ways in which culture is produced through a struggle among ideologies in the mass media and to reveal the contradictions within society (Hall, 1997; Kellner, 2003b; Littlejohn, 1999). Through counterhegemonic interpretations of the prevailing ideologies, critical cultural studies scholars seek to help citizens understand power and domination as represented by and through the mass media and then call for change or emancipation from these dominant images (Hall, 1997; hooks, 1997; Kellner, 1995; Littlejohn, 1999). Stuart Hall, (as cited by hooks, 1994) claims that:

the work that cultural studies has to do is to mobilize everything it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihumane (p. 3).

Although this may be a biased orientation, this is a primary concern of critical cultural scholars. As such this study contributes to the examination of media's role in the ideological positioning of race, gender, and class.
Media's Role in the Ideological Positioning of Race, Gender and Class

Contemporary critical cultural scholars suggest that the dominant ideologies perpetuated in the media contribute to the marginalization of particular social groups and are one of the primary reasons that economic and other resources, advantages and privileges, are distributed inequitably (Gorham, 1999). Further, as has been argued here, media shape our worldview and set cultural values or norms by providing symbols, myths, and resources through which we obtain a common culture (Dates & Barlow, 1993; Kellner, 2003b). To that end, media products help create our perceptions of social reality and influence how we understand the world in which we live, and inform how we react to others within it (Gorham, 1999).

Media specifically represent aspects of the social reality that are the constructs of race, gender, class and other marginalization factors. Representations (e.g., people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts) (Chandler, 2002) are not the thing itself but rather a "reimagined and reinvented, imitation of life" reflecting the ideology of those who produce the image (hooks, 1996). Given this understanding, media products often lead to stereotypical representations and
other misrepresentations of the experience of marginalized others (Dates & Barlow, 1993; Kellner, 2003b). Therefore, in American society, the mass media function to maintain societal power structures through reinforcing cultural ideology in media representations, legitimating the inequalities in race, gender, class, and generational relations for commercial purposes by perpetuating the ideological hegemony of the dominant White culture (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Hall, 1997). These forces have maintained and continue to maintain a certain set of existing social relations and practices to prevent social change (Vande Berg, 1999).

Media introduces and replicates society's dominant ideologies, which are often invisible to the media consumer, reinforcing what the consumer already "knows" to be true as a result of constant exposure to and repetition of these images (Hall, 1997). Thus, critical cultural scholars perform counterhegemonic practices focused on these representations in order to resist oppressive patterns created and recreated through the media.

Representations of Race, Gender and Class in the Media

Critical cultural scholars have examined race, gender, and class in the media as socially constructed categories
that stem from the larger capitalistic and cultural forces of domination put in place to serve an economic and ideological base (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Bogle, 2001; Dines & Humez, 2003; hooks, 1996). While the media help us understand the notions of race, gender, class, sexuality and other societal constructs, (Kellner, 2003a) repeated representations of stereotypical images may perpetuate society's dominant ideologies if consumers accept messages they already believe to be true (e.g., Gorham, 1999; Hall, 1997; Kellner, 2003a).

The separate categories of race, gender and class, each have their own historical dynamic of social domination, material conditions of existence and ideological components (Kellner, 1995). As such, many critical cultural scholars have framed the representations of these marginalized groups in the media, as critiques of race, gender, or class ideology. Ideologies are not dependent upon a certain genre (i.e., comedy, violence, romance) but can be manifest in media portrayals in a number of ways. For example, ideologies do not have to be blatant misrepresentations but can also be seen in humorous or even violent portrayals (Faludi, 1991). Of particular interest to this study are representations in film, a medium that has a unique position in relation to all other
media because of its national scope, and revenue stemming from direct payments by consumers (Cripps, 1993). Film also has an event status. Consumers have to physically go see them, making them more difficult to access, yet they are still successful. It could be that film is a launching pad for culture, therefore, becoming the focal point that creates American culture.

Ideologies of Race

Ideologies of race present a belief system in which the dominant (i.e., White) culture ascribes certain roles and characteristics to those in society who are “others”. The concept of race that led to racism emerged from slavery; ideologies of race are primarily the racist or White Supremacist notion that contends that European Americans are intellectually, physically and morally superior to all other races based on skin color or perceived group affiliation (Gorham, 1999; Philipsen, 2003). As such, the dominant culture exhibits authority and power over marginalized citizen through racial myths to privilege one group over others economically, culturally, and politically (Kellner, 2003a; Philipsen, 2003). The dominant culture then seeks to maintain this social order by using racist stereotypes or representations of certain
minority groups as a vehicle to justify the subjugation of others and keep their investment in Whiteness (Kellner, 2003a; Philipsen, 2003).

Historically, stereotypes of Blacks include descriptions such as lazy, aggressive, heathens, barbarians, savages, athletic, hypermasculine, oversexed and sexually passionate but out of control (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Gorham, 1999; Philipsen, 2003). However, not all depictions of African Americans are negative; for example, when cast in more sympathetic roles their characters are more non-threatening though humorous or desexualized depictions (Bogle, 2001; Pilgram, 2000). Stereotypical film portrayals of African Americans include the caricatures of Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks (Bogle, 2001).

Since the Birth of A Nation when Walter Long, a White actor in Black face played a Black villain, racist ideologies have been an element of American Cinema (Bogle, 2001). This and blatant racist ideologies perpetuated through stereotypical representations of African Americans in early films included caricatures such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson who was a smooth, lighthearted dancer in Shirley Temples films. Sir Stepin Fetchit was another actor depicting a servant character in his role as a
malignant handyman who flamboyantly shuffled and stammered (Bogle, 2001).

For African American females, before there was a Dorothy Dandridge or Lena Horn, there was Nina Mae McKinney, who was considered the first Mulatto Black love goddest in 1929 (Bogle, 2001). She was also the first victim of Hollywood as she soon discovered that there were no leading roles for Black women in film. Another recurring stereotype for African American women can be seen in the role of Hattie McDonald as Mammy, or the big, Black, bossy and beautiful maid who stayed in her place in Gone With the Wind (Bogle, 2001). Many contemporary films continue this ideological positioning of race in mainstream major motion pictures or independent films, despite the increased number of African American writers, directors or producers in many American films (hooks, 1996).

In so-called mainstream major studio production films, the dominant ideology can be found in the characters portrayed by African Americans with cross over appeal who are able to reach mass audiences. The evidence of racist ideology is illustrated in recent box office hits. For example, in Jerry Maguire, Cuba Gooding Jr. portrays an African American football star, who is humorously aggressive and hence, non-threatening as he simultaneously...
totally depends on his agent to take care of financial concerns and to the intellectual heavy lifting (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). However, the authors also suggest that this film has mixed and complex racial messages because of the traditional stereotypes, the promotion of the close interracial relationship, and the transcending stereotype of Gooding being a faithful husband offering advice to Maguire on how to relate better to his wife (Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

In another example, Denzel Washington in his Academy Award winning role in Training Day and then in his recent film Out of Time, portrays the Black male as hypermasculine, oversexed and out of control, a persistent film stereotype. Similarly, in his role as a successful reporter in The Pelican Brief with Julia Roberts, and as a brilliant but paraplegic detective in Bone Collector, he is also attracted to the European American actresses. In both roles the romance is dexsexualized, making him less threatening to the dominant White male masculinity. While playing roles that any European American male could play, his race still defines his film portrayals.

Similarly, films created by African Americans also depict racist ideologies (e.g., aggressive, hypermasculine male). Films like Juice, New Jack City and Boyz in the
Hood, depict ruthless African American characters at the center of drugs and crime in poor Black communities (Antonio, 2002). One could contend that these representations are limiting and only perpetuate images that reinforce racial stereotypes and depict one aspect of African American life. As Gorham (1999) points out, these racial stereotypes rely on invalid myths. However, the audience may passively consent to these racial stereotypes reinforcing what they already know, (i.e., that African American men are aggressive) and that image appears real and natural. The pervasiveness of the image suggests an inability to consciously acknowledge the stereotype, much less make efforts to change, challenge or resist the image.

The challenge of examining race in film for women in contemporary film is that it appears that gender overshadows race. While race ideologies are rooted in stereotypical images that stem from slavery (Gorham, 1999); gender ideologies are complicated by gender stereotypes as we examine African American women in film. Therefore, it becomes difficult to distinguish where racism ends and sexism begins. However, clearly Mammy roles can be tied to race because those images come directly from slavery and European American women do not play the role of Mammy because she is desexualized. As such, African American
women are given certain roles because of their race and are not usually leading ladies opposite male stars like Tom Cruise. Images become more problematic when looking at romantic possibilities. In films like *The Bodyguard* and *Monsters Ball*, both African American actresses have Eurocentric features. Hence, in both cases race and gender are complicated constructs to examine separately.

**Ideologies of Gender**

Just as racial oppression, prejudice and discrimination are supported by ideologies of race, gender ideology is the notion of sexism, which is the belief that men are superior to women (Anderson & Collins, 2004). Ideologies of gender are not based solely on biological sex but whether one is considered masculine or feminine; thus, men can suffer from ideologies of gender as well (Dines & Humez, 1995). Frye (1983) explains that the root of the word oppression is to press, which means to mold things, flatten or reduce them in bulk, sometimes by squeezing them. Things that are pressed are caught between or among barriers that restrain or immobilize the thing's ability to move.

Women are caught in the same manner by a system of power and domination that penalizes them if they work
inside/outside the home, if they are heterosexual/homosexual, if they marry or not (Frye, 1983). Women (or men) who suffer from gender ideologies have to contend with disrespectful attitudes, prejudices or discriminatory behavior if they carry certain traits or behavior that society deems to be feminine (Frye, 1983). Ideologies of gender perpetuate sexist representations of women in film (Kellner, 2003a) such as, bitchy, childlike, dependent, housewives, or simple-minded sex objects (Faludi, 1991; Ryan & Kellner, 1988).

Historical representation of gender ideology can be seen in television programs from the late 1950s and early 1960s that depicted women primarily as mothers and housewives who wore dresses most often and occasionally pearls and accessories (Holtzman, 2000). Feminist critics argue that Walt Disney films continue to perpetuate patriarchal values in films such as *The Little Mermaid*, which mirrors the ideology of *Cinderella* in the 1940s (Xiao & Heisey, 1996). Further, ideologies of gender in contemporary films like *Pretty Woman* and *Runaway Bride*, both starring Julia Roberts, are more about power and sexuality, and the dominance of men over women as sexualized objects.
One such study analyzed the film *Imitation of Life* (1959) in which a gendered portrayal of the lead character Lora, illustrated her as being dependent on the male prince charming who wanting to rescue the working actress and make her a housewife (Harris & Donmoyer, 2000). A persistent stereotype is seen in the objectification of the main female character was also illustrated when the film depicted this talented European American woman as only good for performing sexual favors (Harris & Donmoyer, 2000). The racial stereotyping of the African American women is depicted in the Mammy character or maid, who is also her friend. The Mammy character, modeled after the Aunt Jemima figure, washes the feet of the European actress in an earlier version (1934) of the film; she also plays the other mother, or the good mother to both her daughter and her mistress’s daughter (Thaggert, 1998). However, the light skinned Mammy’s daughter or Tragic Mulatto desperately wants to be White (Thaggert, 1998). Gender stereotypes also appear in contemporary films like *Pretty Woman* where the hooker is portrayed as Cinderella fantasy; in the end, she lives happily ever after with Prince Charming.

Gender stereotypes are not limited to mainstream films; for example, recent films targeted to Latino
audiences such as *Rum and Coke* and *Luminarias* perpetuate gender stereotypes and traditional patriarchal values (Rangil, 2002). In both films, traditional familial roles are portrayed, each film featuring a self-sacrificing mother. *Rum and Coke* in particular is centered on the most gender stereotypical depictions of women with its main storyline focused on the need for women to get married and have children before it is too late instead of having a career (Rangil, 2002). These sexist portrayals of women and men in film illustrate the persistence of gender stereotypes and their resistance to change.

**Ideologies of Class**

Ideologies of class are based on the social class system, which operates on a societal basis and shapes our identity and individual well being economically, politically, culturally and socially. Systems of power and domination, specifically television and film, celebrate the lifestyles of the upper class and denigrate the poor and working class (Anderson & Collins, 2004). These portrayals perpetuate the myth that we live in a classless society. Therefore, ideologies of class justify the inequalities of material wealth and resource distribution, making privilege appear to be something that one can earn, typically through
hard work. However, the reality is that class systems of privilege are deeply embedded in society's institutions to keep those few in power in power and to maintain the social order (Anderson & Collins, 1992). Although some scholars have addressed our understanding of the class system in media (Anderson & Collins, 1992, 2004; Dines & Humez, 2004); scholars continue to emphasize that the working class has all but disappeared from the media with decades of over representing the professional and managerial occupations among characters (Butsch, 1995).

Historical representations of class ideologies can be seen in television situation comedies like *The Brady Bunch*, *I Love Lucy*, *All in the Family*, *The Simpsons* and *Archie Bunker* (Butsch, 1995). On television only 11% of the series portrayed head of households as working class, a mere 4% were blue-collar workers when the actual American population during the 1970s had 45% of blue collar employees (Butsch, 1995). Even fewer examples of working class portrayals exist in film. Often in films where the working class character succeeds in breaking the cycle of oppression it is because of physical activities like sports and dance (Ryan & Kellner, 1988). One study examines the film *Rocky* as a class portrayal that reinforces the capitalistic structure because he is an individual success
story but simultaneously reinforces the system of class oppression (Ryan & Kellner, 1988). The character of Rocky Balboa wins a title from a Black fighter but is also depicted as resenting the Black power movement. Thus, race is used as a wedge to divide the economically disadvantaged. This portrayal ignores the capitalistic forces of power and domination that underlie Rocky’s struggle and his shared class oppression with the African American opponent (Ryan & Kellner, 1988).

In sum, race, gender and class are all socially constructed phenomena. The ideologies of racism, sexism and classism are embedded in society’s deep cultural and ideological structures. As a part of that power structure, the mass media is a force that perpetuates the hegemonic domination of ideologies through media representation. A reflection on this literature reveals two concerns. Researchers have argued that race, gender and class are interconnected and should be examined as intersecting constructs (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990, 1996, Purnell, 2002). Further, media representation studies fail to recognize other salient forms of marginalization in media analysis. One area that has been understudied in visual representations is the subjugated position of physical appearance (weight). This study
suggests weight is a fundamental way that we experience the world and cannot be avoided in media representation studies because it is a visual medium. As such, this study will provide a framework for understanding how the specific cultural product of media functions to produce and reproduce hegemonic and ideological positioning of marginalized citizens, more specifically the factors of race, gender, class and weight. As a counterhegemonic reader of the film text, I will situate my readings within Black Feminist Thought.

**Black Feminist Thought and Media Representation**

In recent years African American female intellectuals have made significant contributions to ways of knowing and thinking about the experience of African American women (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1998; Hamlet, 2000; hooks, 1984a, 1984b, 1989; Walker, 1983). These philosophical and theoretical frameworks may emphasize elements of African American female experiences differently but also share some qualities and characteristics. Patricia Hill Collins has identified and merged features from Black feminism, womanism, Afrocentric feminism, Africana womanism and the like as a critical social theory or perspective for understanding the U.S African American female experience.
(Collins, 2000; Hamlet, 2000). Termed Black feminist thought, developed for and by U.S. African American women, this theory seeks to emancipate Black women, providing a framework from which they can become agents of power and knowledge (Collins, 2000; Walker, 1983). As agents of power, this perspective provides a way for Black women to talk about the implications from systems of oppression and then attempt to challenge and change those systems.

Black feminist thought examines the intersections of race, gender and class, critically assessing the historical, cultural, intellectual, socio-political and spiritual consciousness of African American women (Collins, 2000; Hamlet, 2000; hooks, 1984, 1989). Black feminist thought recognizes the uniqueness of the African American female experience, articulates the similarities and differences between individual experiences, and addresses the important bond between African American women and men (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1998; Hamlet, 2000, hooks, 1984, 1989, Walker, 1983). The goal of Black feminist thought is to empower African American women, within the context of social justice, to resist oppression, oppressive practices and the ideas that justify oppression through analyzing the core themes and shared experiences among African American

The overarching theme of Black feminist thought is the legacy of struggle against the combined forces of racism, classism and sexism that are linked to the self-evaluation, independence, self-reliance and self-definition of African American women (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Bell, Orbe, Drummond & Camara, 2000; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984, 1989). These struggles are manifested within the African American community through work, family, sexual politics and love (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984, 1989).

As Black feminist thought examines any or all of these struggles and the complex intersections of race, gender and class, controlling images are one of the central concerns of Black feminists (e.g., hooks, 1996; Gaither, 1996; Orbe & Strother, 1996; Purnell, 2002).

Controlling images of African American women are one of the core factors leading to the objectification and dehumanization of U.S. African American women. Controlling images are defined as the created and constructed images or stereotypes of African American women that are rooted in slavery. The dominant culture created these images to dehumanize and subjugate all Black women. These created images allowed and continue to allow the dominant culture
to see Black women as subhuman so injustices against them will appear natural (Collins, 2000). These images contribute to the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class and sexual orientation that serve political, social and economic interests of power and domination in society (Collins, 2000; Pilgrim, 2002). While these images have their roots in slavery, they are still prevalent in American culture today (e.g., media, cultural artifacts) (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2000, Pilgrim, 2002).

The primary controlling images or stereotypes of U.S. African American women include Mammy, Matriarch, Jezebel and Welfare Mother (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2000; Pilgrim, 2002). For example, the stereotypical Jezebel can be defined as worldly, open, innately promiscuous alluring or predatory, beguiling, tempting, and lewd (Pilgrim, 2002). Collins (2000) explains how the modern day Jezebel is labeled a “freak” or “hoochie” as often portrayed in rap videos. Similarly, the Jezebel character can also be seen within the Tragic Mulatto image as they both share the reputation of being sexually open (Pilgrim, 2002). It is controlling images such as these that Collins (2000) seeks to reveal and resist.

the objectification of U.S. African American women. hooks & Collins agree that race, gender and class intersect in their dehumanization and subjugation of U.S. African American women (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984, 1989), but hooks (1990, 1992, 1992b, 1994, 1996) in particular, emphasizes media's role in this process. She argues that despite the fact that media can promulgate problematic representations, they also create an excellent space to critically resist these controlling images and their contemporary discourses (hooks, 1994, 1996).

hooks (1992, 1992b, 1996, 1997) has critiqued a wide range of films, those produced by the dominant culture (e.g., Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction) and those produced from the African American culture (e.g., Waiting to Exhale, Harlem Nights). Because she focuses on race and gender oppression simultaneously, she fearlessly critiques oppression in film regardless of the identity of the film creators.

For example, hooks (1992, 1992b, 1996) has critiqued the work of Black film producer, writer, and director Spike Lee, viewed by many as representing authentic African-American experiences in his films. She argues that Lee covers up his sexist and stereotypical agendas by offering the viewer a false counterhegemonic ideology to get the
audience to passively consent to White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy and the continued subjugation and devaluation of Black women and girls (1996). She claims Lee’s films have stereotypical misogynistic and sexist portrayals of Black women which ultimately devalue and erase their importance, creating the same oppressive imagery as films made by White men (hooks, 1992b). hooks (1992b) contends that Lee’s films consistently produce positive representations of the Black male character and represent tensions between White and Black women, both portrayed as sex objects in relation to the male character. However, European women in Lee’s films are usually submissive and desirable while Black women are bitchy, dominating and undesirable (hooks, 1992b). Therefore, through analysis of particular controlling images such as these, hooks reveals the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the oppression of African American women. Further, in this process the critic may identify new forms of objectification that emerge (Collins, 2000). Such critiques provide exemplars for further critique and reinforce the ongoing need to examine the complexities of race, gender and class in these controlling images.

In sum, Black feminist thought gives voice to the individual and collective experiences of U.S. African
American women within the forces of power and domination. hooks and Collins bring to our attention the intersections of race, gender and class as oppressive ideological and cultural forces. As a cultural critic and Black feminist, bell hooks uses media as a critical, deconstructive, and counterhegemonic tool to resist the controlling images created by the forces of power and domination, focused in particular on African American culture.

Therefore, this project will reflect this work and will focus on the interconnectedness of race, gender and class and its problematic representations in film. However, other salient marginalization factors exist and are largely absent in media critiques (e.g., sexual orientation, and physical appearance). In an effort to address this gap, this study will extend media representation studies, to focus on the dominant cultural ideology of physical beauty as an interconnected dimension of marginalization in our society as manifested in media portrayals. Specifically, this study will emphasize the portrayal of body size (i.e., weight) in film. Weight as a marginalization factor has been implicit in previous media critiques, but the goal here is to make the issue of weight explicit and of a piece with marginalization arising from race, gender and class.
Marginalization of the African American Female Body in Media

The dominant American cultural ideal of female beauty is one of a White, middle to upper class, Barbie type female who can be seen in fashion magazines, television, films and other forms of mass media (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Both media effects scholars and media representation scholars have examined this ideal and its consequences for mass audiences (e.g., Hendrix, 2002). The pervasiveness of this ideal has important repercussions for all women. For African American women in particular, this beauty ideal compounds the interconnectedness of the oppressive forces that are already prevalent in society and aligned against them (i.e., race, gender and class). Therefore, this section will consider the ideology of physical beauty and its effects, and the representations of African American women and Afrocentric notions of beauty in the media.

The Ideology of Physical Beauty

Just as race, gender and class are socially constructed phenomenon, the ideal female physical appearance in the dominant American culture is a social construct (Spellers, 1998). The European female's thin lips, thin nose and thin limbs are the dominant physical
characteristics that are valued in American society and can be seen in magazines, on television or billboards and in beauty pageants (hooks, 1992a). The ideal sense of beauty has gone from being plump, to being thin, then voluptuous, then back to thin, and finally to thin with muscle tone (Gray & Phillips, 1998). However, current American culture's version of female beauty is a tall woman, with blue eyes, long flowing blond hair and a slender body (Spellers, 1998). This ideology of beauty reveals that all women should be thin, have flawless fair skin, a perfect smile with a particular emphasis on the thin fit body (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

Historically, the conscious study and critique of this ideology surrounding the female body has been associated with the feminist movement (Bordo, 1993). Previous critiques suggest that large women in the world are basically invisible in our society and that weight leads these marginalized citizens to suffer from prejudice or weight discrimination (Bordo, 1993; Goodman, 1995, 1996). Further, emergent cultural stereotypes condemn the overweight woman as compulsive, self-indulgent, sick, lazy and inevitably hiding behind her fat to avoid intimate relationships (Goodman, 1995). Previous research also suggests that overweight women undergo both subtle and
overt prejudice leading to discrimination and "othering" status in their day-to-day lives (e.g., Bishop, 2000; Bordo, 1993; McDonald, 1995; Goodman, 1995, 1996). For example, overweight women suffer from many forms of "negative visibility" such as not being able to shop in regular malls, getting contemptuous looks from strangers, listening to other women at work talk about their diets, being criticized in lunchrooms for their food choices, and even being excluded from extracurricular activities (Goodman, 1995). The portrayals of this ideal body image and its counter images or stereotypes become problematic in media; given the dominance of this ideology of beauty, these images result in serious consequences for women who do not fit within the ideal.

Media Studies and Ideology of Beauty

Media scholars interested in the ideal of physical beauty approach this issue from two different but related perspectives. Media effects scholars examine physical appearance to understand how such portrayals may influence an individual's body image. It is argued that repeated exposure to stereotypical body images can lead to eating disorders, distortions in body image, a sense of idealized thinness and, ultimately, a fat obsessed culture (Bishop,
While many of these studies are concerned with the acceptance or rejection of the body image norm, these studies do not address the underlying cultural and ideological implications of this ideal. Media representation studies are concerned with the cultural and ideological critique of this dominant image of beauty and the consequences of this image as an oppressive mechanism. Just as media representation scholars are concerned with stereotypes of race, gender and class and contend that these ideologies are so pervasive in media that they teach us how to treat “others” in society (e.g., hooks, 1996; Kellner, 1994, 2003b), so too, does the dominance of the ideal body type function to marginalize many women in society.

It could be argued that repeated mediated images of the ideal thin female form are an attempt to passively control (oppress or press) women into identifying with this idealized thinness and get them to fit that mold (Bishop, 2000; Hall, 1997; Kellner, 1995; MacDonald, 1995; Millman, 1980). Further, the limited appearance of overweight women in general in film speaks to the marginalized status of the overweight woman in our society. More significantly, the limited presence of overweight African American women and
their frequent stereotypical portrayal suggests that oppression continues to redouble its force for African American women. Thus, the presence/absence of overweight African American women in film offers a focal location for extending the ongoing effort to critique the representation of race, gender and class in film. Therefore, this project will specifically focus on the status of overweight African American women in media representation studies, examining the interconnected oppressive forces of race, gender, class and physical appearance.

Media Representation of African American Females and Physical Appearance

In most instances, the physical appearance of African American women does not conform to the beauty ideal. Indeed, their degree of difference from the norm (i.e., beauty ideal) makes them unattractive to the dominant society (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Bennett & Dickerson, 2001; Craig, 2002; Wallace-Sanders, 2002). The underlying cultural assumption is that the Black body, its skin color and its shape are a mark of shame (hooks, 1992a). African American women have thick lips, a thick nose, larger breasts and buttocks, and generally more curvaceous bodies than their European counterparts. hooks (1992) suggests
that the protruding butt on African American women is another source of objectification which perpetuates the notion that Black women are part animal and highly sexual.

Since the cultural ideal of beauty is then unattainable for Black women, they only get attention in the media when it is synonymous with ideological (i.e., racial and sexual) notions that Black females and their separate body parts (i.e., thick lips, protruding butt) are more of a spectacle unless they conform to some degree of Eurocentric versions of physical beauty (hooks, 1992a). The contemporary Black female icon is Caribbean born fashion model Naomi Campbell, who represents the sexually hot savage and White-identified Black girl (hooks, 1992a) that is widely accepted in society. Her lighter skin, thin physical features and artificially constructed hair are meant to evoke notions that Black women cannot be an ideal beauty (hooks, 1992a).

Darker skinned Black women are marginalized in society by a color caste system that prefers lighter skinned Black women, giving them fewer roles in mainstream media (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). hooks (1992) suggests that bi racial or Black woman with fair skin tend to have more sexualized images; her more curvaceous body signifying animalistic sexuality. Further, displays of darker skinned women in
high fashion magazines typically distort facial features and or body postures in ways that make them unattractive or look like animals. This suggests that the clothes have significance over the woman wearing them (hooks, 1992a).

In addition, the hair of African American women is various textures and lengths, yet they struggle with trying to live up to the beauty ideology (Spellers, 1998). Many African American women struggle with beauty products to straighten their hair or use hairpieces to make it more acceptable. Black models or actresses typically have long blonde or brown synthetic hair, which confirms contemporary notions that Black women cannot acquire desirability and beauty with their natural appearance (hooks, 1992a).

hooks (1992) contends that this sanitized ethnic image suggests that while Black women are physically different, they must resemble White women in order to be considered beautiful. These cultural struggles and tensions are reinforced in the media portrayals of African American women. MacDonald (1995) argues that media representation scholars have largely ignored the critique of the image of African American women. This study will be a step toward filling that gap.
According to Purnell, (2002) Black women have been marginalized in a number of ways but specifically through the use of stereotypes. From the earliest films to present portrayals, the misrepresentations of African American women abound and range from subtle to flagrant denigrations that are variation of old “predominantly pejorative to bitterly misogynist” themes. In general, African American women are portrayed as underclass, dependent on male counterparts or their European Boss (Coleman, 2003; Harris & Donmoyer, 2000). When depicted as middle class or a successful entrepreneur, African American women are often represented as bitches, gold-diggers, with an obsession with men, food, money or sex (hooks, 1996; Zook, 2003).

Prominent characteristics ascribed to African American women in film include those such as, unintelligent, asexual, sexually exotic or promiscuous, welfare queen or breeder woman, successful Black woman and finally, whore or the more contemporary terms hoochie or freak (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2000).

In early film history (pre 1960s), the most prevalent stereotypes of African American women in film were Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies (Bucks are typically male
characters) (Bogle, 2001). Female toms are portrayed as passive, kind, faithful, selfless, submissive women who are devoted servants and content with their status (Purnell, 2002). Female coons are most often portrayed as the harmless buffoon pickaninny whose eyes pop out and whose hair stood on end, usually dim-witted, childlike and subhuman; a White person in Black face portrayed this character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone With the Wind* (Purnell, 2002).

The Mulatto or Tragic Mulatto is always a fair skinned woman with predominantly Eurocentric features and is often characterized as someone in immense pain and as an exotic sex object; Halle Berry’s character in *Monsters Ball* represents this image (Bogle, 2001; Purnell, 2002). Female Mammoys are represented as having maternal qualities as well. However, they are usually "desexed, overweight and dowdy" and very dark skinned like *Aunt Jemima* (Bogle, 2001, Purnell, 2002).

These Mammy images are still pervasive in media today; however, these stereotypes may not be as blatant, thus hidden narratives portray them as providing nurturance or comedic relief (i.e., *Women of Brewster's Place*, *The Singing Nun*). Such hidden narratives aid in the perpetuation of society’s stereotypical beliefs and mass audiences may
accept them because the modernized updated version of the stereotype is made to appear natural or real (Chandler, 2002; hooks, 1992a; Purnell, 2002; Hall, 1997).

The contemporary Mammy is not loud or boisterous; improvements have been made to the image that can be seen in character portrayals by Oprah Winfrey. As a popular African American talk show host who has battled with weight over the years, Oprah Winfrey has played several stereotypical roles casting her as a Mammy type character in shows like *Women of Brewster’s Place*, *Color Purple* and *Beloved*. Similarly, while some scholars view the film *Waiting to Exhale* as a positive representation of Black women, others claim that the Mammy character’s centrality is negative (hooks, 1996). Loretta Devine portrays a stereotypical overweight African American woman (Mammy), who is a single mother desperate for a man. The ongoing stereotypes in current films reinforce instead of resist negative representations along the lines of race, gender and class. Therefore, several studies have been done to critique these images in media (e.g., Anderson & Collins, 2004; Dines & Humez, 2003). However, the physical appearance of African American women as it relates to weight remains a largely implicit aspect of the image critique. Within all of the stereotypes attributed to
African American women, weight is an inseparable element of the characterization.

For example, it is apparent that the Mammy character is overweight. The weight factor is not discussed despite the fact that films have rarely presented this image using an actress of a more average figure. In contemporary media representation studies, weight is rarely considered as an interconnecting marginalization factor in the examinations of race, gender and class. However, just as a race and gender clearly play a significant role in character depictions, one could argue weight is also a significant factor of movie portrayals.

Few scholars have looked at race, gender, class and physical appearance explicitly to offer an explanation of what this intersection is and the media representations that reflect it. Therefore, the central focus of this study is to examine the degree to which physical appearance as it relates to weight confounds the marginalization of overweight African American women in film. To address this concern we examined Queen Latifah as a major Hollywood film actress. Queen Latifah embodies the interconnecting constructs of race, gender, class and weight.

As such, the research question is as follows:
RQ1: Do the film representations of African American women as portrayed by Queen Latifah perpetuate traditional stereotypes or transcend these representations?

In sum, we will extend the multifactor oppression of race, gender and class oppression to include physical appearance (weight) in a media representation study. This should provide a starting point for the explicit consideration of weight as an interconnecting marginalization factor.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Study Objectives

The goal of this study was to examine and critique film representations of race, gender, class and weight through a semiotics analysis of the film characters of the African American actress Queen Latifah, who, by current American standards, is overweight. This chapter describes the method used in this study. First a rationale for the use of semiotics in this study will be provided. In the next section the specific procedures for the analysis will be discussed. As such, there were five phases in the analysis, which include: (a) selection of texts; (b) description of texts; (c) interpretation of texts; (d) identification of themes within the texts; and (e) identification of ideological positioning in the texts.

Semiotics

In the study of communication, numerous scholars have contributed theories of meaning that examine the relationship between the object, the symbol and the meaning (Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1976; Morris, 1938; Peirce, 1958; Saussure, 1959). In the late 1960s, semiotics became a
major theoretical and methodological approach adopted by critical cultural scholars. French cultural theorist Roland Barthes' collection of essays, *Mythologies* (Chandler, 1999; Barthes, 1957) was a significant impetus for this method in cultural studies. However, Umberto Eco (1976) has influenced much contemporary semiotics media research.

Simply stated, semiotics is the study of how meaning is created and realized (Barthes, 1972). In semiotics, signs are the conceptual tools and building blocks of communication. A sign (e.g., a word, a sound, an image) is a meaningful unit that "stands for" something other than itself. Signs usually consist of two elements, the meaning or that which is signified and the signifier or the symbol itself (Chandler, 1999; Hall, 1997). In other words, the sound or image is the signifier and the concept for which it stands is the signified (Saussure, 1959).

Semioticians are concerned with the signification process or the ways in which linguistics and symbols operate to associate meanings to various signs (i.e., words, visual images, objects). In other words, they are concerned with how language and symbols work together to create meaning to various signs. Furthermore, the signification process is understood to be culturally, socially, and politically situated as systems of meaning.
reveal systems of power and domination (Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1976; Hall, 1997). Therefore, "a semiotic analysis typically works to interpret how this signification process inherently communicates the values and themes of a society (Saussure, 1959), and ultimately affirms the ideological system of the status quo as natural and inevitable (Barthes, 1972)" (Orbe & Hopson, 2001, p. 164). The goal of many semioticians then is to deconstruct a selected text (e.g., books, song lyrics, photographs, or film portrayals) to reveal the dominant ideological systems that are hidden within the text.

Peirce’s model of signification is based on linguistics and symbols; Saussure’s notion of representation is similar and refers to the construction of aspects of reality such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts in any medium (speech, writing, photos, film) (Chandler, 1999). In the semiotic analysis of film content, Chandler (1999, 2002) and Hall (1997) describe the signifying practice of representation. For the purposes of this study, the process of signification will be referred to as the process of representation.

Hall (1997) argues that representation connects meaning and language to culture. Representation as a
signification process in film constructs identity markers (e.g., race, gender, class) that are socially, culturally and politically marginalized, and ultimately creates and/or perpetuates ideologies of power and domination (Hall, 1997). Given the role of film in the hegemonic process in the larger society, this calls for a critique and deconstruction of film representation.

Purnell (2002) contends that all cultural criticism is ideological because as a cultural participant, we inevitably bring to the critique our individual perspectives. As such, the semiotic researcher situates himself/herself as a subjective participant in the deconstruction of the text. With this ethnosemiotic approach, the reader then understands that the analysis is informed by the critical perspectives that the interpreter brings to the deconstruction (Orbe & Hopson, 2001).

This analysis of Queen Latifah's film roles will use an ethnosemiotic approach to deconstruct the text. As a Black woman, my analysis will begin with my appreciation of film in general and my status as a fan of African American films specifically. In addition, my interpretations are informed by a scholarly awareness of Black feminist thought, and significantly by the 'matrix of domination' I have experienced as a result of race, gender, class and
weight. My interpretations are conducted through the lens of an oppositional or counterhegemonic reader (Collins, 2000; Hall, 1997; hooks, 1992a).

In sum, semiotic studies of representation focus on the system of power and domination governing the discourse (e.g., linguistics and symbols) involved in media texts, stressing the role of signs (i.e., language and culture) and ways of understanding the context in which meaning is created and re-created. The purpose of this study was to employ a semiotic analysis of Queen Latifah's film roles as an overweight African American woman using an ethnosemiotic approach to deconstruct and interpret the signification process.

Research Procedures

The research procedure of this study will include five phases: (a) selection of texts; (b) description of texts; (c) interpretation of texts; (d) identification of themes within the texts; and (e) identification of ideological positioning in the texts.

Selection of Texts

The film roles of Queen Latifah were chosen for this semiotic analysis because of her current visibility in
popular culture and her embodiment of the intersection of race, gender, class and weight identity markers.

In semiotics, visual signs (e.g., a person, an object or event) are deemed iconic signs when they bear a certain resemblance to the object (Hall, 1997). As cited by Chandler (1999) Peirce's definition of the iconic is

A mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) - being similar in possessing some of its qualities (e.g. a portrait, a diagram, a scale-model, onomatopoeia, metaphors, 'realistic' sounds in music, sound effects in radio drama, a dubbed film soundtrack, imitative gestures) (p. 20/http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem-glass.html).

Eco (1976) argues that through familiarity, an iconic signifier can acquire primacy over its signified and at some point the iconic representation, though it may be false, appears to be truer than the real experience; thus, people begin to look at things through the lens of iconic convention. Latifah is an iconic image because she is a
person that bears a similarity or resemblance to (she represents) each of the marginalization constructs (race, gender, class and weight) in her film portrayals. Furthermore, her performance in those roles begins to personify Queen Latifah in the minds of the public. In other words, the audience begins to think Queen Latifah is the person/image we see on the screen. Simultaneously many media consumers begin to see overweight African American women sharing these characteristics (Hall, 1997).

Today, Queen Latifah is a major figure in music, film and television. Further, her career reflects a transition from a rap artist with an appeal to a small audience segment to a broad-based appeal to a mass audience as an increasingly in-demand film actor. Queen Latifah's life experience reflects both sides of Black urban life while growing up. Queen Latifah was born in East Orange, New Jersey on March 18, 1970 to a middle class family. Her father and brother were both police officers. Latifah has been arrested a couple of times on misdemeanors and after briefly working for a fast food chain, she launched her rap career. In 1988 when she was just 18 years old, she released her first debut single "Wrath of My Madness."

As her music career advanced Latifah embarked on an acting career. She played magazine boss Khadijah James on a
very popular sitcom called Living Single before she appeared in motion pictures. Her first film role was a short part in Spike Lee’s film Jungle Fever, where she played an uptight waitress who refused to serve an interracial couple in an African American restaurant. After this small role, Queen Latifah appeared in over a dozen Hollywood films, becoming one of the top African American female moneymakers in Hollywood. She is also the first female rapper nominated for an Academy Award in her supporting role as Matron Mama Morton in Chicago (Collier, 2003; oscar.com).

To date, Queen Latifah has appeared in thirteen films. Selection of her specific roles for this analysis is based on four criteria: (a) the availability of the film, (b) at least five minutes of screen time as a main character/supporting actress, (c) overweight in the character portrayal, and (d) a final selection that includes films from both African American and European American creators (e.g., writers, producers, directors) (see Appendix A).

Using these criteria four films were selected for analysis: Bringing Down the House and Chicago, both by European American creators and Set It Off and Brown Sugar/House Party II by African American creators.
Description of Texts

The second phase of the research project was to carefully describe the precise images for film analysis (Stokes, 2003). To this end, a brief description of the overall film are given including the location, key characters, and plot line. A description of Queen Latifah’s character and traits of the character, plus her primary relationships with other characters (e.g., mother, sister, friend, or lover) will also be provided.

Interpretation of Texts

The third phase of the deconstruction is interpretation of the text, through examination of the literal meaning, or denotation, and then through interpretation of the connotative meaning. Denotative meanings are simple, basic, descriptions of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, a relationship semioticians treat as a cultural consensus (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 1999; Hall, 1997; Peirce, 1958). Connotations are individual feelings, judgments, and specific interpretation of the message content, which can
vary because the same sign may have different meanings to different people (Eco, 1976). The reader then brings to the text his or her socio-cultural and personal associations using the denotative sign as its signifier and then attaching to it an additional signified (Bobo, 2002; Chandler, 2002), the connotation. The interpretations of Queen Latifah's film portrayals are grounded in my role as a counter hegemonic reader of the text. As suggested by Fiske (as cited in Orbe & Hopson, 2001) the researcher should explain how his/her cultural background helps create a particular kind of meaning to the aspects of reality represented from their standpoint. Specifically, I was sensitive to representations of race, gender, class and weight in the linguistic code (e.g., words, dialogue in the script), in the images (e.g., visual representations in the film) and the relationship and interaction between the words and images.

Chandler (2003) has offered a set of questions to prompt the interpretation in the semiotic analysis. These questions will serve as prompts for my analysis (Appendix B). For each text, a systematic recording of notes regarding denotation and connotation was used. These notes will provide microlevel detail for additional analysis in the next phase.
Identification of Themes within the Texts

The fourth phase in the procedure was to uncover themes within each film portrayal and across the film portrayals. These themes will emerge through the process of constant comparison and contrast using the extensive notes from phase three (Chandler, 2003; Stokes, 2003). In the constant comparison the following will guide the process:

(a) What are the similarities and differences in the portrayals? (b) How do these similarities and differences compare to existing stereotypes? or (c) Are there alternate images/portrayals that emerge that are different from existing stereotypes? (d) Is weight problematized in the portrayal? (i.e., derogatory comments about physical appearance, nature of the portrayal of body size, discourse about body image) (e) How does race affect the character? (f) Does class significantly impact the character? (g) How does gender impact the character?

Identification of Ideology in the Texts

Hall (1993) defines ideology as "those images, concepts, and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense'
of some aspect of social existence" (p. 18). It is a socially constructed belief system that explains only a "version" of reality (Holtzman, 2000). These cultural myths are positioned through the media by those few in power who establish the current ideology (Barthes, 1972; Holtzman, 2000). Therefore, the next phase was to examine whether stereotypes exist, if new ideologies have emerged or if more positive images are in the representation identity markers.

I was sensitive to the interconnectedness of race, gender, class and weight. However, weight was foreground in the analysis. The goal was to determine whether stereotypical images of African American women from an historical standpoint have been perpetuated or whether Latifah's performances have transcended previous portrayals of overweight African American women in film. This was completed by (a) reviewing the themes and comparing them to existing stereotypes, (b) identifying the stereotypes, (c) identifying any new positive or negative images.

As such, the research question is as follows:

RQ1: Do the film representations of African American women as portrayed by Queen Latifah perpetuate traditional stereotypes or transcend these representations?
Therefore, this semiotic analysis was completed in five phases to uncover current ideologies of race, gender, and class. Specifically, weight is being foreground in the analysis of film portrayals of iconic figure Queen Latifah. The goal was to determine whether weight is a significant marginalization factor to be included in media representation studies of race, gender, and class.
CHAPTER IV

THE ALLEGORY OF OVERWEIGHT AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN (OWAAW) SIGNIFIED THROUGH QUEEN LATIFAH

This chapter explores the representation process of iconic figure Queen Latifah through four select films that depict the current ideology of overweight African American women (OWAAW) in America. The goal of this study was to discuss how Queen Latifah's character portrayals support the notion that weight is a significant marginalization factor to be considered as an interdependent construct along with race, gender and class in media representation studies. This chapter is divided into three main sections.

The first section examines stereotypes that conform to and resist the Mammy stereotype. The second section demonstrates how Queen Latifah conforms to and resists the sexualized Jezebel stereotype. The last section discusses the emerging representation of the overweight Black female buck.

Film Representations of (OWAAW)

"Once many plantations grew cotton; today, some grow movies (Guerrero, 1993). Guerrero (1993) explains that just as slavery was used as a tool to control the dreams of Black folks,' controlling images that devalue them have the
same intention. Currently, more than ten years later, Hollywood continues to confine the representations of African Americans and other minorities within a web of ideological myths, stereotypes and caricatures (Guerreo, 1993). During the semiotic deconstruction process I looked across all the film roles holistically to analyze how the depiction of Queen Latifah’s characters represent intersecting ideologies of race, gender, class and physical appearance as experienced by OWAAW.

The roles of Queen Latifah are important because of her star persona and her resemblance to a person who ascribe to her race, gender, class and weight (Hall, 1997). Therefore, the way she is portrayed in films can reveal the dominant ideologies of OWAAW in American society. The analysis reveals that Queen Latifah’s character portrayals both reinforce and resist the traditional stereotyping of OWAAW as Mammy, Jezebel and reveals a new characterization of the female buck.

*Queen Latifah Signified as Mammy*

Once the only representation of Black women in film, the traditional racist portrayal of the Mammy character represents the devaluation of Black womanhood while simultaneously glorifying the enduring servant for European
Americans (Everett, 2001). Depicting the Mammy as the obese, jovial, desexualized and submissive servant who was also very strong and assertive, even toward her male partner (Boogie, 2001), this antebellum myth portrays the slave as a jovial Mammy who loved her master and his family, happy for the crumbs from his table, and is beloved in return (Everett, 2001; hooks, 1992a).

This antebellum mythology, was first transferred to film in Birth of a Nation (Bogle, 2001 Everett, 2001; Mapp, 1995; Pilgrim, 2000), but this cinematic paradigm has worked its way into all film genres (Guerrero, 1993). The quintessential stereotypical portrayal of the Mammy character featured the actress Hattie McDaniel, who received an Oscar for her Mammy role in Gone With the Wind (Mapp, 1995). This Mammy is the all seeing, all knowing Mammy who keeps secrets; she annotates, makes asides and always lets others know what her opinions are (Bogle, 2001).

In later films, the association of the Mammy character with slavery diminished, and the Mammy as paid domestic help emerged. Nonetheless, the central attributes of the stereotype persisted at its core. The modern day Mammy, usually a domestic worker, was still self-sacrificing, accepting of her position as inferior, and devoted to her
White family (Everett, 2001; Mapp, 1995). Some changes in physical presence become apparent as well. This Mammy in film was thinner, less bosomy, and had a lighter complexion.

Over time Hollywood has contemporized the image of Mammy. For example, in the 1970s the Mammy started giving advice, aid and comfort to Black women in films like Georgia, Georgia (Mapp, 1995). Today, while the contemporary Mammy may no longer be portrayed as a maid or housekeeper, she nonetheless, serves her European, and sometimes African American, counterparts in other ways. Further, her subjugated status persists in films (Bogle, 2001; hooks, 1992a, 1996; Hudson, 1998; Mapp, 1995; Patton, 1993).

In more contemporary portrayals, Hollywood still associates OWAAW with the Mammy prototype (Gurerrero, 1993; Mapp, 1995). In her film roles, Queen Latifah may be subject to the recreation and reinforcement of this Mammy stereotype in part because her physical presence conforms to the expectations: Mammy as an overweight African American female of lower socioeconomic status. Simultaneously, her film roles appear to have been atypical of the Mammy expectation, at least superficially, in the film content. This contradiction reveals an ongoing
tension between conformity and resistance to this stereotype in Queen Latifah’s performances.

Confirming and Resisting the Mammy Stereotype

Across all of the film roles analyzed in this study, Queen Latifah’s performances manifest a tension between conformity and resistance to the Mammy stereotype. This semiotic analysis reveals that Queen Latifah embodies the Mammy icon as a servant, friend, advisor, and surrogate mother/mistress of the manor in varying degrees in these roles (Hudson, 1998; Patton, 1993). Latifah’s conformity to the Mammy stereotype in these films reflects the sociocultural, political and economic marginalization of African American women in society. Simultaneously, her performances resist the traditional stereotype through irony, humor, physical presence and exaggerated discourse/body language.

Each role presents Latifah as disadvantaged, that disadvantage abetted by identity factors of race, gender and weight. For example, in all of the films analyzed, Latifah is depicted as a person of lower class. In Set It Off (1999), she has a low paid position as a janitorial worker who engages in criminal activity; however, she was self-sacrificing when it came to her friends. In Brown

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Sugar (2002), she portrays a restaurant worker and a divorced wife collecting alimony payments who functions in her relationship to others as a nurturer, caregiver and supporter. In Chicago (2002), although she is portrayed as the one in power with her position as a prison Warden, "Mama" Matron Morton was depicted as non-glamorous, nonprofessional, lower class, and blue-collar. Finally, in Bringing Down The House (2003) she portrays an ex convict who pretends she is the nanny of a White family, a pretence that is enacted involuntarily in some instances and voluntarily in other scenes. This analysis will explain her contemporary variations on the Mammy stereotype revealing the tension between conformity and resistance through the characteristics of: nurturing/self-sacrificing and dominance/bossiness.

Nurturing/Self-Sacrificing

The contemporary Mammy primarily depicts characteristics of nurturance and self-sacrifice to Black and White characters alike. A connection to the historical Mammy prototype and resistance in its contemporary portrayal can be seen in Latifah's performances in Bringing Down The House and Chicago.
In *Bringing Down The House* Queen Latifah's ex convict character Charlene works her way into the family home of lawyer Peter (Steve Martin). Both from within and outside of the family, she is cast into the nurturing role. She performs domestic duties within the family by knitting, cooking, and taking care of the children, helping them with schoolwork and giving them advice. Latifah also gives romantic and parenting advice to Peter. For example, she gives Peter advice before he goes in to talk to his daughter about a date that went wrong. The character states,

Sara don’t need a lawyer, she needs her father. Don’t trip, play it cool, just listen to her.

This demonstrates the good and noble overweight African American woman who always knows best. She can assert herself in this manner within this stereotype without anyone questioning her authority because her assertions are focused on the well being of "her family."

In this film performance, Latifah also resists the Mammy stereotype through her attitude, clothing, exaggerated body language/discourse, and through aggressive/passive-aggressive strategies. For example, Latifah’s character resists through her sexually alluring dress instead of wearing the asexual uniforms of the Mammy
icon. In one scene, Latifah’s character also physically beats up Peter’s ex sister-in-law for insisting that she has no place in their “White’s Only” country club unless she has a broom in her hand. These resistance tactics demonstrate a shift in the meaning and use of the Mammy’s body that represents forms of power through physical strength and sexuality instead of the warmth and comfort associated with the Mammy iconic body.

In Bringing Down The House conformity and resistance surface simultaneously in one particular scene. Latifah agrees to conform to this Mammy representation as an explanation for her existence in Peter’s life to his very wealthy and bigoted client. This stereotype is resisted through her exaggerated body language and slave dialect in the role enactment. For example, when Peter, Latifah and the children run into the client at the country club, Peter tries to frame Latifah as the Mammy/Nanny. Her response to this effort follows.

“Yez sir! come on chillin, let’s go down to da pool and make fun of all da rich White folk.”

Another scene demonstrates simultaneous conformity and resistance when the same client invites herself to dinner and Peter asks Latifah to serve them. In this scene before he asks Latifah, she is already voluntarily wearing the
symbolic large bandanna around her head while cooking dinner for Peter’s family.

Although she agrees to conform as the cook and servant, she simultaneously resists the Mammy representation by mocking and exaggerating the Mammy stereotype. While Latifah, wearing the maid uniform, serves dinner, the client fondly describes the relationship of her family to their maid. She states that her family never paid their beloved maid from her youth and scraped their plates after dinner giving her the left over food as a gift. The client then invites Peter’s family to join in on an old Negro spiritual she so fondly remembers called *Is Massa Gonna Sell Us Tomorrow, (Yes, Yes, Yes).* As a deliberate act of resistance, Latifah tries to serve the guest a laxative in her dinner. Peter takes the wrong plate and consumes the laxative and has to excuse himself from the table. Latifah says, that’s what he gets for making her wear the “dumb outfit.”

Inadvertently, Latifah’s actions have found the real target for her resistance. In order to secure a large account for his firm, Peter puts her in this place of subjugation, using her affection for the family to gain her compliance in the subjugation. Peter’s actions reflect the White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy that keeps all
marginalized citizens in their place to serve the economic base, hence, Hollywood’s modern day creation of a plantation (Guerrero, 1993).

The representation of the Mammy in Bringing Down The House is so self-evident that most viewers could identify the stereotyped behaviors in the film. In Latifah’s other films, the contemporary nurturing-self-sacrificer may be more apparent to an oppositional reader, as we see similar kinds of tensions between conformity and resistance in the film Chicago.

While Latifah’s contemporary Mammy figure is portrayed as a “ghetto fabulous” ex convict maid in Bringing Down The House, she is depicted as a corrupt prison warden in Chicago in the character of Mama Matron Morton. As “Mama” Latifah has both personal and financial interests in the female convicts in her charge.

Conforming to the usual nurturant stereotype, Latifah shows her devotion to the main character Roxie Hart (Renee Zellweger) throughout the film. She helps her get the best lawyer in town and gives her advice on the legal and publicity issues that arise as the story progresses. She cares for her physical and psychological needs in the prison. The ultimate symbol of her devotion to Roxie is her purchase of a blond Roxie wig. Similarly, Mama’s distress
at the execution of one of her female convicts reinforces the nurturing Mammy image.

A tension between conformity and resistance emerges through Latifah's ambiguous sense of "love" for the inmates. Instead of performing as the subservient self-sacrificing Mammy, she uses her position of authority/power, caring for the inmates for a price. For example, in one scene while Roxie is eavesdropping in the restroom, the secondary character Velma Kelly (Catherine Zeta-Jones) is discussing her case and aspirations with Mama. Mama reminds Velma that all calls go through her and that she can help her earn a lot of money when she gets out. The accompanying monetary benefit to Mama is implied in the dialogue. Further, Velma's actions also indicate the possible exchange of sexual favors.

For example, Velma massages Mama Morton's shoulders while trying to get her to make a phone call and flaunts her figure before Mama, describing herself as someone with 'real talent.' While Mama Matron appears to refuse the sexual advances, the nature of the power in the relationship is clear.

Moreover, Latifah also resists subservience through her physical body. All the female convicts are extremely thin; their small figures are overpowered by Latifah's
physical presence. As such, this reveals a tension between conformity and resistance as Latifah’s character is simultaneously depicted as protector and threat. For example, in one scene Latifah both protects and threatens Roxie using her power to first intimidate and then advise her. Roxie’s initial timidity in the prison setting is increased as Latifah hovers over her and verbally pushes her toward a solution to the problem that would favor them both. Her verbal and nonverbal aggression leads to Roxie’s compliance.

Thus, in this role Latifah’s aggressive tone and her body resist the traditional Mammy whose voice was loud but jovial. Latifah resists her subservient position and enacts her power through her larger frame and height. Her presence allows her to suggest caring through power and reveals the tension of conformity and resistance to the appealing warmth and motherly strength/security of the Mammy.

Dominance/Bossiness

Film performances of the Mammy’s bossiness reflect the complicated intersection of race, gender and class in American life. The traditional Mammy bosses her male partner, depicted in films as the male coon, the
intellectually dull, emasculated Black male (Bogle, 2001). She also bosses her White children and especially willful females. In the former case her partner is cowed and in the latter case, her words are frequently ignored, but in all cases her dominance occurs within supposedly caring relationships. In her film roles Latifah’s relationships with men and women, Black and White, rich and poor, suggest a tension between conformity to and resistance to this stereotypical element of the Mammy character. The films Set It Off and Brown Sugar provide illustration.

In Brown Sugar, Queen Latifah and Mos Def portray characters that nearly perfectly match the Mammy-Coon relationship. He plays Chris Shawn, an uncouth cab driver/underground rapper who has a crush on Latifah’s character Francine, who is obviously intellectually and physically dominant over him. While this is a more contemporary version of the Mammy-Coon courtship, she continues to be the stronger personality. The tension between conformity and resistance can be seen through the negotiation of their relationship instead of the typical Mammy domination of the partner. For example, Latifah understands relationships better and she has the communication skills to advance the relationship. After several interactions in which she lets him think that he is
the one who is in charge to nurture his ego, Latifah asks Chris if he wants to go out with her. Although resistance rests with the negotiation aspect of the relationship, the tension is that this union may not have happened if Latifah’s character had not initiated and managed the relationship, conforming to the Mammy icon.

Resistance to dominance as seen in the stereotype is also depicted through Latifah’s bossiness in relation to her Black female counterparts. An example can be seen in the film *Set It Off*. This film centers on a girl gang whose complicated relationships and life experiences lead them on bank robbing sprees. Queen Latifah is cast as Cleo, a dominant dyke who has a Black girlfriend. Latifah conforms to the bossiness stereotype in relation to her lesbian partner. While caring for her partner, she is simultaneously intellectually and physically dominant over her slender girlfriend who is depicted as a deaf/mute. While not the traditional coon, this female partner is portrayed as subservient, silenced literally and figuratively.

The dominance of the character in *Set It Off* escalates in a pivotal scene. Latifah’s character, Cleo, is presented as a hard, masculinized type through her attitude, tone of voice, language, attire, and body movements. In this scene,
when Lida 'Stony' (Jada Pinkett) refuses to rob a second bank, Cleo gets angry and threatens her by putting a gun in her face. Stony does not back down and demands that Cleo take the gun away. Surprisingly, Cleo takes the gun from Stony’s face and gets slapped by her. To protect herself, Stony then breaks a beer bottle and prepares to use it. Instead of following through with her character’s persona, Latifah’s character insists that they have been friends 20 years and walks away. As such, her resistance to the dominance stereotype emerges as she backs down, choosing loyalty and affection over dominance.

In summary, these films reveal a tension between conformity and resistance of the Mammy stereotype in Queen Latifah’s performances. While the Mammy icon is portrayed as nurturing and dominant in relation to particular characters, Latifah’s depictions simultaneously conform to and resist these characterizations. It is historically evident that the identity constructs of race, gender and class increase role conformity expectations in Hollywood film roles for African American women. However, it is Latifah’s body, her weight and her size, that makes the reinforcement and recreation of the Mammy stereotype and her casting in such roles inevitable. While Latifah’s race, gender and class automatically place her in this subjugated
status; her weight reinforces this positioning. Further, her weight also serves as a tool for resistance, enabling the emergence of difference from the traditional Mammy icon. Hence, weight emerges as a significant interconnecting construct in the portrayal of Overweight African American Women in film.

Queen Latifah Signified as Jezebel

In antebellum America the Black female as Mammy, a desexualized being, stood in stark contrast to the Jezebel stereotype, her sensual extreme (Hudson, 1998; Pilgrim, 2002). Depictions of the Jezebel are rooted in another stereotype, the Tragic Mulatto. The Tragic Mulatto is a somewhat sympathetic character who is a victim of her biracial heritage. Her life is viewed as sad and self-destructive as she often suffers from unrequited love (with either her White or Black lover) and often ends up dead or on drugs (Bogle, 2001; Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; hooks, 1996; Orbe & Strother, 1996).

Based on the core attributes of sexual allure and unfulfilled romantic relationships of the Tragic Mulatto, the Jezebel stereotype has been defined as worldly, innately promiscuous, predatory, tempting, and lewd. She is considered a sexual threat by White women and both sexually
threatening and irresistibly alluring to White men (Hudson, 1998; Pilgrim, 2002). Simultaneously, the Jezebel is too different to elicit sexual attraction from reasonable responsible, moral Black men, and White men would never consider her as a life partner, only as a temporary distraction (Pilgrim, 2002).

Jezebels are portrayed in film as using their sexuality to fulfill material needs and sexual gratification (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The Jezebel image was first found in early films like The Debt (1912) and Birth of a Nation (1915) (Bogle, 2001; Everett, 2001; Mapp, 1995; Pilgrim, 2002). Later depictions of the Jezebel stereotype can be seen in movies like Carmen Jones (1954). In Carmen Jones, Dorothy Dandridge’s performance transformed the Tragic Mulatto character into the highly sexually alluring character, representing the Jezebel stereotype (Bogle, 2001).

Cinematic depictions of Black women as the sexually promiscuous Jezebel stereotype became more commonplace in the 1970s with the rise of blaxploitation films (Pilgrim, 2002). These films were supported by Blacks because they presented images of African Americans fighting against forces of power and domination, but such films simultaneously sent negative identity messages (i.e., race,
gender, class) (Bogle, 2001; Pilgrim, 2002). The portrayal of Black women as sexually lascivious can be seen in blaxploitation films like *Foxy Brown* (1974) (Guerrero, 1993). More contemporary Jezebel images can be seen in films like *Monster’s Ball* and *She’s Gotta Have It* that devalue Black women as sexually aggressive with identities wrapped up in patriarchy or a world of misogynist pornographic male fantasy (hooks, 1989, 1996; Pilgrim, 2002).

Few historical physical descriptions of the Jezebel exist. Some have described her as exotic looking, often fair-skinned (but not necessarily) with long straightened hair, a long nose and shapely body (Bogle, 2001; Hudson, 1998, Pilgrim, 2002; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Over time, the Jezebel’s body image has been depicted as occasionally curvaceous but not overweight. Nonetheless, the devaluation of Black womanhood embodied in the Jezebel may be easily transferred to overweight African American women.

Overweight women have traditionally been deemed as compulsive and suffer from various types of negative visibility (Goodman, 1995). It could be that, when connected with the image of weight and race, subjugation is compounded because African American women are seen as highly sexual. Further, weight subjugation may place
overweight African American women in contradictory film roles, either as a tragic figure (i.e., the contemporary Tragic Mulatto/Jezebel) or as a comic figure, a source of humour because the overweight body does not fit the American standard beauty (Addison, 2003; Banet-Weiser, 1999; Bordo, 1993). Thus, as an OWAAW Queen Latifah's character portrayals in film roles may be subject to the reinforcement and recreation of this conflicted Jezebel stereotype as well. Based on her status as an overweight woman, the tensions that arise between conformity and resistance are demonstrated through the highly sexual-manipulating seductress and the comedic, oversexed persona.

Confirming and Resisting the Jezebel Stereotype

In her film roles under review in this study Latifah conforms to and resists the Jezebel stereotype. Her sexuality is used as a source of power whether toward men or women. In these film roles, whether homosexual or heterosexual, she remains a non-threat to her European female counterparts. In Brown Sugar and Bringing Down the House, Latifah's sexuality, in this case heterosexuality, is a key component of her value to the central character in the films. In Chicago and Set It Off, she has a lesbian/ambiguous sexual orientation that serves these film
roles. The contemporary Jezebel primarily is portrayed as a highly sexual, manipulating seductress to male and female counterparts whether they are Black or White. These characteristics are demonstrated in Latifah’s performances in *Brown Sugar* and *Set It Off*.

**Highly Sexual/Manipulating Seductress**

In *Brown Sugar* Latifah’s character Francine conforms to the traditional Jezebel stereotype as a highly sexualized, manipulative Black female. A key concern of the character is money. She frets about alimony from her ex-husband, which serves as a necessity to her well-being. She also displays little romantic interest in a cab driver, who has fewer economic resources. In one scene she flirts in a seductive way with a man who is wearing a business suit and appears to have more financial resources, though her flirtation does not go anywhere. In addition, she is also a source of sexual/romantic advice for her cousin. For example, she encourages her to wear a push up bra and to ‘dangle’ her breasts in front of a wealthy client, using the business opportunity to catch a man. Clearly, Latifah conforms to the Jezebel who views her sexuality as key to manipulating men.
Similarly in Set It Off, Latifah’s character Cleo is portrayed as a highly sexual dyke. Her relationship with her deaf/mute girlfriend is not based on intimacy but on sexual power. She demands the girl to answer her page immediately when she calls her and she misses a week of work to spend time and money on the girl for sexual favors. The emphasis on the breast as the signified feature of the body sexually can be seen here as well. In one scene, she wears a revealing lacy top exposing, emphasizing and objectifying her breasts. While Latifah’s characteristics conform to the Jezebel stereotype in this role, evidence of resistance is revealed through a reversal of roles. Usually, the Jezebel is the one who provides sexual favors in exchange for support; however, Latifah’s character receives sexual favors based on an exchange of goods. In each of these roles, weight may be seen as a significant factor in this variation on the Jezebel character. Her sexuality is essentialized. Specifically, the focus on her large breasts in these roles embodies all of Latifah’s sexuality. Meanwhile her behavior in these performances emphasizes the use of that sexuality in manipulative ways.
Comedic Romance

The stereotype of the overweight woman inevitably casts her as hiding behind her fat to avoid intimate relationships with men (Goodman, 1995). Because their bodies are not objects of male desire (Banet-Weiser, 1999), casting overweight women in comedic romantic relationships is a long tradition in film (Addison, 2003). The comedic, overweight, oversexualized Jezebel rarely ends up with a respectable man. Latifah as the overweight comedic Jezebel reveals a tension between conformity and resistance to this stereotype in Bringing Down The House.

Latifah's character portrayal of Charlene in Bringing Down The House reflects the comedic Jezebel stereotype in her relationships with Peter (Steve Martin) and Howie (Eugene Levy), his friend and legal partner. Latifah's character is not sexually alluring to Peter, however, their relationship eerily imitates the sexual tensions of the female slave and master relationship. Not only does Peter subjugate Latifah's character as a maid, he also needs her for sex lessons. Presumably the African American woman is more in touch with her sexuality and more sexually
experienced. Her role is to guide and free the repressed White male embodied in Steve Martin’s character.

For example, in one extended scene, Charlene and Peter go out together on a pseudo date. After coming back from dinner and dancing, their conversations center on sex. Latifah and Peter have a disagreement about the type of romance women desire. While Peter describes a more romantic kind of love, Latifah’s character suggests that women are sexually savage and like to be treated aggressively in bed. The actors for maximum comedic value play these encounters broadly. A series of exaggerated sexually graphic encounters between the two follow, as Charlene teaches Peter how to seduce his wife. In time, Latifah’s character makes him a man. When Peter seems to get it, Charlene says “you found your balls!”

In this extended scene, Latifah conforms to the stereotype via her supposed broader sexual knowledge, her language, and the freedom she has with her body. She simultaneously resists the Jezebel stereotype as the goal of this sexual titillation is to achieve Charlene and Peter’s mutual goal, to reunite him with his wife instead of trying to manipulate him to be with her.

The comedic portrayal of overweight African American woman as Jezebel also conforms to the stereotype in
Charlene's relationship with Howie. During their first encounter, Howie's interest was not on the character's personality or who she was, instead it focuses on her sexuality. More specifically, he gawks at her large breasts. He calls her his "cocoa Goddess," a reiteration of the mystery of the sexual allure of the Tragic Mulatto embedded in the stereotype. In this relationship Latifah's character simultaneously resists the Jezebel stereotype because she is not the aggressor. In addition, Howie is an awkward, romantically clumsy fellow, not the respectable type of man the Jezebel stereotype usually pursues. Later in the film, Charlene and Howie's relationship is juxtaposed with that of Peter and his wife. Peter's renewed relationship is based on love, passion and mutual respect while Charlene and Howie appear to have sex as the only possible connection. Indeed, their relationship seems to confuse sex, love and intimacy; Howie does claim to love her and this shows some resistance to the Jezebel stereotype and he expresses concern for her welfare:

I'm worried about her, I hate the fact that she's out there all alone.....If you hear from her, please tell her the cool points are out the window and you got me all twisted up in the game (translation: I love you)

This resistance played out as a role reversal with the male as the aggressor toward the Jezebel, does not negate
the fact that this relationship purely exists for comedic value. Howie is a 'non-conventional' man and Charlene, the overweight African American woman, is his unconventional partner. In one scene their contrast in their size is played for comedic value. Charlene’s larger body sitting on Howie’s lap is played for a joke effect, rather than a sentimental romantic moment.

In summary, a tension between conformity and resistance to the Jezebel stereotype is illustrated in the representation of the overweight African American female body. While the Jezebel is closer to the American Standard of beauty, Latifah’s overweight body is more objectified in comedic romance, making her breast central to her sexuality. hooks (1992) would argue that breasts are objectified as spectacle, making the person the totality of a body part, thus, non-human and closer to an animal. In these performances, Latifah’s large breasts are a symbol of the sexually alluring temptation that the Jezebel has over men with her entire body.

The contemporary variations of the Jezebel also reveal tensions between conformity and resistance because she can be cast as either hetero/homosexual because overweight woman are often depicted as having an ambiguous sexuality. Further, in comedic performances her weight and figure
become an object of humor rather than an element of her allure. Thus, the Jezebel depiction of overweight African American women in film also reinforce the notion that weight is an interconnection construct with race, gender and class in media representation studies.

*Queen Latifah Signified as Female Buck*

According to hooks (1992) film is the re-imagined, re-invented, imitation of life. Similarly, Hall (1997) explains that representation has a dual meaning, one of representing something that is already there and one that uses a person to stand in for others. As such, Hollywood is re-presenting an image (or growing one, according to Guerrero’s, 1993 plantation genre theory) from a meaning that already exists. The stereotype of the Black male buck currently exists in the American imagination. In her film roles Queen Latifah can be viewed as re-imaging the buck stereotype in female form.

The notion that Africans were animal-like and subhuman was foundational to the institution of slavery. Whites claimed that without the institution of slavery, Africans in general would be unable to care for themselves in the world and the young strong African male in particular would
become criminal and a threat to White women (Pilgrim, 2002). The male brute then has been defined as a big, bad nigger, a violent lustful savage threatening the purity of White womanhood (Bogle, 2001; Guerrero, 1993). Often nameless and sometimes faceless, the Black brute was subhuman and feral, a vicious beast full of Black rage who jumped out of places and went on rampages to rob, rape, and murder (Bogle, 2001; Guerrero, 1993; Pilgrim, 2002). This mythology that Black brutes were rapists of White woman served as a rationale to prevent interracial mixing and postbellum became the rationale for lynchings across the South (Pilgrim, 2002). This imagery functioned to suppress the expansion of Black civil rights and political power during Reconstruction and beyond in order to reestablish the White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy by defending White womanhood, White honor and White glory (Bogle, 2001; Guerrero, 1993). This image of the strong young African American male as threatening and feral persists in the American culture today.

In their earliest film presentation, Black brutes were portrayed as apes or half human, half animal. Once again, Birth of a Nation (1915) introduced this stereotype of the African American to film audiences (Pilgrim, 2002). In the face of protests condemning this image, Hollywood reverted,
in the short term, to casting Black male actors mainly in Tom or Coon roles (Pilgrim, 2002). Years later, the Black brute was portrayed typically as a rebellious slave, a revolutionary or militant in films like *So Red the Rose* (1935) and *Uptight* (1969) and *Putney* (1969) (Bogle, 2001).

In the 1970s, the stereotypical image of the Black brute was revised. In blaxploitation films like *Shaft* (1971), *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972), the brute was recreated into a sexually potent, violent and frenzied Black buck who served to avenge those who had been wronged and worked to exploit the system that had exploited his people (Guerrero, 1993; Pilgrim, 2002). In short, the buck became a counterculture hero.

More contemporary images of this archetypal figure can be seen in movies like *Color Purple* (1985) and *What’s Love Got To Do With It?* (1993) (Guerrero, 1993; Pilgrim, 2002). This stereotype serves as a foundation of the emerging image of the Black female buck found in the film roles of Queen Latifah.

**Confirming and Resisting the Female Buck Stereotype**

Across three of the four film roles analyzed in this study, Queen Latifah’s performances reveal the emerging
image of the Black female buck stereotype. This semiotic analysis reveals that Queen Latifah embodies the characteristics of the male buck icon as threatening, hypermasculine, physically powerful with uncontrollable sexual urges in varying degrees in these roles. Although her weight is used to conform to and resist contemporary variations of the Mammy and Jezebel stereotype, within her roles she also uses her body in very masculine ways that mirror the historical brute and buck caricature. The apparent resistance to the male buck is the gender reversal and therefore, no perceived threat to the purity of White womanhood. Nonetheless it is this very gender reversal coupled with race, class and significantly weight that suggests Latifah’s embodiment of this new image, albeit a stereotypical image.

As an overweight African American female, Queen Latifah’s character portrayals in *Bringing Down The House*, *Chicago* and *Set It Off* feature elements of this brutish, hypermasculinized character. This analysis explains how Queen Latifah’s portrayals represent a black female buck, driven by instinct, not intellect, embodying a physical and sexual threat.
Queen Latifah Signified Physically
and Sexually Threatening

Latifah’s persona in these films is depicted as hypermasculine and physically powerful through her large figure and its underlying potential for threatening behavior. This persona is exaggerated using her body as a tool to reinforce this subhuman image like the male buck stereotype. The clothes she wears in her film performances, her physical size and exaggerated body movements reveal this image. Further, just like the male buck stereotype, Queen Latifah’s characters reflect the inability to exhibit intellectual cognition as control on behavior and an inability to experience the more refined human emotions. Instead the female buck appears at times to be driven by uncontrollable instincts. Bringing Down The House, Chicago, and Set It Off provide illustration.

Across Queen Latifah’s film roles she is portrayed as a comedic lover, an aggressive dyke, a con artist warden who pays for sexual favors and a Jezebel who uses men for sex and financial gain. Holistically these representations depict her as one whose sex drive is uncontrollable; she is desensitized to feelings of love, passion, nurturance and respect that traditionally ground long term romantic
partnerships. Therefore Latifah's characters conform to the male buck stereotype's uncontrollable sexual urges, and at times even present her as sexually aggressive. Beyond sexuality, Latifah's character portrayals also reveal her as physically threatening.

For example, in *Set It Off* Latifah's character Cleo is explicitly portrayed as a lesbian who is the physical aggressor in a sexual relationship. Similarly, although she has an ambiguous sexuality, Latifah's role in *Chicago*, uses her body size as a source of intimidation toward the female inmates. Her physical height and size in relation to her White female charges shows a large contrast that makes her body appear to be physically and potentially sexually threatening. In these roles, Latifah's gender and weight are key elements, suggesting that overweight women are more threatening physically and sexually because of their size. Further, the threat/challenge is to other women, reflecting another Hollywood stereotype portraying larger women as homosexual and only attractive to other women. Moreover, even in her lesbian roles, Latifah is the stereotypical butch lesbian female with masculine characteristics. Race and class further complicate the stereotype suggesting that overweight African American women are more threatening.
because of their physical strength and their animalistic impulses.

In *Bringing Down The House* Latifah’s character demonstrates conformity to the threatening characteristics of the buck stereotype as she is portrayed as having masculine physical strength. For example, Peter’s daughter calls her for help when her date tries to force her to have sex. Latifah rescues the young woman and physically confronts the young man. She forces the boy outside in his underwear, picks him up and hangs him over a ledge, forcing him to apologize. She conforms to the buck stereotype in her use of brute strength but also resists the stereotype as her strength is used to make wrongs right and to protect Peter, White womanhood and the community. This illustration shows Hollywood’s subjugation of Queen Latifah’s body; because of her size, she is able to create this stereotype and be physically threatening like the male buck character.

In *Bringing Down The House*, Latifah’s character uses her body weight and masculine strength as her weapon for good and justice. In contrast, *Set It Off*, Latifah’s character Cleo had been a professional car jacker, and served as the muscle in the girl gang. Cleo was involved in a lot of criminal activity previously; she has access to weapons and is usually the aggressor during the bank
robberies. Here, her size meets the expectations of the physically threatening buck. Further, her uncontrolled emotions are often on display.

For example, she celebrates their first robbery with abandon, accidentally endangering her gang mates. In response, one gang member orders her to "sit!", an order Cleo obeys like a dog. Even her African American female co-stars are referring to her as one who needs short, verbal commands. The female buck caricature is denied the basic moral emotions and feelings. She reacts instinctively. Neither her emotions or her intellect are involved in her actions. Indeed, the potential for threatening or violent behavior is always present in the absence of intellect or real emotion.

The emergence of this new characterization based on the historical Black male buck is possible because Latifah meets the race and class expectations of the male buck while broadening the stereotype because of her gender and weight. It is likely that a woman who meets the idealized standard of physical beauty in American culture would never occupy the female buck role. This stereotype representation of Queen Latifah demonstrates the centrality of weight as an element of marginalization to be considered in a visual
medium such as film when critiquing a media representations.

In summary, this chapter presented Queen Latifah's film performances as representing and resisting the Mammy and Jezebel icons. The analysis also revealed the emerging female buck stereotype based on the historical male buck icon. These stereotypes reflect the intersections of race, gender, class and weight as ongoing facets of oppressive images in film.
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION

The research question posed in this study was “Do the film representations of African American women as portrayed by Queen Latifah perpetuate traditional stereotypes or transcend these representations?” This semiotic analysis revealed that across the four selected film roles, Queen Latifah’s character portrayals perpetuated the traditional Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes while also resisting and contemporizing some aspects of the historic depiction. However, the analysis also revealed a new image, a gender reversal of the male buck icon. In this female buck image, intersections of race, gender and weight function to enable the enactment of a new, and equally as marginalizing, stereotype of Black womanhood for film and pop media culture.

The research question also addressed the possibility of transcendence of stereotypical representations. Transcendence of an image would suggest that the current representation rises above the traditional stereotypes, eliminating their negative characteristics or transforming the overall nature of the images. This semiotic analysis revealed that Queen Latifah’s film roles examined in this
study reflected contemporary variations on the historical representation. Hollywood has not risen above these enduring stereotypes of African American women but instead has recreated and reinvented them for modern audience consumption. As such, the dominant ideologies of race, gender and class continue to perpetuate the cultural hegemony.

The goal of this study was to determine whether weight is a significant marginalization factor to be included in media representation studies of race, gender, and class. Significantly, this study demonstrated the problematic representations of overweight African American women in film. From my standpoint as an overweight African American woman that has experienced oppression along the lines of weight, race, gender and class, I suggest that this study serves as a testament to the strength and pervasiveness of racist, sexist and classist images of African American women in film. It appears that race, gender, class and weight are interconnecting factors that marginalize African American women in film, reflecting the marginalization of overweight African American women in our culture (Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Hendriks, 2002; Houston, 1992; hooks, 1996).
The persistence of these film images disguises the realities of history. For example, the Mammy icon covers up the fact that Black women were not happy and content slaves. The Jezebel was not a whore but in fact a victim of rape. The Black male brute was actually the hard working Black man that was the backbone of the slave economy and not some lazy man as suggested (Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Pilgrim, 2002). These myths have their contemporary realities as well.

The ideology of physical beauty has its own myths and crippling ideologies. It suggest that Americans, overweight or not, pour money into expensive health, diet and exercise programs and pay for costly and dangerous procedures to get rid of unwanted fat. The food industry is making money off of low fat, no sugar, low carb, high cost foods. The fast food industry has joined the bandwagon; new books, videos and DVD’s have hit the market concerning obesity. The mainstream media helps to sustain this ideological-cultural domination of the White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy machine.

The power of this ideological domination can be seen in Queen Latifah’s work. In an interview, Latifah stated that she wanted to co-produce Bringing Down The House because she wanted to make sure these types of scenes were
funny but not offensive. In other words as producer, she would have the power to resist the stereotypical portrayal. This analysis revealed despite her perceived clout in Hollywood, Latifah’s roles have remnants of Mammy and Jezebel. Further, now Hollywood can frighten America with Black female sexuality through the Black female buck image. Whether the producers are Black or White, the dominant culture persists in misogynist stereotypical images of overweight African American women.

Limitations

This media representation study has three primary limitations related to the methodological approach, the number of films critiqued and the dominance of Queen Latifah’s media persona. First, this semiotic analysis has been informed by my cultural standpoint. Critical cultural scholars work to give voice to marginalized groups and to scholarship in media representations from that marginalized perspective. My experience as an overweight African American female thus provides a counterhegemonic reading for this marginalized group. Nonetheless, other approaches and other scholars might bring to light alternate and equally as useful interpretations of the same text.
A second limitation of this study is its effort to deconstruct the imagery of several films featuring Queen Latifah. Traditionally film critiques analyze one film or one character within a film/series (see, for example, Coleman, 2003; Gaither, 1996; hooks, 1996; Orbe & Strother (1996); Purnell, 2002). A focus on films with multiple characters created complexities for this analysis. While more films perhaps increased the substance of these findings, the number of films also lead to comparisons of film roles that varied in not just their quality but also in their centrality to the storyline. This analysis did not account for this variation.

A final limitation of this study may be its focus on Latifah as iconic figure, representing overweight African American women. While Latifah certainly represents the marginalization factors of interest in this study, she also brings to every role her larger than life media persona. Before entering the film industry, Queen Latifah came out of the rap/hip hop culture and weekly television. She brought this developed media persona, a recognizable image with crossover appeal, to her films. Further, today, there is a lot of consumer information on Latifah, including personal interviews, her new cover girl spokesperson role and her new clothing line. This media saturation may result
in challenges to any interpreter’s capacity to separate the media image from the film characters Latifah portrays.

Directions for Future Research

The results of this study suggest several opportunities for future research. The first set of potential questions concern the media effects of these images of overweight African American women. If these stereotypical images perpetuate negative images of overweight African American women, what are the consequences of viewings of these images for African American women’s self image, in particular overweight African American women? Moreover, the effects of these images on the dominant cultures perception of overweight African American women are future options worthy of exploration. Finally, researchers may examine the effects of these images as representations of Black culture within the African American community and the dominant culture.

Further, other approaches to film analysis may offer additional insights into understanding the representation of marginalized characters in film. For example, Queen Latifah’s film roles and body could be analyzed emphasizing cinematic elements that reinforce/challenge the interpretative findings of this study. Deconstructing
cinematic elements in film such as lighting, framing of the subject, camera angles and overall composition, can bring insight to the intersections of race, gender, class and weight as well.

Last, the findings of this study illuminated Hollywood's perpetuation of the idealized female form as a thin woman and continued marginalization of the overweight woman in film. While this study focused on overweight African American women, a broader critique of the female form in American films is warranted. For example, one might question the invisibility of women of average size in films. Further, a comparison of film representations of race and weight would offer insights into the force of these marginalization factors in women's lives. Are there differences in portrayals of thin European American women versus thin African American women? Do overweight European American women get fewer roles than overweight African American women? Are the images represented positive or negative, similar or different? An exploration of all of these questions can contribute to our understanding of the intersections of race, gender, class and weight.
Conclusion

This study has been an attempt to explicitly address weight as an interconnecting marginalization factor along with race, gender and class. It is evident that without the race myth, Latifah’s portrayals would not be able to fit into these characterizations. It is equally true that her gender and class further marginalizes her and places her into the demeaning roles given to African American women. Finally, it is her weight, which defines the roles and character for which she is suited, according to the cultural hegemony. Weight remains an acceptable bias in our culture. The invisible nature of the male gaze upon the overweight body and of true romance with comedy for the overweight woman, speaks volumes to the weight prejudice and ideology in mainstream American films. In today’s society, it appears that while race, gender and class are things that we have worked toward exposing and making more socially conscious, overweight persons are the butt of the joke, figuratively, and literally.

To continue to raise consciousness concerning controlling images in media is important, but it is only the first step. hooks (1992) contends that “Unless we transform images of Blackness, of Black people, our ways of
looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation.”

African American women, African Americans and the dominant culture’s scholars, filmmakers and film audiences need to work for change; indeed, need to demand change in film representations that reflect the African American experience with authenticity. These changes in micropractices can lead to transformation so that future generations may see themselves in film.
### APPENDIX A

#### Selection of Films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Roles</th>
<th>Availability</th>
<th>Screen Time</th>
<th>Overweight</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Creators</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jungle Fever</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1:30</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Party 2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>7:26</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juice</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>2:53</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who's the man</td>
<td>Not Available</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Life</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1:53</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>EA/AA</td>
<td>European American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set it Off</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoodlum</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1:47</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sphere</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>7:00</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>European American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Out Loud</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>14:00</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>EA/AA</td>
<td>European American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone Collector</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>12:39</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>EA/AA</td>
<td>European American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country Bears</td>
<td>Not Available</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Sugar</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing Down the House</td>
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<td>48:00</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scary Movie 3</td>
<td>Not Available</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Macro Level of Deconstruction

1. What is being represented (represented(depicted))?


3. How is the representation made to seem 'true', 'commonsense' or 'natural'?

4. What is foreground and what is backgrounded? Are there any notable absences?

5. Whose representation is it? Whose interests does it reflect? How do you know?

6. At whom is this representation targeted? How do you know?

7. What does the representation mean to you? What does the representation mean to others? How do you account for the differences?

8. How do people make sense of it? According to what codes?

9. With what alternative representation could it be compared? How does it differ?

10. A reflexive consideration - Why is the concept of representation problematic?

**Questions taken directly from teaching module on media representations at the University of Texas at Austin**
APPENDIX C

Synopsis of Films

*Bringing Down the House* (2003)

A lawyer (Steve Martin) left by the wife (Jean Smart) he still loves tries the world of online dating and meets a woman he believes to be a smart, gorgeous attorney. When she shows up for their first face-to-face meeting, he discovers that his date is Charlene (Queen Latifah), a prison escapee who seeks Peter's legal knowledge to clear her name. When bland Peter refuses, she sets out to throw his orderly life into chaos.

*Chicago* (2002)

This long-awaited movie adaptation of Bob Fosse's 1975 Broadway musical is about two dreamers, Velma Kelley (Catherine Zeta-Jones) and Roxie Hart (Renée Zellweger). Velma is the Windy City's top nightclub star until the night she guns down her cheating husband, after which she becomes an even bigger celebrity, thanks to smooth attorney Billy Flynn (Richard Gere). Roxie also desperately wants fame, so the solution is simple: shoot her abusive lover dead. After Roxie replaces her, an outraged Velma plots...
Roxie's demise as she obsessively pursues her goal of being back on top.

*Brown Sugar* (2002)

A hip-hop music critic (Sanaa Lathan) and an executive at a hip-hop label (Taye Diggs) have known each other since their childhood, but only as friends. As the exec's wedding date approaches, they're both forced to consider whether or not they were meant to be more than just friends.

*Set It Off* (1996)

They spent a lifetime struggling to move away from the mean streets of their neighborhood. But the system stole their dreams, and now four childhood friends are determined to steal them back. As one grapples with the possibility of losing her only child, the foursome find themselves on the edge of desperation. With their world in turmoil and their backs against the wall, they decide to seek their fortune literally. Virtually overnight, the women spiral into an uncharacteristic world of crime.

Targeting the banks of Los Angeles (the bank robbery capital of the world), Cleo, Stony, Tisean and Frankie rob the city's most vulnerable financial institutions. Flush
with cash, they discover that easy money can inch them towards their elusive goal of escaping from the projects - but H can't solve their problems. With the police hot on their trail, breaking out of prison may be easier than busting free from the 'hood.
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