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In this project, I want to breakdown the fascination and phenomena of the Black woman's body, precisely the assumption that being a Black woman or girl automatically means you will have a very pronounced butt. I wanted to understand from other Black women's perspectives what it means to feel more valuable when they have the ideal 'thick black woman' body and how that affects them in their daily decisions. I look to social media as a foundation to see the impact that Instagram, YouTube, and cultural expectations influence the decisions of young girls and women.

This desire to have a larger, rounder behind has taken on a life of its own, as we see with the surge of the very dangerous and sometimes deadly plastic surgery procedure the Brazilian butt lift (BBL). The BBL is not new to the world of plastic surgery and augmentation, but it has seen an increasing rise in social media access. More and more women are seeking out the BBL, traveling, and even documenting their journeys to share with other women who may be interested in the procedure. What I am most interested in is the 'why' why are these women, specifically Black women willing to put themselves in a position that could end with pain or death, especially in a society that is so quick to marginalize them and their bodies. From the historical approach, I examine how the Black woman's body has been violently used for medical purposes and how this new phenomenon of the BBL is, in a way repeating this history.

THE DISAVOMENT OF BLACK WOMEN’S BODIES: THE RISE OF THE
BRAZILIAN BUTT LIFT

by

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To all the Black girls and Women who are constantly reminded that they are not enough,
and who are forced to conform in a society that does not value their uniqueness. This
work is for you, know that you are the keepers of your body and you are worth more than
what society has labeled you.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Nijah Imani Toshumba has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
A Review of Literature	22
Overview of Chapters	30
II. TAKING BACK THE BLACK WOMAN’S BODY: A HISTORICAL EVOLUTION.....	36
III. THE RISE OF THE BRAZILIAN BUTT LIFT	70
IV. CONCLUSION.....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY	103

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Nicki Minaj was invited on the George Lopez' show *Lopez Tonight* to speak about her newly released album *Pink Friday*. Only four minutes into her interview Lopez turns the very brief conversation about her new album to concentration solely on her body. Lopez starts by saying to Minaj, "you have magical powers in your posterior...it is impossible for anyone to resist you" (Minaj). He then shows her clips of her on the Regis and Kelly show of Regis touching her thighs to point out a piece of clothing she is wearing. During this interview, Lopez continues to direct the conversation towards her behind by stating, "we have to protect your magical powers, so I made a booty protector for you." While saying this, he pulls out a barbwire cage-like accessory "a butt protector" he claims, he then attaches to the back of her waist, covering her behind. Lopez takes Minaj's hands and walks her closer to the audience, where she poses and blows a kiss to the audience. Minaj declared to Lopez and the audience that she loved this new contraption, that now covered her butt (Minaj). This moment could be read in a variety of ways. However, from my interpretation, it was not only harmful but bewildering. The obsession with Minaj's' buttocks and Black womens butts in general, is the basis of my research, Black women's identity has often been hyper-sexualized and centered around her body. Over the past few decades it seems that Blacks womens individuality has been presupposed to and reduced down to the expectation of having

large butts. The larger portion in bell hooks' *Black Looks: race and representation* she describes Black females' sexuality traits and how they have been portrayed in society; hooks critiques the association of Black female sexuality with sexual deviance and primitiveness. Hooks writes "undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it idealized and unattainable, the Black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with the accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant (hooks). The accessibility, availability and sexual deviance that hooks is pointing to can be seen with the increasing fascination of the Black woman's butt. Attaching the expectation of a large butt to Black women bodies, allows for society to gain access to Black womens bodies, specifically in rap, hip-hop and R&B music videos, where there was and continues to be an acute focus on the butt. Music videos were one of the first places Black women gained recognition for their beauty and body types, and therefore became the place many Black women and girls looked for validation for their bodies, especially myself. This in turns allows for the music industry and people to use Black women as nothing more than sexual props in these music videos. With the broadening and popularity of social media, butts of all shapes and sizes are everywhere; seeing a butt is as common as seeing a selfie, in so much that it has its own name a "Belfie" which is a picture that only shows the butt, as one would show their face. Our society has become so infatuated with having the best behind, that there are social media pages dedicate to the Brazilian Butt lift (BBL) and YouTube channels focused only on individual womens BBL journeys. You can also see the popularity and attraction to the enhanced buttocks, by how many followers certain Black cis womens accounts

have; the better looking the butt (whether it be in size or shape) will hold a determining factor in how popular certain female-identified pages are.

Though this phenomenon of having a nice butt is not technically new, the desire to have a Brazilian Butt Lift is. Much of the research surrounding the BBL has been growing along side the thousands of women who have gotten the procedure done. Professionals and patients are learning all the possible risk, health concerns and death each time one is done. This leaves me as a researcher in a sense to fill in the blanks, to connect the historical breakdown of the Black woman's body to the present day exposure on social media, and how through it all, the Black women who are still being treated as the spectacle. Whether the Black woman is a celebrity such as Minaj who has built most of her career around her large behind, to the ordinary woman who is seeking to enlarge her butt in order to feel complete as a Black woman or feel better about herself, I want to understand what we as Black women are trying to achieve.

My research is not so much about why society seems to only value Black cis womens body when it resembles the curves of Minaj, but why women, specifically Black women feel it necessary to risk their lives or comfort to look like her. Main stream society would have us believe that there is one universal body frame that fits Black women, and though this image has shifted overtime what has not is the focus of the body. Contrary to societal beliefs, there is no one true or naturally genetic body of what a Black woman should look like, the ideal Black womens body is imaginative production, that has emerged from sites and text that were formed through racist stereotyping. From Scientific racism from the early 1800s, to the creation and categories of cisnormativity

and now social media, we are able to understand how the imagined Black women's body has been created to look, but it is important to recognize that these images are causing harm for Black women and girls. What are the factors and influences that are causing these women to feel that their worth and self-esteem will be made complete if and only when they are able to get a Brazilian Butt Lift? Seeing Minaj on this stage with a cage over her behind, I began to realize that society's way of viewing not only the butt but the Black woman's body, was through humor, and enjoyed making a spectacle out of her. During her debut on the Lopez Tonight show, there was no need to protect this Black woman, the only thing understood as needing protection was Minaj's behind from being damaged or harmed. The very second Minaj welcomed the cage around her butt echoes the historical reality of how little things have changed surrounding the Black woman's body. When Sara Baartman died at a very young age, her body was not only dissected and examined for "scientific" purposes. Her buttocks, genitals, and brain along with her skeleton were preserved to be put on display for one hundred and fifty years at the Musée de l'Homme (Homme Museum) in Paris, France (Pearce) . This created a lasting impression on how the world would continue to marginalize and label the Black woman's body as a sight of both disgust and justification of exploitation. In Kamille Gentles-Pearl *Romance with Voluptuousness: Caribbean Women and Thick Bodies in the United States* she explores the deep-seated expectation surrounding the Black woman's body. For example, Gentles-Pearl uses Rainbow Johnson from the show *Black-ish* who is trying to defend her Blackness. Rainbow states "If I am not Black, can somebody please tell my hair and my [buttocks]" (Gentles-Pearl 164), as to insinuate that as a Black woman these

two markers alone make complete her identity, which as we know this belief began centuries ago with the Hottentot Venus. In so much that Black women are seeking out butt augmentation, fat transfers and illegal silicone shots in order to meet the ideal large behind that is often an associated attribute of Black women and they believe they should have to feel like a “true” Black woman. However, the rise in body modification specifically on Black womens seeking to enhance their behind are the dangerous methods in which they are exploring.

The obsession with bigger behinds is nothing new but with the access to various media outlets and social media becoming the hub of sharing images, the focus on a larger behind has taken off to an entire different level. The fixation of having a larger behind has caused an increase of Black women getting their bodies surgically done. The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reports that cosmetic augmentation among Black women has increased fifty-six percent between 2005 and 2013. According to the 216 Plastic Surgery Statistics Report, Black women accounted for eight percent of all plastic surgery procedures in the United States- that. is double the percentage from 1997 (Hilliard)From these statistics we see there has been a major shift in Black womens desires to fit into the idealize Black woman’s image, the most requested body augmentation is the Brazilian butt lift. The Brazilian butt lift is the process of using ones’ own fat in other parts of the body and transferred to the woman’s butt and hips to ‘improve’ and enhance the shape. The surgery is a combination of liposuctions with fat graphing and injection. As simple as it sounds, it has been ranked the most dangerous form of plastic surgery a person could get done to their body. But this has not slowed

women from getting it done; according to the American society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery more than 20,000 people had the BBL procedure by board certified surgeons in 2017 rising steadily from 8,500 in 2012 (Perry). Though there is no break down available as to race and gender, I do believe it is telling that with the rise of social media, we also see an increase of the BBL (though research has not been done specifically on the correlations of the BBL and social media, there is definitely a connection).

Consequently, due to historical tropes, stereotypes, and systemic racist structures that have stayed the course for hundreds of years, the Black body is shaped. Black female assigned people are marked the moment they enter the world. Assumptions and stereotypes that are placed upon their bodies create a life long struggle of to remove those labels. The belief that all Black women are supposed to be a specific shape and size is as damaging as the Eurocentric beauty standards of maintaining a slim figure. Black women, more specifically, are expected to have a curvaceous body, specifically in the lower half. This means that if a Black woman lacks a large behind and shapely hips, she's automatically "other." She is then encouraged to do whatever possible to obtain a larger bottom, no matter the risk involved. This encouragement usually comes from her peers, a partner or various forms of media, all reminding women and young girls what they are lacking and need in order to be desirable.

Throughout my life, I was steadily overwhelmed with what I was supposed to look like. Growing up in a predominately White school from the age of five to thirteen, I was always trying to make my body look like the girls around me, which I never succeeded in doing. One thing I did not understand until I was much older and constantly

reminded by family and peers that by being a Black girl meant my body was automatically was going to look different. Though as we know that this is not always true, because I have met and seen Black women and girls who are shaped all very differently, including myself, none of us look the same, yet we have all been generalized and stereotype of having a larger body. I found out very early on how quickly how body shapes are racialized, White girls were seen as naturally skinny and with longer torsos; as they got older they would also be expected to have a large chest. By contrast, Black women were not deemed as your everyday beauty queens, yet we were known to have thicker bodies and a large butt. However, it was not until I met my then best friend at the age of ten, who was both Black and White that I became more confused and disheartened about my body. My friend had a slim frame that was much like the other young White girls in my school, but because she was Black as well, I failed to comprehend why her body was not shaped like mine. It was not until I transferred schools on the other side of town that I felt more at ease but also even more aware of my body. The new school I attended was the complete opposite of my previous school; all I saw were girls who looked like me. I was excited, but my excitement quickly became overshadowed by how others began to acknowledge and approach me. It was one thing to be the new girl, but it was also another thing to be viewed as weird simply because of how I talked and acted. However, the focus on my demeanor was not their primary concern; it was my body. They only focused on my butt and hips.

When I decided to transfer schools, I did so because I wanted to fit in. I no longer wanted to be known as “the Black girl,” but by my name and my character. I went from

being the token Black girl to being known as the girl with the “big butt.” This for me became even more baffling because from what I had learned throughout my exposure of media, is that having a more pronounced behind was something Black women had. My sisters, my mother, and many of the older Black women I encountered and saw on TV had a behind that was bigger than most White women. I always knew my body, but specifically, my bottom was more prominent, especially while attending the predominately White school. There would be a few comments made here and there, but it was mostly myself comparing my body to those around me. It was not until I was around more Black girls and boys that I truly started becoming more aware and self-conscious of my body. I quickly realized that not all Black girls were shaped like me, and that was a “problem,” not only for myself but for other Black girls. We all wanted to have what we felt we were lacking. Some of them wanted my large behind; I wanted to be smaller in shape and size like some of them. We all wanted something we did not have. However, I can say it was not all negative; in fact, many people began to admire my body and telling me how they wished they had a butt like mine. As flattering as that was, it, in a way, became my identity. Being new at the school and not the most outgoing person, I would hear people describe me as the girl with the big butt, and nothing else, which, as a young adolescent, this can be damaging, at least it was for me.

Throughout my adolescence I came to realize that Black women’s bodies have always been on display, whether by her choice or by force. Regardless of the reason, there are clear expectations of what the “Black women’s body” should resemble. From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, our televisions were filled with images of Black

women shaking their behinds in front of a camera. Similar to how we see women on Instagram and other social media platforms taking and sharing videos and pictures that are specifically concentrated on their butt, whether through dancing or posing, the goal is to show off their body. During the era of the music video It became so necessary to have a scantily clad young woman dancing in a music video that many songs no longer had important messages, such as topics affecting the Black community as it had been in the 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, lyrics focused on what a Black woman should look like; male rappers were notorious for rapping lines that spoke on the ideal measurements of the Black women they were attracted to.

As heard in Gucci Mane featuring Megan Thee Stallions new song titled *Big Booty* (2019), the very first lyrics of this rap song spoken by Gucci Mane are “Tell the skinny hoes to point me where the thick hoes at (Go), He want a flat booty bitch, I’m not with all that (No)” (Stallion). However, our first real mass –produced song that put Black womens butts as a topic of discussion was in Sir mix-a-lot’s *Baby Got Back* (1982). The song begins with dialogue between two White girls in pure disgust of just seeing a Black woman walk by with a large butt. They state “Her butt, is just so big/ I can’t believe it’s just so round/I mean gross, look/She’s just so, Black.” Then with a quick and upbeat tempo Sir Mix-a-lot jumps in and begins to rap about just how much he appreciates big butts. His lyrics consist of “I’m tired of magazines/Saying Flat butts are the thing/Take the average Black man and ask him that/She gotta pack much back” (Mix-a-Lot). I can admit that to this song and many other songs that acknowledge a curvier/full figured woman, gave me some level of empowerment, as if the song was finally sticking up for

women like myself and giving us the confidence that was not always offered by mainstream media. With the increase of songs like *Baby's Got Back* and *Big Booty* is also a form of body shaming and recreating unhealthy ideals of what Black women should look like, specifically her behind.

This phenomenon of the Black woman's larger buttocks, as we know, is far from new; Beginning in the early 19th century, Europe was introduced to Sarah Baartman. Baartman was taken from her home as a young woman and paraded around because of her ample behind. She became the symbol of Black femininity and transformed the image of the Black woman from thin to fat. It was because of a Scottish surgeon by the name of Alexander Dunlop who took Baartman's presence to another level, Dunlop's goal was to exploit Baartman on as many levels as possible. According to Sabrina Strings research, in *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Dunlop promoted Sarah as an erotic and scientific curiosity... On a poster she was billed as the "most correct and perfect Specimen of that race of people" due to the voluptuousness of her physique (Strings 91). Baartman soon became the leading icon of what all Black women were supposed to look like. Strings addresses how the Black woman's body came to be a site of scientific examination and the firm beliefs of what a Black woman's body is supposed to look like based off of scientific racism. Throughout the mid eighteenth century White scientist such as Francois Bernier created racial classifications systems in an attempt "to pin down fundamental physical differences between Europeans and non Europeans with an intense focus on the women in various categories" (Strings 67). This was done specifically to serve as "proof" of European superiority in intelligence and

appearance. Bernier was not alone in his quest to determine the inferiority of Black bodies, anthropologist and naturalist Julien-Joseph Virey also joined in on the research of Black bodies. Virey believed the reason for Black skin was a superabundance of black bile beneath the skin; this back up of bile also explained why Black women like Sara Baartman came to be shaped the way they were. “Those who are darker than others of the same race are also more robust, active and stout, the hot sun caused the body hold excess liquid fat, allowing it to accumulate in the breast and on the entire body (86).” Virey continues this theory by stating “the women particularly as they age, develop big bottoms and bellies that push out, living in the hot climate causes the body to retain excess liquid fat, causing the fatty liquid to gather in their breasts, hips and buttocks (86). This helped continue the assumption that other Black womens bodies would emulate a similar shape as Baartman.

Fast forward to 2009 when the world was introduced to Nicki Minaj, who was not only a female rapper, but one of the few and most popular female rappers out at the time and was also the leading sex symbol. Before Minaj, many of the earlier female rappers in the late 80s and early 90s were the opposite of Minaj when it came to appearance. There were rappers such as Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Da Brat, Left Eye who were dressed in baggy attire, one of the many fashion styles during this era. It was not until Lil’ Kim stepped on the stage and we saw a woman fully seen as embracing her sexuality. In fact, Lil’ Kim and Nicki Minaj have been compared when it came to who exuded more sexuality. In her most famous photo on her debut album *Hardcore* Lil’ Kim took sexiness to a whole new level when she is seen in spread-eagle squat position wearing a leopard

print matching bikini lingerie. Fast forward eighteen years and we have Nicki Minaj in a squat pose for her single “Anaconda” wearing a matching pink bra and thong, that looks very similar to Kim’s, except shot from behind. “Many of Lil’ Kim’s wildest, most iconic outfits are still being recycled is a true testament to her influence, Stars from Beyoncé, Cardi B and Rhianna have all worn Lil Kim inspired outfits. Even Nicki Minaj was photographed wearing similar looks to that of Lil Kim, even with their on-going rap “beef” (Witte). Within the decade that passed, it seemed the only way Black women would make it in the music industry is if they were willing to show more. If they did not have the assets to show off, it was up to them to find a means to get them.

With Nicki Minaj on the scene as both a rapper and a sex symbol, it seemed a new precedent was set. If you, as a Black woman, wanted to be viewed as attractive, you needed to have a huge butt, small waist and a large chest, similar to Minaj, she became the ideal Black woman for many. In 2015 a very well known Doctor, Michael Salzhauer who also goes by Dr. Miami on social media, made a name for himself by mastering the Brazilian Butt lift and documenting his procedures on the social media outlet Snapchat. Responding to a message after Nicki Minaj asked for clarity as to why he had posted pictures of her butt on his Instagram page, Dr. Miami stated “Your butt inspires me. You have the beautiful booty. It’s a compliment.” Dr. Miami continues his twitter thread stating “And your [Nicki Minaj] butt is the most requested ‘model butt’ in Miami” (Abravenel). These tweets initially came from a small spat between the doctor and Minaj, but again illustrates how much Minaj’s enhanced bottom was and continues to be a mirror of what many women are seeking, no matter the cost or consequences. Whether it

was through surgery or genetics, her body was the new goal for Black women and the new expectation set forth by mainstream media.

When Minaj started showing up everywhere, I, in a way, became surer of my body, granted my body was nowhere near the proportion of Minaj. However, her frame was similar to mine, and I no longer felt as ashamed for having larger hips and a butt than my peers. Instead, Minaj was showing it was okay to embrace my shape. It was not until a few years later that I became aware that Minaj's bottom half was augmented. It quickly became the topic of discussion, though she never outwardly admitted it. However, it is evident from an older picture of her that she was not shaped to have a behind as large as it was now. Through her denial and avoidance of the question, it did not stop Minaj from showing off her behind proudly.

There are vast differences between Minaj and Baartmans experiences. On one hand you have Baartman who had no choice but to be used as both entertainment and science. She was taken from her home during the rise of the slave trade, and she no longer had autonomy of her own body. Then we have Minaj, who prior to her fame had a much smaller frame; Minaj from Queens, New York had dreams since the age of fifteen to become a rapper. It was her goal to travel the world and share her talents. Minaj unlike Baartman also made the decision to get her behind enhanced, whether this was to gain more notoriety in the rap game, as being not only this talented rapper but a sex symbol too. In any case, this was a choice, one that definitely helped skyrocket Minaj's career at a quicker speed than any other female rapper during her time.

Although Black Women's body parts may not be displayed in a museum anymore; instead, the museum aspect has shifted to the powerful platform of social media. It has taken the marginalized Black bodies and put them at the center of consumption. We no longer have one Nicki Minaj prototype body; literally, thousands of Black women are beginning to emulate her extremely curvaceous body. It is because of social media that I learned about the many possible ways that Black women were seeking methods to alter their lower half. From silicone injections, fat transfer, also known as the Brazilian Butt Lift, to actual implants, it was a phenomenon that was taken over and quickly. For example, Dr. Miami has sky-rocketed in the social media world, making millions of dollars and maintaining a loyal large following, by broadcasting breast augmentations, tummy tucks and his most popular procedures the Brazilian Butt Lift accessible for the world to see. He along with his younger social media assistant Brittany Benson not only normalized plastic surgery but made it fun, so fun that the television network WETV upgraded his social media clips to an actual television show. Though his show only lasted one season, it shows how plastic surgery continues to go from a private sphere to one that could be categorized as entertainment. Dr. Miami's clients can assume that nearly 100,000 people will be tuning in to see their transformation live. While some women decide to have their identity hidden, by blurring out tattoos or noticeable birthmarks, other opt to have their boyfriends or husbands names written on their bodies as if to say they are doing this for them or in some cases it is their male partners who are paying for the BBL (Schaefer). Though these women are obviously consenting to these procedures and it being video taped for the world to see, it sends a message to the public

that can be internalized as something one needs to do in order to fit in. These women were from various ethnic groups not just Black, White and Latino women can be seen on the Snapchat stories as well. Dr. Miami is not the only doctor who displays his clients for the world to see, but he is the most popular. There is something truly disturbing when scrolling through Instagram to see one unconscious woman after another, being completely exposed to show that they now have a more pronounced buttocks.

“Dr. Miami is the first surgeon to broadcast on the social media. He said he recently hit a high of 1 million views and about 100,00 people tune in every hour, while 180,00 watch from “snap” to “snap” (Schaefer). With Dr. Miami’s increased popularity continues to aid in the normalizing of plastic surgery amongst women, specifically Black women doing whatever necessary to enlarge their behind, the most effective way being the Brazilian butt lift. It would be also important to note that Dr. Miami often plays rap music in the background of his procedures, stating “I like trap music. I’ve developed quite a taste for it. We always had something playing in the O.R. before the snap, but now I monopolize the music. I’m always asking, ‘Is this new?’ Or, ‘Are the kids asking for it?’ (Schaefer).”

There is a lot to take away from Dr. Salzhauer statement, first his fondness of trap music, which for those who may not be aware is a popular genre of rap music that originated in the Southern United States. The term trap is Atlanta slang which refers to a place where drugs are sold illegally. A place I can most certainly tell you Dr. Miami has never been, as he grew up in a fairly privileged background in New York, attending medical college and then began training as a Plastic Surgeon at Mount Sinai Medical

Center and The University of Miami. Yet he has “developed quite a taste for it.” Another disturbing factor is his desire to monopolize off “what the kids are asking for,” which makes it very clear who his target audience is, individuals with impressionable minds, who can be swayed by a White man who likes the same rap music as them. The demographic that Dr. Miami targeted could be described as a diverse group, but being that the majority of the time he is playing rap music and that his social media assistant Brittany Benson is a Black woman, it could be argued that he has focused in on the Black culture. But for the women who cannot afford Dr. Miami and his antics other options such as black market silicone injections or butt lifts done by plastic surgeons who has not been certified nor cleared to do the Brazilian butt lift, both these options being much cheaper than procedures one could get at Dr. Miami’s surgical center. This becomes a problem for many reasons, first when you have a professional such as Dr. Miami who is purposely targeting a group of individuals like Black women, it could possibly put them in a binding position of feeling obligated. But when they are unable to afford his prices, and still want to enhance their behinds, they can make risky or illegal decisions that could leave them permanently psychologically or physically damaged. It would seem that the moment a Black woman find a place where their beauty is no longer compared to the beauty standards of a White woman, that White women and White society find a way to come in and remarket it to exclude Black women. “It is important to note that the contemporary obsession with bigger derrières is located within mainstream (middle and upper class) White culture” (Gentles-Peart 165). White women and mass media have found a way to appropriate the very one thing they have always labeled the Black

women's larger and thicker body as a site of disgust and made it popular, but with a few modifications that still fit within the Eurocentric beauty standards.

This then in turn affects how Black women over time will come to view their bodies and beauty when it is in comparison with White women who already fit into what society deems as attractive. Again, this leaves the Black woman in a marginalized position of having to take extreme and dangerous methods like the Brazilian Butt Lift or alternative Black market procedures. It is a vicious cycle of Black women's features being used for profit and the actual Black woman's body is sidelined, (Kim Kardashian or her younger sister Kylie Jenner, have individually created a multi-million and multi-billion dollar empires centered around their enhanced buttocks, hips and even lips). While the Black women whom Kardashian and Jenner gained their inspiration from are left behind, the world of media and beauty are still very White focused and therefore if they can give their money and attention to a White woman over a Black woman, they will do just that. This does not stop Black women from attempting to reach the level of fame and fortune that these sisters have gained, which is evident with the amount of Black women traveling and spending their money to achieve this look. In their minds it is worth any sacrifice they may have to make in order to feel more confident in themselves while also increasing their following on social media, with more followers' usual peaks the interest of companies, who are always looking for a new fresh face to advertise their products.

I decided to focus my research on the impacts of the histories and sociopolitics that have shaped and disavowed the Black woman's body. Black women's bodies have and continue to be a spectacle, with more and more Black women turning towards plastic

surgery because of this need to fit into an imaginative mold. I believe that there is a meeting point between the history of what has always been assumed of the Black woman's body and the power of social media, which has lead many Black women to not only seek out the Brazilian butt lift but other plastic surgeries, to fit into a mold. Objectification theory asserts that self-objectification, which manifests as self-surveillance, leads to increased body shame, overtime women who encounter recurrent sexual objectification come to view themselves as objects rather than subjects, prioritizing their external appearance over their internal experience, a perspective known as self-objectification (Lauren M. Schaefer). For example, experience of sexual objectification among Black women may be shaped in part by particular racist ideologies and stereotypes that lead them to participate in self-surveillance, which we see in the comments on social media. On certain Instagram pages like The Shade Room that post Black women often, the comment sections are overflowing with negative statements or constantly unsolicited opinions about what the woman is wearing, her hair or makeup and more often than not how her body looks. Black women are so used to being viewed as nothing more than sexual objects, and therefore find themselves in a cycle of shame and low-self esteem, this may lead to some modifying their bodies or taking on the identity of nothing more than a sexual object.

This trend to alter ones' body with the most dangerous plastic surgery procedures kills 1 in 3,000 women who get a Brazilian Butt lift, not including the hundreds of women who seek out cheaper alternatives. Through my research, I hope to gain a better understanding, because no Black woman is being forced to get the Brazilian Butt Lift

done. Because of the long racist history attached to the medical field and the mistreatment of Black bodies it is no secret that Black people as a whole mistrust doctors and this is usually due to them feeling unseen, unheard, misunderstood, sometimes misdiagnosed and their pain and concerns are often brushed aside. In Rasul A. Mowatt journal article *Black/Female/Body Hypervisibility and Invisibility: A Black Feminist Augmentation of Feminist Leisure Research* piece they explore how systemic oppression shows up for Black women in multiple ways. Mowatt states that “social inequities translate to health consequences, over half of Black women 20 years and older are consider obese, and 44% of Black women 20 years and older have hypertension. Black women are twice as likely as White women to be diagnosed with diabetes and 2.5 times as likely to die from diabetes (U.S. Department of Health and Human services, 2010) he continues “Black women show greater mortality rates of breast cancer than their White counterparts (American Association for Cancer Research, 2013). Several contextual factors relate to these health disparities within African American communities including chronic and race related stress, socioeconomic conditions, cultural mistrust of the medial system and more (Mowatt). Black women unlike any other women who seeks medical services are treated as is they can deal with more pain and are therefore denied pain meds, this is not due to some magical feature that Black females possess that others do not (Mowatt). Instead, this is just one way that color-based biases are ingrained in the American healthcare system, so again I wonder why are Black women purposely putting themselves in the position to be in unimaginable pain, such as the BBL, with the possibility of it not being taken seriously. I want to know what is driving the rise of Black

women seeking methods to enhance their buttocks. Is it due to the need to fit into a mold or is it simply a risk these women are willing to take because it is their body and they only want to enjoy being their most attractive self? Or is it due to the predatory industry of plastic surgery and the beauty industry that purposely seeks out women, who they know are desperately trying to find a way to fit into mainstream media beauty standards.

Also with my work being grounded in the Black woman's body, I am interested to know how other Black feminists would classify this modification or whether it connects with Black feminist questions of how Black women perceive their bodies and the methods they use to resist societal expectations. Would this be viewed as a means of freedom and one having the agency to do with their bodies what they want? Since, the Black woman's body has been rendered invisible in a White dominated society, the only time it does become visible is when it is viewed through a sexual lens. With Black women augmenting their bodies to appear more feminine and sexy, they are simultaneously becoming more visible, and through social media are on full display for the world to see. This will connect with the Black feminist theorist that I will work with such as Patricia Hill Collins, to understand the tropes that encompass Black women's bodies, and how new tropes like the 'thick Black women' are equally as damaging.

Since this topic is fairly new to the academia world of research, I will be looking at various sources, theorists, opinion pieces and individual stories to make connection of how we as a society got here, and why Black women especially feel this need to enhance their buttocks. I have found research articles that correlate Black women and young girls dealing with self-esteem issues and having bodily dissatisfaction, while other pieces I

have found are opinion and articles written more recently about why the BBL has become such a trend. To make my argument even more concrete, I have gathered data from various Instagram and YouTube page of women sharing their stories of what they experienced and learned. These include those reality stars such as DreamDoll and Winter Blanco, to the ordinary woman like Amina and Allyiah who have all augmented their behinds, and what they regret and love about their BBL. What has come to be my saving grace throughout my research is the creation and access to documentaries such as Shami's *My BBL Journey: Black Beauty & Brazilian Butt Lift (2019)* and *Killer Curves: Bodies to Die for (2019)*. In these documentaries I am able to get the first hand experience of women who have taken measures to enhance their buttocks in an illegal manner such as a silicone butt shot, and how they had to cope with that decision they made years later.

The various Black women who shared their BBL journey through their YouTube channel, often began their videos with answering questions that their followers had posed. The most popular question these women would answer was “why they chose to get a BBL?” which they would often respond that they simply did not like their body and wanted to do something about it. For many of them they wanted to feel more confident about themselves. others made comments that it was a way to increase their following and therefore increase their income, while a few did it to gain more attention from the men in their lives (Allyiah). We can see all these reasons being performed and shown through social media, specifically on Instagram and YouTube. YouTube has hundreds of subscribers who have pages dedicated to Black women from all over the world going

through the BBL, documenting their entire journey, such as AllyiahsFace, Winter Blanco, Life of Tyjha and countless more.

A Review of Literature

For a historical backdrop, Sabrina Strings assembles an archival narrative in her book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019). In Strings' research, she takes us on a journey of how and when fatness and different body types outside of the European norm became less desirable, repulsive, and feared. At one point in history to be a bigger person meant one was well off financially and was the goal for many individuals who saw fatness as richness. However, this only applied to certain people of society, specifically White men. Conversely, with the increase of the slave trade brought lower prices on sugar, allowing people from all socioeconomics and women to also easily gain access to sugar. Weight gain was no longer exclusive to rich White people.

Strings goes into detail how scientists worked together to prove that being big or gluttonous was entirely for "lazy" Africans. Black women's bodies, in particular, were "becoming legible, a form of "text" from which racial superiority and inferiority were read" (Strings 67). Prior to the slave trade, Black women were viewed as well proportioned, plump, and considered physically appealing. This is shown in the paintings that were done in the mid-1500s. One, in particular, painted by the artist Titan in his painting *Laura Dianti and Her Page*, is a painting of White women and a Black servant. "Yet, along with his depiction of the servant's social status as inferior, Titan depicted her physique as no less alluring than that of the goddess" (Strings 35). This idea of inferiority

and superiority was evident in a class standard as to who was to serve whom. However, the concept of beauty was uniformly given to both Black and White women, regardless of status or race. Be that as it may, Black women were still not considered as facially beautiful because of their supposed prominent features, of having full lips and wider nostrils and their chattel status also made them less alluring to the White public (Strings 17). It is through authors like C. Riley Snorton and Sabrina Strings detail of a historical background the many ways Black women's bodies were dissected and used for medical purposes to help better science.

This long history, steeped in the fascination and repulsion of the Black woman's body is grounded in scientific racism. The slave trade also came with the increasing interest in racialized science. In his book *Black on Both Sides: A racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton details how enslaved Black women were subjected to painful, unimaginable procedures by their White slave masters and the 'respectable' doctor J. Marion Sims. Sims set out on a "three-year experiment on named and unnamed chattel persons who suffered from Vesicovaginal fistulas (VVF)" (Snorton 20). These Black women who suffered from VVF were used by Sims to "prove" their inferiority, though it was proven that these chattel women suffered more from VVF than White women due to their poor nutrition, lack of prenatal care and births at an early age than it was because of simply being Black (Snorton 19). Scientists used racist beliefs to justify the violation of Black women's bodies and to argue that Black bodies were undoubtedly inferior. "The Pelvis was also a critical site for producing racial hierarchies...Black women's buttocks (seen as larger than white women's) served a compensatory function for their smaller

(read: inferior) average pelvic size” (Snorton, 19). The women that Sims operated on did not have anesthesia, were forcibly held down, and could not consent to these procedures; they were merely living cadavers who were used to better the medical field for White people. Snorton’s focus on Sims medical plantation establishes the dehumanizing of Black women, and the centuries of violence, pain and vulnerability that is attached to the Black woman body. Moreover, the spectacularization of the Black woman’s body may have left the confines of enslavement but it is now reappearing in the Snapchat videos and before and after pictures that are being shared on Instagram. Though these women who are volunteering to be used as an example and allowing their surgery to be viewed for the world to see, does not erase the continued history that willingly uses the Black women’s body as an object.

In addition to historical information the various articles that will be included in my research help situate how social media outlets along with expected beauty standards continue to play a part in Black women self-image and self-esteem. In a journal article written by Erica B Edwards and Jennifer Esposito titled *Reading the Black Woman’s Body via Instagram Fame*, the authors discuss how “Black women’s bodies are articulated and rearticulated, despite post-feminist assertions of women’s liberation” (Erica B. Edwards 342). Edwards and Esposito look at the traditional ways in which Black women’s bodies have been situated in society: “their bodies were ideologically marked during slavery as invisible, disposable and valuable solely in terms of their physical, reproductive or sexual labor” (344). Social media is, as I have stated before, a place that some women can feel unrestricted to acknowledge their unique beauty and

connect with other women with similar features. However, on the flip side, the moment Black women do express their liberation and embrace their bodies, they are still scrutinized and judged. Edwards and Esposito use the example of the Fourth grade teacher Patricia Brown whose picture went viral after posing in her classroom wearing a fitted dress. On the one hand, people were saying her outfit was inappropriate because of her curvaceous body, and on the other hand, people were defending her. The whole discussion boiled down to how Black women are quickly body shamed in comparison to their White women colleagues who can wear the exact same clothing but do not have to defend themselves in the process. The hyper-sexualization of the Black woman's body is so intense it discredits any of the other attributes that she may possess and is assumed to be nothing more than a sexual object — leaving the Black woman in a place that she cannot love her body without being labeled a jezebel. This is a doubled edged pressure for Black women to be in control of their bodies and sexuality, because it will always be policed or deemed too hyper sexualized.

However, now Black women now have the space to embrace their bodies and this can be seen on social media. There are pictures after pictures of Black women posing in a manner that highlights their body and especially their buttocks. This hyper sexualizing simply increases and continues the narrative that Black women's value and beauty lie only in her “outrageous” curves (Butler). Demetria Lucas D'Oyley, a writer for The ROOT, begins this discussion on how Black women have created their ideals of beauty, in her article *Black Beauty Standards* can be just as unhealthy as white ones. D'Oyley states, “Black beauty standards are ones that emphasize curves in all the ‘right’ places and a

little more ‘meat on the bones.’ She goes further to say, how these Black women beauty standards, though they are unique compared to what mainstream has considered ideal, are just as equally problematic as absolute thinness.” Black women are told from a very young age that they are not built like White women, meaning their bodies are “naturally” going to be fuller (D'Oyley). As familiar and realistic this statement is, it can always give a false impression and expectations because just as many thicker Black women there are, there is just as equal if not more amount of Skinny Black women. In my opinion, the idea that Black women have more prominent hips, butts, and thighs have been conflated as automatically “fat,” when, in reality, it is merely the shape of that particular woman.

This leads to Lucas D'Oyley's next point. Throughout Instagram, we are bombarded with hashtags that say “body goals,” and these body goals are customarily attached to a cis woman whether she's Black or White. D'Oyley uses the example of a “Video-model-turned-fitness advocate Tiara Harris” Tiara has what many would label the ideal Black woman's body, slim waist, large chest, full thighs and behind. Comparable to Tiara, though her body looks relatively “natural”, meaning she did not get an enhancement to her butt or insert artificial implants in her chest, her body type is not typical. It is an exaggerated version of what we as a society have come to accept as “normal” Though the curvaceous body type is often more desirable and admired, D'Oyley writes “is it [thickness] more realistic for most Black women than say, a White woman attempting to look like a Victoria secret model” In hindsight now, it would be similar to all women trying to look like the images one would find in anime films or video games,

where depictions of women include having a bigger than life bosom, a waist that is barely there, and a lower half that matches perfectly with her chest in width and girth.

However, this does not stop Black women from attempting to get this potentially unhealthy unrealistic body. It is because of social media and social influencers who will tell women, “if you just diet and exercise, you too will get curves in the right place and still be healthy or skinny” (Prichard). They know this is not realistic, but women still go on doing whatever they can to get this body type, even if that means participating in criminal procedures. On this topic, D’Oley provides us the story of Natasha Stewart, who was convicted of “culpable negligence manslaughter” after helping women get silicone butt injects that resulted in her death. Though death is the unfortunate consequence of these procedures, many women do not die and are left with behinds that, over time, begin to sag because their body frames cannot maintain the weight of their enhanced bottom. They can also suffer from disastrous results such as their bottoms turning purple, excessive peeling of their skin, or, more commonly, leaking from the injection site as heard from the reports of singer K. Michelle. K. Michelle, who admittedly got her behind done to obtain this “ideal body” left her in insurmountable pain that she had to seek professional help to remove as much of the injection from her body. Even with the removal of the injections and the now smaller bottom, it is no secret that she still made sure that her shape was as curvy as it could be under her circumstances.

Another article I found vital to include in my research is *Black Women’s body image: An Analysis of Culture-Specific Influences* written by Kari Kelch-Oliver and Ancis. Here Oliver and Ancis expounds on my focus of Black womens relationship with

their bodies and how they understand their health through societal structures. Oliver and Ancis introduces this topic by comparing how White women and girls and Black women and girls view weight. “On average Black women weigh more than the White women; however, it is White women who are more concerned about their size, than that of Black women.” As I referenced earlier and throughout Oliver’s and Ancis’ article, she points to the cultural differences that shape an individual’s perspective and experience when it comes to viewing body image. Oliver and Ancis also goes on an exploration of the ideas Black girls and women have about their beauty by the influences of “external factors such as men, family, peers, and media on Black women’s self-evaluation” (Ancis 346).

Oliver and Ancis goes on to say that “several possible cultural factors provide a safeguard to Black women’s body image when compared with that of White women, for instance, weight gain and obesity, Black women report greater comfort with and even idealization of fuller figures (346).” “Black beauty ideals accepts a broader range of body weights and types as attractive compared with the White ideal body shape” (347). Oliver and Ancis provides much information about how Black women think about their bodies and how these perceptions do not impede with the assumption that there is only one way of observing Black women bodies. Black women like all women have an ideal image of what they want to look like, this often depends on their upbringing and other factors, for example some Black women and girls, like myself may want to be smaller.

As I mentioned earlier the Brazilian Butt Lift is the most dangerous plastic surgery procedure one out of three thousand women who get the BBL die. Those numbers do not include the thousands of Black women who want the “look” but can not

afford it so turn to alternative procedures riskier than the BBL. Rokeshia Ashley and Jaehee Jung break down the statistics of Black women's increased interest in altering their bodies in their journal article *#BlackBodiesMatter: Cross-Cultural Examination of Black Women's Motivation to Engage in Body Modification*. "According to the American Society of Plastic surgeons (2015), buttock implants have increased by 98%, and buttocks lifts by 44% from 2013 to 2014. Some women who desire to increase the size of their butts turn to the black market (Jaehee 236).

It was because of Instagram that I became engrossed with this new trend of Black women traveling to different countries and states to go get the Brazilian Butt lift. Before Instagram, the only other time I had ever heard of this procedure was due to a college friend suggesting I get one after I had lost a significant amount of weight. I did not think much of it until Instagram became a staple part of my everyday consumption of beauty standards and desires; the emphasis on butts and body shapes, lead me to decided I wanted to understand why so many Black women were longing to achieve this very exaggerated buttock and hips appearance, through the Brazilian Butt lift (BBL). The rise of plastic surgery came along with the mass production of reality Television shows and the accessibility of Instagram, where the ability to compare oneself took on a whole new and deeper meaning. Ashley and Jaehee investigate the difference of how White cis female bodies are the primary focus when it comes to the health and safety regulations in the plastic surgery spectrum. Often Black women are left uneducated and unaware of the actual risks that could take place if they get a BBL, especially if they choose an alternative route like the black market. For example, "a 34-year-old Black nursing home

staffer died after receiving butt injections from someone other than a certified plastic surgeon” (236). As more and more women are coming out to tell their stories, many of them either know someone who has died due to trusting someone to inject unknown substances in hopes of getting a more significant behind (Jaehee 237). Or they have almost had a near-death experience by way of illegal butt shots and are lucky enough to warn other girls not to go that route.

But that has not stopped women from seeking out this cheaper and quicker method. Those who can afford surgery may not always be getting the best surgeons. Many surgeons and doctors will claim to be experts in BBL’s but are not legally certified or well experience in the BBL practice, which has and continues to put women at the same risk as women who chose butt shots. With all of these factors and risk not halting the surge of the BBL proves that the fascination of having the ‘perfect’ butt supersedes ones’ health. We have become a society so steeped in superficiality that we are willing to take a harmful and even deadly chances to fit into a mold that we believe will bring us a sense of happiness or wholeness.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One will center around how Black women’s bodies have been violently used, exploited, and manipulated for the benefit of Western science, and the need to regulate Black bodies. Between Sara Baartman and the hundreds of other unnamed enslaved women, the erasure and fungibility that is imposed on the Black woman’s body did not end in the nineteenth century. It has continued to the present day and has been modernized by social media and the Brazilian butt lift. To understand the struggles of Body image and beauty among African American women we would have to look within

the intersecting systems that shape each of their individual experiences such as (racism, sexism, classism, and sexuality) — beginning with the era of slavery, where the devaluation and fungibility of Black women's bodies under constant violence and racism.

The historical background is essential to grasp how and why Black women became associated with “controlling images” created by White racist ideologies during slavery that labeled Black women to be hypersexual Jezebels (or sapphires). Also how this image has followed Black women throughout American history. In the past and still, to this day, Black women's bodies and beauty have mainly been devalued and rejected by mainstream media and culture, from their features to their complexion, which were all deemed ugly and less feminine. This concept that Black women are just sexual objects but still considered unattractive is a message that is transmitted daily, especially with the increasing interest of social media. Social media platforms like Instagram paint another depiction where Black women are only valued when they look certain way such as light skin, lose curly hair, or they have enhanced attributes like a large chest or an incredibly round, protruding behind. Outside of those two categories, we only see other women, specifically White women, still gaining all the praise for the beauty and looks.

Due to the focus of most body image studies historically focusing White women's beauty, my research will bring to the forefront how Black women and girls have also suffered from lower levels of body image dissatisfaction. Even though Black women and girls have accepted that their bodies may appear fuller in certain areas, such as their butts, thigh and hips, they still, however, suffer from self-image issues and low self-esteem. Specifically, when their bodies do not fit the mold of what mainstream media believes all

Black women should look like. Instagram plays a significant role in how Black women and girls view all that is wrong and right with their bodies and how they are using social media to take extreme deadly and painful measures to feel better about themselves.

Chapter Two will focus on the rise of Black women's body modification, with attention to the new BBL trend. I will also break down and explore all of the risks, materials, results, and testimonies of the selected women I focus on who have gone through with the BBL. I will provide insight into the procedure of the Brazilian Butt lift, silicone injections, and implants while unmasking the insecurities and drastic decisions Black women go through to feel better about themselves. I will also provide a historical background of Doctor Ivo Pitanguy, who pioneered the BBL, and the overall evolution of the BBL.

Relatedly, I first came across a short documentary on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) titled *My BBL Journey* (Shami). This documentary follows Shami, a 23-year-old Black woman who admits she feels the pressure to have the ideal curvy Black woman's body so much so that she is willing to get the Brazilian Butt lift herself, to feel better and more confident. Shami goes on a journey to get advice, insight, and the stories of other Black women who have gone through with the procedure. Shami even speaks to doctors who have done the procedure to gather their personal experience and opinions on whether or not it is worth the risk. The majority of the doctors that Shami visits discourage any woman from getting the Brazilian Butt Lift. Shami, like many women in a world full of expectations, speaks on how discouraged she has felt her whole

life, with the constant struggle of maintaining her weight and the belief she does not fit into the quintessential Black women's frame.

Shami states that "it is because of social media that the pressure to fit in as a black influencer on social media, you have to have a particular look." This look consists of a decently sized chest, but most specifically a waist that is "snatched" or in other words, tiny and hips and buttocks that are noticeably pronounced. In Shami's interviews with other Black women influencers on social media, she meets with her close friend Livs. Shami starts by telling Livs that she has been considering the BBL, and the first thing Livs ask Shami is, "why, why girl why?", Shami responds by stating, "down to what I do in my day-to-day life, social media, my job, and what I see." Livs then ask her, "if you did not follow anyone on Instagram or any social media, do you think you would still want to even think about getting a BBL done?" Shami looking surprised says, "wow, no one has ever asked that question. I would probably say no" (Shami). It is in Shami's one on one interviews where it becomes evident that the driving force to enhance their bodies due to the overpowering influence of social media.

Shami admits that being bombarded by the images of other social media influencers who have gone through with the BBL procedure and the amount of "fame" they gain because of it, leads her to take the risk herself. At the end of Shami's research, meeting with other women who have gotten the BBL and the doctors who have and have not practiced this procedure, Shami decides not to go through with it. She concludes this after meeting with Dr. Kremer, who had been doing the BBL procedure throughout the United Kingdom but had recently stopped because of the high risk of death. His

explanation to Shami shifted her perspective and caused her to opt-out of getting it done. It was no longer appealing to her desires to fit into social media beliefs of what a Black woman should look like (Shami).

After completing her research, the documentary jumps to four months later, and we see a very enthusiastic Shami. Shami claims that because she has become more active, going to the gym, and eating healthy, her confidence has come back and declared there was no longer a need to get a BBL. Though I am very happy for her, I do believe it is a bit quick to assume that all one needs are a little confidence, a gym membership, a better diet, and their desire to alter their bodies will go away. Many of the women who seek out the BBL claim to have high self-esteem and confidence, fit bodies, and a diet that suits them, yet they still want to get a more significant behind. This idea that Black women only lack confidence, and it is the leading reason they are risking their lives to gain more followers and notoriety, is challenging for me to accept. There has to be more to it. I will delve more into this notion of confidence throughout this chapter by looking at various other women who have decided to go through with the BBL and what they feel they have gained from it.

In my concluding chapter I will be discussing the many ways social media sites are used as a medium for Black women. In the beginning social media, notably on Instagram, was an outlet to give a voice to all the various beauty throughout the world. Black women, in particular, created hashtags like #Blackgirlmagic #Blackbeauty and #naturalhair, all of which highlighted the unique features and various skin tones and hair texture of Black women while also acknowledging that their Blackness and features are

beautiful. However, social media is still a very toxic place. Unless Instagram pages are private, it makes it extremely easy for anyone to gain access to unattainable beauty standards.

The conclusion will also acknowledge how Black women have come to use social media and the power that one possesses when they achieve a sense of fame or influence. I will be looking at the pressures that arise for Black women when they decide to either morph into this ideal body image and what occurs when she does not. Though thousands of women are saving up money to get these procedures done to their bodies, there are equally as many who refuse or do not see the purpose. This is a dichotomy that needs to be broken down and further probe to understand better where these insecurities or confidence stems from and why these feelings are not mutual for all Black women. Black women also use social media to seek out doctors who perform surgeries, create surgery pages, and seek out other women who have gone through with the procedure. I will also speak on the impact of body-shaming on social media, specifically at Black women and girls, who have and have not chosen to get surgery and how they may be internalizing both the good and bad comments about their bodies and looks. This chapter will also cover the idea that self-love, and confidence are not the only things missing for these Black women. I will be exploring the structures that have been set up by mainstream media, society, and social media that are creating new standards for Black women's bodies and what it looks like when we give space to all the various shapes, sizes, and skin tones of Black women, reminding them that their bodies whatever it looks like, is equally beautiful.

CHAPTER II

TAKING BACK THE BLACK WOMAN'S BODY: A HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

Black women's bodies have been examined, propped, dissected, paraded, condemned, abused, and now emulated. Prior to the surge of slave imports, the rare sightings of Black women were a novelty. They were viewed as unique bodies that were different but still beautiful in their own way. In Sabrina Strings *Fearing the Black Body: the racial origins of Fat Phobia* (2019), Black women were often taken from their homeland to become servants for European families. Prior to the increasing influx that would soon come in the late 16th and 17th century to Europe and America, the Dutch had begun illegally bringing in Black individuals under the guise of being servants, because during this time slavery was illegal. These women were labeled as servants but they were in fact slaves. Nevertheless, though deemed inferior in many ways to White women, Black women were still painted in pictures that portrayed them as equally beautiful. This did not impede or change the minds of certain scientists such as Comte de Buffon, who was one of the many scientists of the 16th century who focused much of his work on distinguishing between humans based on their race. In his book *Natural History: General and Particular*, in his chapter "Of the Varieties in the Human Species," Buffon stated that the first and most remarkable [difference] is the color. After skin, according to Buffon, the size and shape of the body were the next vital markers of physical distinction between the races" (Buffon quoted in Strings 76). Buffon used his scientific findings to justify the

“inferiority” of Africans. He settled much of the blame on their skin color and the plumpness of their bodies, which equated to them being not only “lazy” but “stupid” as well.

Even though Buffon had marked the Black woman’s body as a sight of idleness and slow-wittedness, he was also the first scientist whose racist idea of Black Africans as plump, idle, and insipid were celebrated. That said, he did not find their figures unattractive. On the contrary, Buffon enthused the “tall, plump” physique of le nègre, describing it as “well-made” (Strings 78). In his “several page dissertation on the beauty of shapely Black women of select nations, such as Senegal whom he believed to be the most attractive of all Black women, Buffon stated [The Senegalese] have the same ideas of beauty as the Europeans, considering fine eyes, a well-formed nose, smallmouth and thin lips” (Strings 79). Still, in Buffon’s descriptions of the Senegalese women, he only appreciated their beauty in the likeness of European women, which continues to be the narrative for Black women to this day.

Black women are only valued or deemed beautiful when they appear “less Black” in their facial features, skin tones, and even hair texture. I will elaborate further on how Black women would later embrace their beauty during the Black is beautiful era in the late 1960s. But for now, we will continue to look at the method in which Strings follows how scientists used certain methods, such as deviating their racist science from the skin to the body itself. “The body becomes legible through racial discourse as body size was increasingly linked to a racial category, the building of the work of Buffon” (81). Black women’s bodies though now viewed as more attractive due to Buffon’s assessment were

still classified as “gluttonous and lazy” and, therefore, still inferior and susceptible to enslavement.

Following in Buffon’s footsteps, Julien-Joseph Virey, an anthropologist and naturalist, described Black people from Senegal to Northern Cameroon as “very handsome” people (Strings 85). This, however, did not stop Virey from categorizing and making his assertions of the supposed inferiority of Black bodies. Blaming the overflow of black bile as the reason for Black skin and weight gain in Black people (Strings 85), Virey expounded his findings on bile as the reasons Black people are, in his words, “incapable of thinking” (85). Virey used the Hottentot as the prime example of how and why Black women’s bodies are so large, specifically in the lower regions. Like most things, these studies and findings were passed down from one scientist to the next; many scientists picked up where others left off, and were often students of the scientist they emulated within their own work. Dr. Anders Sparrman, a Swedish physician and naturalist and a student of Buffon, traveled to Africa to explore the various Hottentot people; Hottentot is a Khoikhoi person from Southern Africa and was given the name Hottentot by Dutch Colonists based on the specific physiology of their women.

As a result, the term Hottentot began to be conflated with the description of all women of African descent. It was believed that all Black women would have the same shape as Saartjie “Sara” Baartman, who had been dubbed “The Hottentot Venus” and became a thriving site of attraction due to the “abnormal” protuberance of her buttocks (Young 70). Her single Black body was not only “Other” but used as a measure against what was deemed normal in European society. Her allegedly distinctive body also laid

the foundation of ideas that began to formulate around all women of African descent. The display of Baartman abetted in making fatness an intrinsically Black, and implicitly off-putting, form of feminine embodiment in the European scientific and popular imagination (Strings 89). This distinction was important for White culture because just like labeling Black bodies as savages, it also aided in determining the amount of femininity and protection that would be allotted to Black women. If Black women were viewed as grotesque, unattractive and non-feminine they would be just as valuable as their male counterparts and be used for laborious work in Western societies.

Once more, this one-woman became the icon for all Black women. White people and scientists began to generalize all Black women to have a similar structure. Baartman was taken from her farm in Cape Town, South Africa, after being sold to a man named Cornelius Muller. She was then sold again to a man named Hendrik, a so-named Free Black man, who purchased her after the death of her parents. Nevertheless, to pay off his debt, Baartman was then used as a display for British Soldiers (Strings 90). Baartman was forced to reveal her naked body to the soldiers and allow them to touch her as they desired. It was not until Alexander Dunlop tricked Hendrik in giving him Baartman that, Dunlop knew that having Baartman in England would exceed any income Hendrik was making in Cape Town.

Dunlop promoted Baartman as an erotic and scientific curiosity, a veritable “ethnographic freak show. The show bill continued to explain that the shape of her body that is most admired among her countrymen” (Strings 91). She was the “perfect specimen” of Hottentot women in the eighteenth century. However, this so-called “ideal

specimen” is still attached to the bodies of Black women today. Though Baartman’s body was on display centuries ago, Black women are often suspected of having certain features, such as a large bottom. “But the fascination with Sara’s size was different. She was simultaneously grotesque and exotic: a sexual specimen with a particular racial identity. For these reasons, exhibit goers came both to gawk at her proportions, especially her posterior” (Strings 93).

The focus on the Black women’s body, specifically their buttocks, began with Sara Baartman in the 1770s and ironically continues to be a principal focus of Black women in 2020. The rise of Brazilian Butt Lifts is an indicator of this; thousands and thousands of Black women are taking a very deadly risk to get the idealized Black woman’s behind. Through a long and very ingrained history the Black woman’s body has been a sight of exploitation, that has been commodified and capitalized on throughout the years. Through Patricia Hill Collin’s theory of controlling images such as both the asexual mammies and the hypersexual jezebels serve a purpose, these images mask the truth about racial, sexual and economic exploitation of Black women in American society. They display Black women as one or the other, there is no in between when it comes to how they are represented in the media and even their personal lives. The thousands of Black women who are getting the Brazilian Butt Lift and then flaunt it on social media quickly get labeled and pigeon holed an ‘Instagram model’. An Instagram model is a derisive way of referring to the many young women who have built, or are hoping to build, careers using the social platform (Wright-Jackson). Being labeled an Instagram model for certain White women can be positive term and even a starting point

for their modeling career, opening many other doors for them throughout Hollywood. However, for Black women, as Killian Wright-Jackson wrote in her culture piece for Fader titled *The Black Barbie's of Instagram*, do not get nearly the same positive feedback. No matter her educational background, goals or status, the moment one is labeled an Instagram model and are a women of color, they are thought to be less valuable and not real models. Jackson interviews a life long friend and classmate, Lira Galore who is now a very well known Black Instagram model, who is constantly having to prove herself, stating “Instagram is the avenue we have, other models use it to promote themselves and their brands – why can’t we?”. It’s not that they cannot, but there is a fine line when you are Black women, even on social media. Social media has regurgitated its own tropes about Instagram models to reinforce society’s supposed beauty standards (Wright-Jackson).

As Sabrina Strings writes Baartman’s life was short-lived, dying at the age of twenty-five, did not stop her body from being a spectacle. After her death her body was dissected and excavated by the head of the museum of Natural History Georges Cuvier. Cuvier had a passion for comparative anatomical studies, making Sarah his most enticing new project to work on, and unlike others who had handle her, Cuvier thought that Sarah was an abnormal specimen of “her race” (95). But this abnormality did not stop the overall fascination with her body, being that she was denied a burial, lead to her remains falling into the hands of various museums, one of these museums was Musee d’Homme in France. Where her brains, genitals and skeleton were preserved and on view for the public to see until 1971. Several connections between the long-standing history and

exploitation of Baartman's body continues to linger and play a vital part in how Black women value their body and identify their womanhood. Through racialized and gendered white Science labeled and place Baartmans body in a deviant sexuality and racial inferiority, simply because it was seen as different from White women. This also determines the ways in which Black female assigned bodies were visualized, stereotyped, specifically in popular culture. Black women are most often pictured with large naked breast and enhanced posteriors. David Pilgrim's article *Jezebel Stereotype* contains reproductions of various every day items such as ashtrays, nutcrackers, swizzle sticks, bottle openers, souvenirs that reproduce these racist and gendered representation of Black women as one-dimensional sexual beings (Pilgrim).

There is also a parallel where the Black women as a whole needed to be deemed the completely opposite of the White female, whether this was through bodily shape, the color of their skin, and cleanliness. Though Baartman was put on display without her consent, it would not be long before again before we saw the like of Black women on various forms of media that would be used to prove the inferiority of Black bodies. The method of commodification of the Black woman's body is illustrated in Anne McClintock *Imperial Leather: Race Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, which examines the creation of items like trading cards. McClintock also analyzes the usage of Black bodies and Black women throughout the initial and continual contact between Europeans and Africans by looking at colonial effects and the intersections of gender, class, and race. "By the turn of the century, soap ads vividly embodied the hope that the commodity alone, independent of its use-value, could convert other cultures to

‘civilization’” (McClintock 223). It was believed that Black bodies were marked with permanent filth, and the only method to properly clean them was through soap. This racist trope continues to be evident even centuries later, as was seen in 2017 Dove body soap advertisement of a Black woman in a Brown shirt who is believed to have used Dove soap and removes her brown shirt to reveal a white woman in a light shirt (Reuters). Though Dove released a statement a few days later stating that it had not intended the commercial to come off as racist as it did, but to appreciate the diversity of beauty, they failed at conveying this message. Instead and as McClintock delves further into in her evaluation of the commodification of Black bodies, uncover the destructive racist stereotypes in American history – that White skin is clean and Black skin is dirty. In the advertisements that emerged over time, patterns also came to be, the rhetoric and imagery of hygiene became conflated with racial order that made White people pure and Black people dirty.

This contrast of the Black female with the White female, adds to the belief that White women are indeed superior to Black women. In one advertisement which appeared in 1897 by the company N.K. Fairbanks for their Fairy soap, there are two young female children one Black and one White. The Black child has been stripped of any appealing qualities, she has extremely short hair, a dress that looks as though it has been passed down and re-patched multiple times, and barefoot. Where as the White child appears very feminine., in a nice dress and shoes to match at the bottom of the ad it states “why doesn’t your mamma wash you with fairy soap?”. This indicates that all the Black child needs is soap and she too will appear cleaner and feminine (McClintock 123). The ads

that were often distributed throughout the U.S. served two purposes when depicting a Black woman or child in the presence of White women and children, one usually being that of subtle racism and inferiority, while the other ads being much more blatant and overtly racist. In Marilyn Mehaffy's article *Advertising Race: The Feminine Consumer 1876-1900*, Mehaffy breaks down the differences of the various advertising to promote consumerism and the role of Black bodies, specifically Black women. In the realm of White society domesticity takes shape through a juxtaposition of the Black female figure, usually in contrast to a demure White woman who is the aim of the advertisement. In one of the many ads that Mehaffy examines she looks at a trading card for Clarks ONT thread that was produced and circulated in 1880, illustrating the new prim White woman consumer who is sitting in a chair, sewing by hand even as the mass-produced sewing machine at her side mutely testifies to her active participation in commodity culture. The accompanying Black female laborer, who is standing over the White woman with a very muscular hyper-embodiment, is producing the raw material cotton for the work of the bourgeois ideal (Mehaffy 134). This one ad sums up the race division of femininity and that of labor, reproducing the brute, masculine Black woman whose sole purpose is to work compared to that of the softer, more feminine White woman who is painted to appear beautiful and soft.

During antebellum slavery, there were many negative images of the Black woman in contrast to the more alluring White woman. In another trading card that Mehaffy looks at, 1876 a Black maid with facial features that mirror those of a monkey, visually establishes not only inherent racial difference between her and the consumer ideal of the

White woman but also a clear difference in species as well (Mehaffy 152). These reoccurring images that advertised soap and other cleaning products defined White Americans and African American female assigned bodies with equating civilization with cleanliness and cleanliness with Whiteness.

Black women became such a figure in the home that their very images were commodified and used to sell and promote more products than just soap and sewing machines. The Black woman's image went from trading cards to kitchenware, food products, souvenirs, postcards, and much more. The most prominent image of the Black woman was that of the so-called mammy, which we see the mammy being cast as the ideal Black woman and even the expectation of what Black women were to more than likely appear. From slavery through the Jim Crow era, the mammy served the political, social, and economic interests of mainstream White America (Pilgrim). The mammy was the leading confirmation that Black women were not only content but happy to be enslaved, which eventually led to her being so happy in this role that she continues to do so even after granted her freedom. What is even more concrete about the mammy was her appearance, which solidified her joy of being a domestic servant was the smile plastered on her face can be seen on any product manufactured to mirror her happiness. In films and media that was created, the mammies' smile was often accompanied by an enthusiastic laugh and an unmatched loyalty to her White employers or masters (Pilgrim). To match the wide grin on her face was also a woman who was depicted as being overweight, matronly, coarse figure who was completely desexualized, and had no other

purpose in life but to serve her White employers, even though she had a family of her own.

The image of the mammy was done so on purpose to diminish the reports of rape of the enslaved woman by their slave owners, particularly the light-skinned women who approximated the mainstream definition of female sexual attractiveness (Pilgrim), the mammy was created to be the complete opposite. She was dark-skinned, in a society that regarded Black skin as ugly, tainted, obese, and facial features that mainstream society would deem as unattractive, she was older or at least middle-aged. The goal was to desexualize the mammy, and in a way, all Black women, no sensible White man or any man for that matter was to find the mammy attractive; she was simply there for labor purposes, while the White woman was to be appreciated and admired by all men. One of the most notable mammy images can be seen in the iconic film *Gone with the Wind*, played by Hattie McDaniel, who became the first Black person to win an Academy Award for playing a very loyal and the quintessential mammy. McDaniel was so faithful that she was often willing to risk her life to defend her White family, she even fights Black soldiers whom she believes to be a threat to the White mistress of the house (Pilgrim).

The countless reproduction of the derogatory images of Black people but specifically women, in forms of cartoon drawings, figurines or burlesque portrayals by White actors in Blackface established and reinforced the widespread association of dark skin, kinky hair and African facial features with ugliness, comedy, sin or danger (Craig 25). This repetitiveness serves as a tangible force in how Black women were viewed and

represented within American society, which was ultimately a very damaging and violent one. It also made the Black woman a body that was not desirable for the masses, and this was due to the most shared image of the Black woman was the domestic servant, the “mammy” who is often portrayed as fat, dark-skinned wearing a head wrap. This “mammy” was typically set up in juxtaposition with a thin, fair skin, flowing hair White woman whom which she worked for, as we saw with Hattie McDaniel’s in rendition in *Gone with the Wind* or the very first example of a mammy that was displayed in D.W. Griffith very racist film *Birth of a Nation*. In the film, the Mammy did not want to be free; she like McDaniel’s fought off Union soldiers sending an unambiguous message that she had rather fight than be free (Pilgrim). The depiction of the mammy was first offered by Harriet Beecher Stowe's in her book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* published in 1852 where she describes the mammy, Aunt Chloe, as a round, Black shiny face, so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with the white of eggs. Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under a well-starched checkered turban (Pilgrim). These images of the mammy were very good at reminding both Black and White women that they have very opposing differences, and one is believed to be more attractive.

The mammies' popularity grew beyond the plantation and became such a popular figure during the Jim Crow era that it continues to be a commercialized image. The mainstreaming of the mammy was primarily due to the growing advertising industry. The mammy image was used to sell an array of household items, especially breakfast foods, detergents, sewing accessories, and beverages. In the late nineteenth century R.T. Davis

purchased a struggling milling company that put out ready-made pancake mix brand one of their leading ads was a picture of a mammy like Black woman who is happily and eagerly handing off a box of pancake mix to a White woman who states “With a box of your ready-mix in my kitchen, it’s like having you there in person Aunt Jemima!” (Soniak). To promote the pancake mix, R.T. Davis hired Nancy Green, who was born into slavery in 1834 and spent the majority of her adulthood impersonating Aunt Jemima, she sang, cooked pancakes, told stories about the Old South, stories that promoted the idea of happy Blacks in the South. Aunt Jemima was paraded around at country fairs, flea markets, food shows, and local grocery store and by 1910, more than 120 million Aunt Jemima breakfasts were being sold annually (Pilgrim). Although if we compare the Aunt Jemima that still graces pancakes now, there are stark differences such as lighter complexion, no headscarf and is considerably smaller in size.

As the mammy trope was one extreme and the Jezebel trop was another, there was a very thin margin in which Black women were able to define and appreciate their bodies, facial features, and skin complexion; if the Black woman did not assimilate to the mammy image they were viewed as a Jezebel. The Jezebel was the opposite of the Mammy. She was hyper-sexualized, lewd, and had no qualms with showing off her body, similar to the Mammy, and the Jezebel was marketed and created by the beliefs of White America. Many of the Jezebel caricatures mocked African and Black women. The image of the Jezebel would regularly depict Black females with exaggerated buttocks and breasts, scantily clad, and seeking the attention of men. In a 1949 postcard, there is an image of a naked Black girl hiding her genitals with a paper fan; although she has the

appearance of a small child she has visible breast. The caption on the postcard reads: "Honey, I'se Waitin Fo' You Down South and the sexual implication is clear" (Pilgrim). Even with the Black woman now being viewed as a hyper-sexualized individual, she was still illustrated in a very unattractive manner, especially regarding her facial features, which were exaggerated and reiterated anti-Black beliefs.

Though Black people were not being used as in mainstream marketing and media as the ideal image and being ignored, what was not ignored was the Black woman's facial feature and body shape and size. These racist images saturated the mainstream consumerism and became the accepted and expected appearance of the Black woman, with the exaggeration and highlight of facial features and oversized bodies. These images focused mainly on the body, over and over again in cruel caricatures, physical attributes of Black women were associated with negative characters' traits and low social positions. Through these racial ideologies, social hierarchies were formed based on constructed visible physical differences, leaving Black women at the very bottom of the beauty hierarchy. As I stated earlier, the images of the mammy and the Jezebel were reproduced and used to uphold ideas that Black women were not attractive, and this was through a construction of Black women's facial features and body proportions. This cultural representation of Black women often exists at the opposite end of the beauty spectrum of White women, is done purposely to keep a divide. The history of keeping Black women as an asexual, unthreatening servants, who are unfeminine continues the ideal that they do not possess beauty worth noting. When the mammy figure died down overtime, Hollywood and the media was eager to find other images to attach to the Black to

woman's identity, the sapphire was constructed to present Black women as overbearing, masculine and emasculating.

The Black woman as the sapphire was the polar opposite of White women who were often represented in Hollywood as feminine, delicate, or frail. The influence of hetero-centric and ethno-centric renders the prototypical women as straight and White, making those of color and lower class identities practically invisible, due to their characteristics and experiences unable to fit into the prototypical female body. There is a long history of defining femininity only permitted for White women, and Blackness as Male, leaving Black women overlooked and deemed masculine. Black women's femininity and gender as a whole was lost long before the creation of the sapphire or the mammy. As Hortense J. Spillers describes in her article *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book* "the stolen and captive body loses gender, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific" (Spillers 67). Spillers continues by listing the ways in which the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor, stating that removing the body from the subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness" (67). This otherness continues to be assigned to Black women's body, even outside of the confines of slavery and captivity they are viewed as outside of the norm, and are always having to prove they too just as much of a woman as their White peers.

This otherness was put in place by systems like slavery that wanted to justify the mistreatment of Black women; if they were not viewed as women, it meant they did not

need any form of protection and capable of hard physical labor. This history of systemic racism of viewing the Black woman's body as "other" has seeped down throughout the centuries to modern day spheres of media, film, television and even sports press coverage. The stereotype of Black women being viewed as strong, unbreakable, unable to feel pain and the ability to take anything that comes their way has continued to result in prejudiced. A modern day version of this racist attitude can be seen in the treatment tennis player Serena Williams, a darker skinned woman, who has had to deal with the world labeling her as too aggressive and angry throughout the course of her career. Williams is revered for unmatched precision and her ultimate dedication and skill can not be denied even by the most racist spectators, but this does not stop the army of reporters and individuals for attacking Williams. Most of the attacks and comments are based on her body, calling her arms too "manly" and that her physique is too strong. In an interview Williams had to stop a reporter who questioned whether she was intimidated by her (White) opponent Maria Sharapova's "super model good looks" (Smith). That question adds to the recurring question about Williams identity that she must prove and speak on her femininity, when she has more important things to be considered about, but Black women are often having to perform their femininity, it is not just given.

Another example would be former first lady Michelle Obama, who in an interview with Oprah Winfrey spoke about how she learned to accept her body despite criticism from men. Obama state "I'm a Black woman in America. And you know, we're not always made to feel beautiful" (Obama). Obama seemed to experience most of her scrutiny during her time in the White House, and even prior during the campaign trail,

where her entire body has been picked apart by the media and the average American. From her bare arms to her butt, Obama was constantly being judged, many of the comments were directed not only towards her body, but also her character was under attack, she like her husband was labeled a terrorist. It is not a new topic of the media to focus on womens appearances, hair style, clothing and features, but its specifically complicated when a Black woman is being examined. The Black female and the White female dichotomy remains a powerful one, resisting and cultivating stereotypes of White women as feminine, hidden in the domestic sphere, delicate, emotionally and physically restrained and Black women as public, exposed, hypersexual, abnormal, degraded and masculine.

Maxine Craig argues that that “the degradation of Black bodies was particularly painful for African American Women. In a male supremacist society in which women were valued as much for beauty as men were for their accomplishments, an ugly woman was a failure” (25). Black women have always been deemed a failure in the beauty department. However, the beauty industry presents itself as a solution for women who supposedly fail at being a standard beauty; the cosmetic industry tycoon Helena Rubenstein once declared, “there are no ugly women, only lazy ones.” The belief that beauty was available to all women who sought out the products to achieve was deceitful and limited to White women only. Black women were not included or thought of in the beauty industry, limiting their access to beauty products and procedures. As long as dominant standards of beauty excluded Black women who had dark skin and or short

kinky hair, they would never be able to fit into the beauty world and were unable to achieve the ideal look most.

There is no surprise that research has shown that African American women suffer from low self-esteem, beginning at a very young age. Black psychologists Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark, who studied issues of skin color and self-esteem among Black children, published a foundational piece of research in 1947. They reported that when young Black children were given a choice between a Black doll and a White doll, they favored the White doll and made disparaging comments about the Brown-tone dolls. The Clark's finding was seen as primary evidence of the negative psychological consequences of segregation, racial inequality, and the production of anti-Black images (Craig 38).

As shown in the Clark's research, there was and still is widespread of internalized self-hatred and the belief that Black people are not beautiful and need to work to achieve a look that is more widely accepted. Even with the push for Black people, specifically Black women, to fit into mainstream beauty standards, this did not prevent Black women from creating and making space for what they deemed beautiful in their own ways. In Craig's book *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of race*, the author explores the long history and battles of Black women, defining their own forms of beauty in a society that has erased their existences and made their images a sight of hatred. Before the civil rights legislation brought limited integration in the United States, African Americans lived in very segregated conditions, and Black people found ways to resist racial oppression. Black people created publications, colleges, and social clubs to disseminate alternatives to white portrayals of Black people. By 1910 there were 35,000

black churches in the United States. African Americans established 106 colleges and more than 2,000 newspapers before 1950. Black churches, newspapers, classrooms, radio stations, and the streets of Black neighborhoods were a site of cultural productions. (Craig 46). In all of these various publications of Newspapers and magazines, their goal was to reject White standards of beauty and white depictions of Black women. They advertised Black beauty contests, Black beauty cosmetics, hair care companies, all various avenues that allowed Black women and girls to embrace their natural features, such as their afro, the complexion of their skin and facial features.

Furthermore, as Craig highlights the Black is Beautiful Movement, which came out of the Black Power movement, but quickly seeped into mainstream American culture, the Afro hairstyle and Afro-centric fashion was adopted and celebrated. Blackness, became the epitome of cool in popular films, such as Blaxploitation films, that gained popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, aimed initially at African American audience, but soon the genre audience appeal broadened across racial and ethnic lines. By 1969 there were Black characters on 21 prime time TV shows (Yacovone). It was through songs, movies and television shows like *Soul Train*, which was created and hosted by Don Cornelius, that helped spread the idea that Black was beautiful. *Soul Train* not only brought Black music, dancing and fashion into the homes across America, but it also showed Black women with various skin tones and hair textures. Similar to the magazine and newspapers publications that Craig explores, shows like *Soul Train* taught Black youth to learn to appreciate their Blackness and celebrate it to the fullest extent.

Moreover, for a brief span in the mid- 1960s until the late 1970s, “Black is beautiful” expressed the spirit of self-love and exuberance felt by a new generation that found a new way to see itself (Craig 23). Craig uses the phrase “Black is beauty” to refer to the new practices of self-presentation and the newly expressed appreciation of dark skin and tightly curled hair that became wide-spread in African American communities in the late 1960s and early 70s (23). Along with dark skin and hair, Black facial features were also being recognized as equally as beautiful as White facial features, and redressed those women who had been devalued by earlier beauty standards.

Though Black women had finally been able to embrace their image through the Black is beautiful movement and began to seek alternatives to dominant beauty ideals in which they had been excluded from, this did not mean Black women had been spared objectification in their own culture. Even within the African American communities, Black women were quickly reduced when their general worth was based on their physical appearance. However, the Black is beautiful movement was the combination of new practices of self-presentation and newly expressed appreciation of dark skin and women with Afros, African facial features, and were prominent in the African American communities in the late 1960s and early 70s. This movement was even pushed forward with songs like James Browns *Say it loud, I’m Black, and I’m proud* (1968). Though Brown's song is not specifically about women, it is about Black people reclaiming their space in society.

A new standard of beauty was being celebrated in Black culture; dark skin, natural kinky hair, full lips, and bodies all around that was once devalued by earlier

beauty standards. However, the new standards of beauty were still being set up and restructured by Black males. Craig explores that even in movements that were set up to uplift Black women beauty ideals were reinforced through male supremacy, especially Black males which still requires all women to judge themselves in relation to unrealistic physical ideals. Through Craig's research, she spoke with two dark-skinned women who told her that they were encouraged by female relatives to apply themselves at school because of the slim chances of finding husbands to support them. One of the women quotes her grandmother, who states, "Your chances of getting a husband who's going to be able to take care of you is much less than somebody else. So you're going to have to be prepared educationally. You'll have a good job You'll be able to take care of yourself" (Craig 26). The woman recounts how much damage that did to her self-esteem to know that even her grandmother, a person who supported and loved her very much, reminded her that she was not pretty due to her dark skin and the texture of her hair. Another woman recounts that her family was so conflicted about what to do with her dark skin that they used other methods to make her appear more appealing. She remembers them using clothespins to try to squeeze her nose to make it real sharp because if her features were not so African, there would be some compensation for her dark complexion (Craig 26). Within the Black communities, glamorous and beautiful Black women published by the Black press circulate within the Black communities, but these images did not correspond to how all Black men and women defined their beauty; as Craig points out the people making the decisions of the ideal Black woman were Black middle class men, whose perception of beauty was limited to their own ideals (Craig 47).

This newfound recognition of Black beauty took off with the formation of Black beauty contest and pageants. As Craig elaborates the beauty pageant has a very complicated history, due to the rejection of White institutions and altogether rejecting those standards and creating their own. Though these Beauty contests were formed to recognize the uniqueness of Black women's beauties, these contests also projected the ideal images of African American women, ideals shaped by a particularly Black male-dominated middle-class worldview (Craig 48). *The Appeal*, a Black newspaper in Chicago, launched one of the first beauty contests stating, “who is the most beautiful Afro-American woman?” I read that ad as both a call for the appreciation of Black women but on the other hand creating a competition between Black women. *The Appeal* even inserted a description of what they believe to be the “ideal negro woman” which was the “Egyptian types, with a touch of the spirit of the new world – she would have: a well balanced symmetrical head, full slender neck, the features clear cut, with the appearance of being chiseled rather than cast the forehead broad and slightly expansive. A fine negro nose with a slight Egyptian curve, the mouth fairly small but well proportioned and slightly pointed, round, firm chin, their eyes should be large but slightly elongated, surmounted by a fine brow that is not too sharp, delicately arched and last but not least to have a marvelously fine curving eyelash of which the negro race can be justly proud” (Craig 50). The “justly proud” came with a price, the specification of what the ideal Black women look like, left out a large portion of Black women who did not have the “Egyptian look” which as Craig claims is a woman who has a mixed heritage Black woman or a lighter skin Black woman. This particular desired look created a breeding

ground for Black women's beauty to not only be scrutinized by the larger part of mainstream society but also within their own community.

Naomi Wolf confirms Maxine Leeds Craig's argument in her book *The Beauty Myth*, arguing that many beauty ideals and expectations are generated by men. Wolf states "the beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institution and institutional power" (Wolf 13). Both Wolf and Craig are correct in their assessments; the majority of the beauty products and images were produced by men, typically White males, and it became the goal of not only White women but Black women too, to attempt to gain access to all the items and resources that could manipulate their body and or face to exceed or match what a beautiful woman looked like. Many of these examples can be seen in Craig's research; over the counter bleaching creams were sold in great quantity, although they could not actually transform a dark complexion into a light one. Although Black women did not have the means to access plastic surgery or lighten their skin, they could effectively remove the curl pattern from their hair. Straightening hair became widely popular after the First World War. The Great Migration brought more Black women to the city and with it straightened hair became the norm (Craig 27). Not only White women but Black women's identity was based upon their beauty and therefore remaining vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air (Wolf 14). As Wolf explains the beauty myth has been around since the production of mass media, and a lot of these women gained their knowledge of what a woman should look and act like straight from the desk of White men in power. Even with more and more images and beauty products being made and advertised by women, it

continues to follow the same pattern, of women competing to see who can master being the most feminine and therefore the most attractive.

Many of our beliefs and formation about the way women have always thought about “beauty” date from no earlier than the 1830s, when the cult of domesticity was first consolidated and the beauty index invented (Wolf 15). However, being that the Black women were still enslaved during the 1830s, this meant that the beauty standards were not shaped around their looks at all. This is illustrated in the rise of the mammy and the juxtaposition they were in with their White mistress they often worked for, the Black woman was purposely illustrated to be as unattractive as possible. In the early 1900s the beauty industry targeted White middle class women, who wanted to enhance their look and be more appealing to their husbands. Overtime this impact led to an even larger impact onto the industries that created these expectations and ideals. With the rise of magazines, radio and television White women were sitting at home with too many tools to change who they were. The beauty industry had told them they had failed at being a woman, but there was nothing to fear because you could buy your beauty if all else failed. This led to what is now a conscious market manipulation: powerful industries – the \$33-billion a year diet industry, the \$20-billion cosmetic industry, the \$300-million cosmetic surgery industry and the \$7-billion pornography industry. This too increased the capital made out of unconscious anxieties and are in turn able, through their influence on mass culture, to use, stimulate and reinforce the hallucination in rising an economic spiral (Wolf 17). These numbers have increased through each generation, and with the rise of social media platforms like Instagram, we no longer have to wait for the larger companies

to tell us what to look like. We can simply scroll through Instagram, look at the comments and quickly make an assessment on what is considered beautiful and ideal and what is not.

Even though self-esteem has always often been a sensitive place especially when beauty is on the line, and with outlets like Instagram, some individuals' self-esteem seems to have hit an all time low. It is not only affecting every day woman but also celebrity women who have stepped up to say that Instagram has become a breeding ground for unrealistic beauty, Kylie Jenner, a celebrity profiting off of the social media platform has stated the pressure to look a certain way, influencing her to fill her lips. A survey of 227 female university student's women reported that they tend to compare their own appearance negatively with their peer group and with celebrities, while browsing social media platforms. Even with the wave of "body-positive images" it is still focused on the body and women who see the body-positive photos still end up objectifying themselves (Oakes). But this has not slowed down the production of images and products that are being advertised to all women and girls that if they buy a certain item, wear makeup a certain way or if they have enough money can simply go alter their bodies.

"Given few role models in the world, women seek them on the television screen and the glossy pages, this pattern, which leaves out women as individuals extends from high culture to popular mythology: Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relations of women to themselves" (Wolf 58). Some of us continue to look at ourselves through

others eyes. Instagram, an app that is all about pictures, is the ultimate example of Wolf's explanation of how and why women manipulate themselves to fit in. For those who cannot afford all of the products to enhance their beauty, they will opt to putting filters over their picture or using photo editing tool to appear to look like something they are not. Women of all ages and backgrounds can suffer from intense self-surveillance, they will do any and all things possibly to fit into what they believe a woman should look and act like. For Black women this self-surveillance, can be a means of survival or resistance, depending on how they plan to navigate the world. For some Black women it means fitting into both the Black culture and White society, for others it may look like only trying to appeal to Black society. Either way, they are measuring and comparing themselves to others standards or expectations.

In Karia Kelch-Oliver and Julie R. Ancis article *Black Women's Body Image: An Analysis of Culture-Specific Influence*, the author emphasizes the differences in body image between Black and White women. Though it is not often talked about, Black women, like White women, also suffer from body dissatisfaction. Kelch-Oliver and Ancis conducts interviews with sixteen Black women, to analyze how Black women see their bodies missing something here...the themes that appeared resulted in the expectation of Black women being shapely and curvaceous as the ideal body. These women also spoke on how they feel pressure and influence from external factors such as men, family, peers and media, which causes them to do more self-evaluations on how they measure up (Ancis 353). In her findings there were six major themes that emerged 1) Standards of beauty within Black Cultures, 2) Interpersonal Influences on Body Image and Beauty

Ideal, 3) External Influences on Body Image and Beauty Ideal, 4) Black Identity and Self-Affirmation, 5) Beauty Reflective of Internal Attributes/Strengths and 6) The Journey Towards Self-Acceptance. In these findings Black women were generally satisfied with their bodies and did not conform to societal standards of appearance. Rejecting the thin ideal image that had been pushed on them through White mainstream media outlets, and were much more accepting of a shapely appearance. Instead these young Black women influences came from interpersonal factors such as men, family and peers, seemed to exert a major weight on the participants' body image (Ancis 353). Although the standards of beauty are different for Black and White women, it is clear that the same body image influences (family, men, peers and media) exist for Black heterosexual women as for White heterosexual women (353).

Now we see a combination of the skinny “in-shape” woman who have curves in all the “right places”, having larger bosoms, and a curvy lower half, but still skinny. Even with the rise of plus size models, there is still a certain shape and size that is preferred and reproduced within the media. With the rise of social media outlets, we a variety of different body types and more often than not they are praised for being unique yet beautiful, which is a great thing when it comes to how we consume media. However, it still quite clear which bodies get more attention and more praise, suggesting that female beauty standards have not changed much. Deanna R. Puglia breaks down the impact of followers and “Likes” on social media platforms, in her essay *Social Media use and its Impact on Body Image: The Effects on Body Comparison Tendency, Motivation for Social Media use, and Social Media Platforms on Body Esteem in Young Women*. In her

essay Puglia states that the quality of feedback that users receive on social media, especially regarding their bodies or appearance, may play an important role in body esteem (Puglia 12). She gives the example of positive comments of a high number of “likes” received on a user’s photo could serve as a source of positive feedback that may promote body esteem, whereas negative comments or lack of positive feedback may negatively impact a social media user’s body esteem (Puglia 13). These effects of something as simple as a like have lasting effects and cause women and young girls to constantly compare themselves, hoping that by some means they can increase their likes and followings. For those who are unable to dramatically change their body are often left dissatisfied, which is linked to the rise of weight and body shape anxieties in young girls and women.

From my own observations in scrolling through Instagram I have noticed that one can be a bigger woman, but more often than not her body is still proportionate in a manner that gives her a curvaceous figure, and their facial features and hair will lean more so to the Eurocentric beauty standards. Some of the women that fall into this category are @barbieferreria who has a following of 1.7 million, @jordynwoods who has a following of 11.3 million, @dounia who has a following of 230 thousand people, who are all women of color, but light skin women. Moreover, they have features that fit into mainstream beauty standards; even with having bodies that are larger than the “norm” there bodies are still curvy and feminine, which they have all capitalized on. They become the face of full figured women and take on the image of what all women of their

size are believed to look like, this is harmful for the same manner that Black women get limited to one appearance.

Wolf brings up the reality that many women are stuck in a state of anxiety of whether they look “good enough,” and “it is due to the formula created by the beauty industry that also includes an element that contradicts and then undermines the overall prowoman fare: In diet, skin care, and surgery features, it sells women the deadliest version of the beauty myth money can buy” (Wolf 69). The contradiction begins when magazines or commercials tells us with a specific beauty product, workout or new item of clothing we can be just as beautiful as the models used to sell the product. However, it is in the same breath that these images of women who are “natural” or “naturally” beautiful, insinuating that the model you see before you were born with these genetics, and only uses extra products to maintain her look. A toxic cycle that keeps women and young girls trying to look like the women they see on television or social media. Taglines like “maybe she’s born with or maybe its Maybelline” has been a line that we have all heard on our television. Maybelline and other companies make statements that give us this idea that all we need is their product and we will be transformed into the women we see on television, but it also quickly reminds us that we may never look like her, because “maybe she’s born that way” and she was lucky enough to be able to enhance her look, but she would have been perfectly fine without.

“Women are deeply affected by what their magazines tell them (or what they believe they tell them) because they are all most women have as a window on their own mass sensibility” (Wolf 70). Now women and girls have access to unlimited sources that

tell them what is in and what is not, especially with the rise of social media, where image after image is being shown, and large companies reach out to women with the largest following and have them re-promote what is considered beautiful and what is not. Whether these Instagram influencers are promoting make-up, clothing or a surgical procedure women are being reminded every day and almost every minute that they can alter their bodies and face to be more desirable and have a place in the competitive beauty world, even if it is only on Instagram. “Women magazines do not simply mirror our own dilemma of beauty being asked as an apology for new scope and power, they intensify it” (Wolf 73). As Wolf states, this leads to the beauty backlash and reinforce by the cycle of self-hatred provoked in women by the advertisements, photo features, and beauty copy in the glossies. The beauty index causes women to scan as anxiously men scan stock reports (73).

Some Women are constantly waiting for the next beauty trend to drop and to decide if one they can afford it and two if they can make it work for them, and if they are unable to do either they fail. Beauty images promised to tell women what men truly want, what faces and bodies provoke men’s fickle attentions – an environment in which men and women rarely get to talk together about honestly in a public setting about what each really desires (Wolf 73). Magazines are not oracles speaking for men, Wolf found that one study discovered “our data suggest women are misinformed and exaggerate the magnitude of thinness men desire” (Wolf 73). This falseness benefits the diet and surgery industry but harms the individual woman’s self-esteem and causes women to live a completely dissatisfied life. This reality of false advertisement brings me to how women

and girls get stuck in a cycle of comparing themselves to advertisements and now social media photos that have often been altered, or the women in the photos have gone to extreme measures to alter their actual bodies. We continue to see and feel the impact of social media through research and studies that are finding how detrimental social media use can be for both the youth and adults who are active participants.

In Puglia's essay on *Social Media use and its Impacts on Body image* she found that body comparison was the leading cause of negative correlations with body esteem and positive correlation with the motivation to use social media specifically for body comparison (iii). Though social media has its benefits by allowing us to connect with a wider and more diverse network of individuals and allows for larger network of social support, it also enables greater opportunities for detrimental processes such as body comparisons with peers and celebrities (4). Puglia uses the term "normative discontent" to describe the acceptance of women being dissatisfied with their bodies as a social norm – the National Institute of Mental Health in a study of 1600 adolescents, girls were found to experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction, pressure from the media and weight dissatisfaction than boys (6). College women also scored higher than men on body surveillance, body shame, appearance anxiety and disordered eating, indicating that young women are particularly vulnerable population for the development of body image disturbance (6). Puglia research was not race based, only focused on the impact of social media usage for a group of college women of various ages. Her goal was simply to see how social media made them insecure, creating eating disorders and other mental health issues.

Puglia turns her attention to the objectification theory which developed out of feminist theories and posits that social-culture such as gender roles, cultural emphasis on women's appearances, the social and economic success associated with achieving and maintaining an idealized appearance. The objectification of women in media causes some women to view themselves as objects as well, who will be looked at and evaluated by others (6), which causing women to self-internalize others opinions. Women are prompted to engage in body surveillance in order to ensure that they are conforming to accepted cultural standards and to avoid being judged negatively by society, when women experience discrepancies between their bodies and the cultural reference that relates to them, they experience body shame (7).

Puglia goes on to explore what motivates women to use social media; she found that social media users seemingly have different motivations and gratifications which they are seeking to fulfill – via social media use. Many of these causes included entertainment, personal utility, information seeking, convenience, altruism and socialization (12). Although individuals may have different reasons and motives for their use of social media, it is still an interactive and customizable than any other form of media, allowing users to have a great control over the available content. More often than not social media outlets like Instagram an extremely visual and photo based app is specifically used for feedback, specifically positive feedback. Women will examine and endorse other women that prompts them to seek out references against which they can evaluate their own appearance and their progress toward attaining the ideal body (Puglia 8). Puglia uses the social comparison theory to make sense of how and why women

pursue targets for comparison for the aspects of the self that they consider to be important. It has been suggested that women are motivated to look to various sources in order to find references to use for body comparison.

This creates even more competition amongst women on social media outlets, especially Black women who are still having to prove their unique beauty. As stated before, Black women and young girls are not exempt from suffering from low self-esteem, though many of the stereotypes portray a lot of Black women being strong, independent, and self-assured. They, too, endure the pressures of the beauty world to look a certain way. Particularly when they do not resemble the Black girls and women on television or even those gaining massive amounts of followers on Instagram; over the last ten years, Instagram has become the place in which extensive levels of comparison happens daily; we are constantly reminded what is attractive and what is not. Those who have managed to garner hundreds and thousands of likes, ad promotions, and large followings, all have a certain look of flawless skin, a very proportionate body shape in which their breast, waist, hips and buttocks that appeals to the masses.

Social media has helped push the images of the ideal Black woman's body. However, prior to the increase of social media outlets, Black women and girls were being told and shown what society desires and expects their bodies to emulate by a certain age. Being a young Black girl through the 90s and 2000s during the rise of very explicit music videos and lyrics, reality television, and the increasing growth of media publications like magazines that catered specifically to young teen girls. I was very clued into what I should be striving for as I developed. Beyond the media impact and influence in how I

saw myself, I was also reminded by my family and peers what I should look like as I got older. On the one hand, I had the most significant influence of my life, my father who steadily encouraged me to embrace being young, dressing, and acting like a young lady; he was somewhat conservative when it came to how his daughters dressed. But he also reminded us that our bodies and character would be judged before we had a chance to even introduce ourselves. Therefore, in his mind, it was vital we acted and carried ourselves in a way that would not be scrutinized by society. Black women know all too well that their bodies are already hyper-sexualized, and yet some of them continue to put themselves in position to be objectified. The Brazilian Butt Lift emerges as one of the many ways that Black women are allowing their bodies to be repurposed and objectified by society, especially for those who feel that having a larger butt solidifies their identity as a Black woman.

CHAPTER III

THE RISE OF THE BRAZILIAN BUTT LIFT

Due to the hyper-sexualizing Black women from a young age, they never have the true opportunity to be a child and embrace their bodies through each stage, many times I have heard Black girls called little women. If they dress and acted a certain way that was viewed as adult-like, the term “fast” gets attached to their narrative insinuating that they are grown no matter their age. A new study from the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality titled *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood* give reasons Black girls go through adultification. In the study they found that adults view Black girls as less innocent, especially through the ages 5-14 years old. When compared to Whites girls, Black girls were perceived as needing less nurturing, protection or support. It also found that Black girls were viewed as more independent and knowing more about adult topics, including sex (Casey). In another piece Tressie McMillan Cottom’s opinion article *How We Make Black Girls Grow up too fast* for The New York Times, she states that new research corroborates what Black women have long known: people across gender and race see Black girls as more adult-like than their White peers. In the article Cottom recounts a moment with her family discussing the rape of an 18-year-old Black girl named Desiree Washington, by the famous boxer Mike Tyson. At age 15 McMillian quickly understood from the conversation of her family members defending Mike Tyson and blaming the girl for being raped, that Black girls like herself

could never truly be victims of sexual predators, because they were asking for it (Cottom).

Though my father attempted to instill and practice keeping me in my childlike state for as long as possible, when it came to my appearance, it only lasted until I was thirteen. When I had the opportunity to transfer schools, I went from an all-White middle school to a predominantly Black middle school and, I was no longer the exception or the odd person out. I finally felt ‘normal.’ However, what I quickly realized was how, within a matter of weeks, my body was being assessed by my peers, both girls, and boys. Two different occasions stood out to me the most. It was the first month into school and I was still getting to know people. Many people would approach me, but they would not ask me general questions like my name or where I was from. Instead, they would make statements about me to my face, and the very first occurrence was in my eighth-grade computer class when a girl a year older than me blatantly stated: “You must have a kid because your hips are so wide.” I was not only confused but ashamed. I first did not understand what wide hips had to do with giving birth; secondly, I did not know my hips were wide. Thirdly, and probably the one that sat with me the most was the accusation of being a young mother, this was nothing to be proud of in my mind, because I had been raised to believe the moment a Black girl was no longer viewed as a child, and therefore automatically labeled as a sexual deviant and in many ways a failure.

Another incident that happened a few weeks later was entering my Health education class, when all the boys in the class turned their attention to me, or more so my butt. It had seemed as though they were talking about me before I entered the classroom,

but my entry had not ceased the conversation. One of them turned to me and said “I’ve seen bigger” while another little boy said, “well if you look at her butt and hip ratio it is pretty large.” Not knowing what to do with their comments and also not wanting to draw any more attention to myself, I sat quietly and began to dissect what they had said and continued to say throughout the class. It was a mixture of feelings, but something I would learn to get used to throughout my life was people looking at me and not only making assumptions but also judging to see where I measure up compared to what we have deemed as the ideal Black woman’s body.

Outside of my father and my peers’ opinions and comments, the most impactful influence has always been how other women and girls perceive and judged me, and how I view and judge myself in comparison to them. Beyond the opinions and men and of young boys, women, and girls, particularly from your family and closes group of friend and, are not only your biggest influences but also the same ones who encourage young girls and young women to be as womanly as possible. For example, in my family, most of the women on both my mother and father’s side are known for having large bottoms and breasts, wide hips, and to be taller than the average female height. Though this was not the case for all the women, as we know this does not stop family members, specifically women, to make comments, sometimes positive but mostly negative statements. For instance, when I was in my early 20s I began to take running up as a hobby, as a result, I began to lose what I felt was normal amounts, but my family thought I was losing too much weight. It was therefore not a surprise when my aunt or sister-in-law would shout across the room that you look sickly or you no longer have a butt, with a

face of repulsion. It is also no shock when they make a big deal about your hips growing and smile with a sense of satisfaction that your body is developing and becoming fuller like theirs. Many times I have had my hips and butt poked by the females in my family expressing joyous feelings that I have developed the “Johnson hips.”

In Kamille Gentles-Peart Book *Romance with Voluptuousness: Caribbean Women and Thick bodies in the United States*. Gentles-Peart explores that in many Black cultures and societies, a woman with a fuller figure and curves are much more desirable to Black men, which contradicts the “beauty myth” and goes along with Wolf’s beliefs that women are manipulated into believing one thing when the reality is much different. Wolf states studies have found that ‘our data suggest women are misinformed and exaggerate the magnitude of thinness men desire... they are misinformed, probably as a result of promotion of thinness in women through advertising in the diet industry (Wolf 73). This is just one example of how media outlets, magazines and social media can be reframed to benefit the companies that are in it for the financial gain. Thickness is celebrated and encouraged in most Black communities and cultures; whether they are from the Caribbean, Africa, or America; being full-figured is not only accepted but expected of Black women, and they are responsible for keeping up appearances.

Gentles-Peart begins the first chapter detailing how, even as a busy graduate student on a tight budget, she made a concerted effort to ensure she ate three meals a day. She did not want to miss a meal, because that would risk her hearing the dreaded words of her mother when she returned home between semesters: “You lose weight.” Though some women would be delighted and welcome these words viewed as positive

assessment of their bodies, however being that Gentles-Peart was a Jamaican woman, those words would be distressing (1). “It was important for me to ‘keep on some weight’; I did not want to be skinny. I had to have ‘a shape’; I had to have thick hips and round buttocks, so I was careful to eat (1), Gentles-Peart goal’s in maintaining a full-figured body is not something new. I have heard many of the women and young girls around me emphasize how vital it was for them to eat to ensure they would not lose weight or to make sure they were gaining weight. To be a full, voluptuous woman, therefore, meant you were attractive as your peers and relatives.

Similar to my experience growing up, Gentles-Peart also describes how her body would be the topic of conversations at her family gatherings. She remembers her body being highlighted by members of her community. Aunties, cousins, and girlfriends examined her body, liberally and jovially making comments about her small size and shape. She also notes how comments indirectly came from Jamaican popular culture, with songs, magazines, and music videos, promoting a body type that was not like hers and reinforcing the difference of her body compared to what media viewed as ideal. Gentles-Peart explores the “thick” Black woman and how Black women were able to celebrate and be proud of the body the same body that been labeled as unattractive and unwarranted of praise. Gentles-Peart also mentions how Black women from the Caribbean expressed their newfound love for their body by wearing extravagant yet thin bikinis in annual carnival celebrations or the rise of dancehall music, which introduced another avenue that allowed Black women to enjoy and embrace their thickness, without being judged (Gentles-Peart 18).

In America, music videos had begun to skyrocket due to the debut of MTV in 1981, giving all women, especially Black women, ample opportunities to be seen and viewed as a sight of beauty. With more and more Black artists producing videos, the Black woman's body were seen as equally desirable to audiences as White women. Even though music videos began to be critiqued as a place where women lacked agency, with little to offer besides their bodies, it was still very impactful. It pushed forward Black women as equally as attractive as White women, Black women were no longer afraid of acknowledging that they, too, were sexual beings who were okay with flaunting their bodies. As we see with the rise in popularity of video vixens in the Black community, I personally saw how they were idolized and wanted to have a similar look. However, this newfound appreciation and expectation of the “thick Black woman” has its downfalls, in so much that Gentles-Pearl views it as another negative “controlling image” of the Black woman. As Janell Hobson argues, the long-lasting effects of these exhibitions of Black women's bodies in Europe and American cultures are the ‘Black women en masse are often ‘known; to have big behinds, à la the Hottentot Venus’ (Gentles-Pearl 9).

Black women's acceptance and acknowledgement of possibly having a larger butt was used to their advantage with the rise of music videos. However, music videos for Black women was not the revolution it was proposed to be. In Amber Johnson's journal article *Confessions of a Video Vixen: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory* a self-proclaimed video vixen details how her first music video quickly diminished her hopes of embracing her sexuality, without being labeled or condemned. Johnson was one of the leading ladies in rappers Nelly's music video, when she found

herself being taunted by the men who surrounded the car she was dancing in. She recalls refusing to get on the roof of the car because she did not want to be the hypersexual “hoe” dancing for money. These feelings Johnson had, are not hers alone, but were constantly echoed by mainstream media, stating that music videos were doing more harm than good for Black women. These music videos were seen as a means to reproduce negative tropes of Black women, specifically the Jezebel, which had reached its peak when the Video Vixen was created.

However, like most things that have been used to degrade and dehumanize the Black race, they have been reinvented and used in a ‘positive’ manner by Black people, such as the thick Black woman. The image of the large, grotesque Black woman was used by White society to instill the perception that all Black women were monstrous (and thus not up the standard of White beauty), as a way to preserve the beauty ideology solely for White women. However, Black society was able to take the Black woman’s body and capitalize off of it, especially as the music industry exploded. Rappers beginning with Lil Kim, Foxy Brown in the 1990s and now Nicki Minaj, Megan Thee Stallion and so many more have found an avenue to profit off of their bodies and sexuality, in a society that has constantly pushed White beauty standards. One thing all these women have in common is how comfortable they are in flaunting their bodies, specifically their breast and buttocks. In Summer Okoye essay *The Black Commodity* she explores how the Black women are slandered for their “natural” physical attributes, attributes that are then praised when on a White Woman’s body (Okoye).

Even still, African diaspora cultures have reclaimed the “thick Black woman” from a place of shame and humiliation, in which it has always been in comparison to the White feminine beauty standards. According to various research findings Black culture have ascribed value to the ample Black female physique and have deemed slender bodies as a sight of colonial influence (Gentles-Peart 10). But with this new appreciation of the larger, full-figured body associated with the Black woman, it also limits the types of Black women’s bodies accepted in Black communities. As Gentles-Peart illustrates, not all Black female voluptuous bodies are celebrated; it is essential to note the difference between a curvaceous body and fatness in the celebratory politics of Black women (13). In most cases, the positive discourses about Black womanhood are in relation to the former, a Black body with ample derrière, hips, and thighs, not one that is round and plump. Therefore, within this construction of Black femininity, fat Black women continue to be marginalized (Gentles-Peart 13).

As a consequence of this marginalization and expectations we meet women like Shami, the central focus of the documentary titled *My BBL Journey: Black Beauty & Brazilian Butt Lift* which aired on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in March of 2019. I came across the video on YouTube and was introduced to a young twenty-three women who had decided she wanted to learn more regarding the BBL. Shami had begun to feel the influence of not only her family, but mostly her social media presence had brought her to this decision. We are first introduced to Shami in a gym, where she begins to detail her journey. She states, “my family back home will probably be thinking, ‘why would you put yourself under the knife? Are you crazy? You could lose your life.’”

But usually, in African Culture, it always likes ‘no the bigger, the better. Or ‘the curvier, the better’ (Shami). She continues to say how she has been struggling with her weight since about college and can’t seem to lose weight consistently and with that decided that maybe getting the BBL would not only help with her weight loss but also give her the curvy body she believes will give her a better chance in her field of marketing.

Shami begins her journey by exploring and researching the different types of surgeons, getting an insight of other women’s experiences, how they came to the decision to get their body done, and the emotional process behind what encouraged them to get the BBL. The Brazilian Butt Lift is a surgical procedure pioneered in Brazil by Doctor Ivo Pitanguy. Pitanguy began his career working as a trauma surgeon, but soon created a plastic surgery unit in Santa Casa de Misericordia Public hospital after a massive fire broke out leaving children in need of skin grafts. During this experience, Pitanguy stated that what he learned during this time was how vital appearance was to people’s emotional well-being. Pitanguy had two mottos in which he lived by one being “The most important thing is to have a good ego, and then you won’t seek plastic surgery” and the second and most fulfilling motto was to “help patients overcome low-self-esteem.” He even had a therapy clinic attached to his plastic surgery unit to ensure people left feeling their very best. Though Pitanguy’s intentions may have been with good purpose, it does not erase the fact that the BBL is one of the most dangerous plastic surgery procedures anyone could seek to have. One in three thousand women die from the surgery, and hundreds more are left with a lifetime of pain, hospital bills, or disfigurement (Bruculieri).

The Brazilian Butt Lift uses the method of liposuction to remove fat from unwanted areas like the stomach, back, and thighs also known as a “fat transfer”. This fat is then taken and re-injected into the butt and hips to give the desired fuller, perkier and rounder effect. However, what makes the BBL so dangerous is the lack of knowledge along with the neglect of the surgeons doing the procedure. If the fat that is injected into the buttocks goes into a dense muscle, it may not stay in place; instead, the liquid fat can squeeze through the muscle fibers filling the compact space beneath the muscle in the pelvis, causing a rupture that could lead to another surgery or worse, death (Shami).

Through Shami’s journey, she not only examines the reasons that women seek out the BBL, she also delves into the dark side of the procedure and the list of complications that come with it. Through her research, she speaks with Dr. Kremer, who used to practice and offered butt enhancement in the U.K. and abroad, but recently stopped offering the procedure. Shami went to Dr. Kremer to know why he decided to quit and fully understand all the risks that come with getting a BBL. Shami begins by telling him that she has been thinking about getting the BBL and that she is researching the various prices for the BBL procedure. The lowest prices that Shami came across was two thousand pounds which converts to 2,367.00 U.S. dollars, Dr. Kremer is in disbelief and tells Shami that amount sounds inexpensive. He would be right to assume that as a surgical and certified professional accredited to do this particular procedure would usually charge between five to six thousand for the surgery alone. Dr. Kremer continues by stating that he would even have to question the credentials and the experience of the

surgeon and to be very careful when seeking a BBL outside of your home country, due to language barriers.

It is through her time with Dr. Kremer that Shami learns that the BBL is a so-called “blind procedure,” in which a doctor could injure a vessel and pump milliliters and milliliters in the vessel and cause a fat embolism. A fat embolism would hit the lung or the heart, and one could die within seconds of a lung embolism or a heart attack. What I found as a reoccurring theme of the various YouTube videos I watched of women documenting their BBL journey, was how much they did not know before committing to the surgery. For example, in Miss RFabulous’ YouTube page, she explained that for three days after her surgery she was in so much pain that she did not even want to get up to walk around, which is necessary to keep blood circulating and preventing blood clots; while she knew it was something she had to do but dreaded the process of moving at all (RFABULOUS). Many of them had to learn the hard way of the actual pain, risk, and even the likely chance they would have to get more than one surgery to have the body they assumed they would get on the first try. The women that go through with the surgery often face one or more negative side effects, such as swelling, unwanted weight gain, burns from the procedure, or garments they have to wear after its complete. Even more dangerous other complications such as bacterial infections such as MRSA, necrosis, which is the death of the tissue, excessive scarring, wound ruptures, and abscesses, with the most extreme outcome being death.

One of the most significant factors that cause women to experience one of these consequences of getting the BBL or augmentation of any kind is the method in which

they get it done. As Dr. Kremer referenced previously, many doctors are not certified in doing the BBL, and put hundreds if not thousands of women at risk every year. These doctors who are not board-certified often provide the services at a much lower price, luring more and more women into one of the most dangerous cosmetic surgeries offered. Arthur W. Perry a plastic surgeon for twenty years wrote a very detailed article titled *I'm a plastic surgeon who won't perform Brazilian Butt Lifts they're deadly*. In his opinion piece he opens with his shock of how many women had begun asking for a Brazilian butt lift ten years into his practice. Perry believes the rise of the BBL was due to the many celebrities who had gotten the surgery and how women who are now seeking the look. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons, stated more than 20,000 people, got the BBL procedure by board-certified surgeons in 2017, which is a significant rise from 8,500 in 2012 (Perry). But these numbers do not account for the women who do not seek a board-certified BBL surgeon or pursue cheaper and quicker alternatives.

When women take the 'proper' and 'safest' route, I have found through the YouTube videos that this surgery requires not only a substantial amount of money, but also time and resources that women from specific class backgrounds may not be able to afford financially. In one of the YouTube channels, Tia Zamara, a digital creator for YouTube and Instagram, details a list of the cost and necessary items for a successful recovery after surgery. The augmentation itself can cost between three thousand to six thousand dollars depending on where and by whom the surgery is done. Many of the women that I viewed also mentioned that they had to travel to get the procedure done as many of the better surgical practices in the United States are done in Miami, FL and

Beverly Hills, CA. But those looking for a cheaper means to a BBL will travel to places like Brazil, Columbia, and Turkey, and a lot of women from London will go to Turkey specifically to get a better deal. As Shami discovers with one of the women she interviewed, Jamilah from the U.K. traveled to Turkey for her Brazilian Butt Lift, the same year another British woman Leah Cambridge died after undergoing the same procedure.

Jamilah is a social media influencer and explains to Shami what brought her to the decision, Jamilah explains that it was rooted in her culture. Her family comes from the West Indies and it is there where she felt the pressure of being surrounded by her mom and aunties who, as she described, are voluptuous women and desired to look like them. Once Jamilah decided to go through with her surgery, she was able to find one a surgeon and clinic in Turkey, the clinic she went to covered the entire cost of her surgery in exchange for Jamilah posting her results and tagging the clinic on Instagram (Shami). This is a reoccurring theme as the rise of BBL continues. Many surgeons want the money and notoriety that comes along with social media. This need to be known in the surgical world, can be seen through Dr. Sims work in Snorton's *Black on Both Sides*; it was the goal of Dr. Sims to be considered the best at Vesicovaginal Fistula surgeries. Though Sims history of his surgical procedures have brought up ethical questions, it did not stop the praise he received from his peers. He became the president of the American Gynecological Association in 1880. Upon Sims death in 1883, the Medical Society of the District of Columbia issued a series of resolutions that included commentary on his later years in the profession, writing "the light of his genius had not grown dim with year. But

to him for future discoveries of hidden truth in the yet unexplored regions of medical science, which can only be penetrated and made manifest by a genius like that of Sims” (Snorton 41). To top it all off only a decade later after Sims death, the City of New York dedicated a bronze statue of him, marking the first occasion that a physician received a publicly erected memorial in the United States. While surgeons now will more than likely not have a statue created and put up for them, if they are of high popularity like Dr. Miami, they can expect a television show, which in todays society seems just as significant.

Unlike the chattel women Sims worked and experimented on, the women today are giving consent. They are more than willing to show the process of their bodies getting surgically enhanced. This creates a new dynamic between surgeons and their patients. With the U.S. medical field’s long legacy of discriminating and exploiting Black bodies, this exploitation from centuries ago could be compared to the action of surgeons today. Throughout slavery Black bodies were used without consent for the advancements of medical theories, technologies and method to reinforce systems of oppression. As we see with surgeons now, many are willing to cover the cost of a Black woman’s BBL in order to use their body as an example or a guinea pig, proving that the same method is being put at work. The only thing these women have to do is post about their results on their social media pages, and share with their public how they feel about their surgery. Posting on Instagram for these women begins the journey of what the social media world labels a ‘Instagram model.’ With that, comes sponsorships of clothing brands like FashionNova and Pretty Little Things. They might also become spokesperson for diet supplements for

companies such as Flat Tummy tea, Fit Tea and MateFit drinks. Once a woman has been given these sponsorships and begins creating ads, they know they have reached a level of notoriety, especially being that celebrities such as Khloe Kardashian, Nicki Minaj and Vanessa Hudgens all at one time or another advertised to their millions of followers.

Moreover, returning to the experience of BBL, it is frequently recommended that to ensure proper healing in the first few days to stay at recovery houses. These houses have been put in place to appropriately assist and care for women who may not have anyone to take care of them after the surgery is complete. It is highly recommended that they do not fly or travel after the procedure because that could lead to swelling and a possible pulmonary embolism. A few of the women I followed through their BBL journey always reiterate to their listeners how vital it is for them to either book a hotel or stay in a recovery house. These houses, such as the Eos House of healing and recovery in Miami, cost each patient two hundred and fifty dollars a day to stay and be cared for properly. Those who cannot afford to wait and fly back to their homes a day or two later, tend to regret their decision because one of the very first things doctors repeat to their patients is to not sit on their bottom for two to eight weeks. One story in particular was from YouTuber Miss RFabulous, where she shares her regrets on the BBL. She describes the moment she realized something was going terribly wrong with her behind when she got on a plane from Turkey back to her home in the U.K. On the plane ride home, she states how uncomfortable and stressed out she was due to her inability to walk around and making sure the blood was circulating in her bottom. Between her flight home and delays, she was made to sit on her behind much longer than she had planned, causing her

to get an infection in her left butt check and simultaneously causing an indentation in her bottom as well. The indentation in her behind was so bad, she had to go back to Turkey and get another procedure done, which she was finally satisfied with, but it did not last. She had to get it a third time, because her fat cells kept depleting and she felt her body looked terrible (RFABULOUS) . Though most women do not go back three different times to fix their bodies, it is not an uncommon story to hear all the regrets and the things you should not do when getting a BBL. For those who can afford to adhere to all of the proper maintenance, they have a better chance at healing, but for those who can't afford it, they tend to have more of a painful and extensive story regarding their healing.

If women do have to sit on their buttocks before the eight weeks are up, they are recommended to buy a unique BBL pillow or follow a particular sitting position. If sitting is necessary, it can only be for a short amount of time. The pillow is just one of the many items that are required for healing after the BBL. Some surgical clinics provide BBL packages adding three to four hundred dollars to patients' bills. For those who opt-out of the package are left to their own devices, but due to the influx of videos on both Instagram and YouTube, individual women share what they believe is necessary for healing. These supplies can consist of: a female urinal device since sitting is not recommended and due to the bandages that wrap the lower half of their body, making using the bathroom difficult. Other items consist of compression socks, gauze pads, bandages, Neosporin, liposuction or contour foams, wipes, and much more are essential to proper healing (Amy in the Mirror).

Two of the most necessary items and services that women need after surgery and care are a Faja, which is a full-body compression garment that is to be worn all day every day for the first three weeks. The purpose of the garment is to maintain and keep the body shape in place. It will help with the enhancement of the butt, smooth and slim the legs, and provide a full-body slimming to enhance ones' silhouette. If women do not wear this item, they run the risk of their newly placed fat to shift into places it was not designated to be and possibly having to get multiple surgeries to fix any deformities, they may have caused. The average Faja costs around \$110.00, and if a woman is set on having a specific look, they will get two Faja's one for the beginning stages of compression and a final Faja for phase two, which they will provide more compression to better shape the body. With all the additions on top of the actual BBL procedure, the entire process could quickly end up costing between eight thousand to nine thousand dollars.

However, these numbers do not account for the women who have to get life-saving surgeries when their Brazilian Butt lift goes wrong. In Author W. Perry's article, he explores the risk and rising number of deaths that happen because of the BBL due to untrained doctors. By 2015 thirteen women died in Mexico after receiving the BBL by untrained and uncertified doctors; still, these deaths went ignored by board-certified plastic surgeons. By 2016, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic surgery had recorded the additional deaths of twenty-five more women who had died while getting the BBL procedure in Mexico. In 2017 Perry reports that three percent of plastic surgeons who performed the procedure had a patient die, from 2013 to 2018, a single Florida clinic had at least eight patients die. Newly reported death rates for the BBL have gone from 1

in every 3,000 to 1 in every 500, truly making the BBL one of the deadliest augmented surgical procedures (Perry). But the BBL is not the only procedure women seek to alter their bodies. As I stated before, the BBL is not a cheap procedure. It is one that takes nearly six months to heal from entirely, but many of the women who want to get the ideal look and body either do not have the financial means, time, or both, which leads them to even riskier methods to alter their bodies. Like many things provided to consumers, there is a Black Market for injections that are used to enhance the shape of women's buttocks.

In a documentary produced and narrated by actress La La Anthony *titled Killer Curves: Bodies to Die for*, Anthony discusses the rise of black market butt augmentations such as the illegal injections, that end up causing women severe damage. In the documentary, Black women who have sought out these injections tell horrifying stories of what they experienced (Anthony). Many of these women speak on the many health issues they developed, and for those who had died, their loved ones reiterate how much pain and suffering had occurred up until their death. The rise of the fascination of having a larger butt came rushing in due to the upsurge of Black music videos, which is where the documentary begins. Many of the commentators in this documentary have been involved in the music industry in one way or another; some host of shows like 106 and Park, who played the hottest ten videos and songs out. Singers like K. Michelle, who begins her interview by stating growing up she not only wanted to become an R&B singer but to have a similar look as the women she saw in the videos. Women who gained fame through music videos, as well speak on the power they had pushed forward the narrative of the ideal image of Black women, specifically the larger butt. The women

who share their personal stories of augmenting their bodies express how powerful and influential social media impacted their choice of getting their bodies done.

The BBL is far from seeing a decline; while watching YouTube videos, many of the women share how crowded and busy the surgical clinic is. Especially after taxes are returned, there is a massive influx of women who use their money from the IRS to fund their procedure. It has become so typical to get plastic surgery that I have had ads pop up on my Instagram page as a sponsored post, and there are so many individuals in the comments saying how badly they could get a procedure done. There are memes, gifs, and constant jokes being spread throughout the internet of women wanting to get their bodies done, but not being able to afford it or for those who have obtained a BBL finding humor in it. Where plastic surgery was once a very hushed topic, it has now become an ordinary conversation; there are numerous influencers who are very transparent about their surgeries and feel an obligation to share with their followers why and how they got their bodies done—giving their followers as much information as they can because they want them to learn from their mistakes, while also reminding them that it's their body.

I support the transparency of those who are willing to share their BBL journey, however, where I find an issue is their claim to have done it for themselves. This may be the case as we all have insecurities, but it frequently seems more complicated than that. Through my research of how Black women's bodies are perceived, it becomes more and more apparent when each of these women shares what brought them to make this risky decision. The underlying factor for many is the belief that they do not have the ideal body. Either they feel they do not have enough curves, or that their buttocks are too flat

or their hips too indented. They have an image in their mind of what they believe they should look like and how they are shaped is not it. Therefore, when they make the decision to get their body done, they are convinced it will make them feel better about themselves and are positive that no workout nor positive affirmations will give them the look or confidence they seek with a BBL.

When looking up the ‘BBL journey’ on YouTube, what was normally accompanied along with it were videos labeled with terms such as ‘do I regret my BBL?’, ‘What you should know before getting a BBL’ or blatantly ‘I regret my BBL.’ Most of the videos, the women actually do not regret their BBL in the end; if anything, they regret not knowing all the pain and steps they were going to take in order to get their desired bodies. Those who genuinely regret their BBL like YouTuber Miss RFABULOUS tend to do so because of the number of times they had to go and fix their BBL, the overall pain and mostly their results. As Miss RFABULOUS points out in her story and what she failed to realize until after her third procedure is how your body reacts to fat cells, at the end of the day, most of the fat cells will deplete. However, depending on one’s body type, the depletion may happen at a more rapid pace or not at all. For Miss RFABULOUS, it happened quickly, and she was unable to keep the shape she wanted, which happens to many women like her. Their bodies simply do not hold on to fat long enough for it to take shape, and money is eventually wasted.

A shared feeling by some women who get their buttocks augmented, is regret, like that of influencer and rapper Tabatha Robinson best known as DreamDoll, is very open about her body and the work she has gotten done to it. In a recent interview DreamDoll

shared the horrific details of augmenting her butt, she had a fat transfer but did not feel like her butt was larger enough. Therefore, she opted to get another fat transfer, but because she did not have enough fat on her body to get it done properly, she ended up with illegal injections. This caused a series of issues for DreamDoll, and only most ending her life, she says that after the shots, her body started to reject the shots her skin became hard, red and inflamed. She was unable to walk and became sick, she was eventually able to get the silicone out of her behind, but this experience did not stop her from again getting another fat transfer or BBL, which she is satisfied with. However, in an interview with VH1, DreamDoll wanted to share with other women and young girls who felt like she once did to look like the girls on Instagram, to not do it (Robinson). Robinson encourages women and girls to love yourself and be comfortable with who you are, because altering your body will not change anything about yourself, if anything it will attract the wrong people and only bring men into your life who only like you for your body and nothing more (Robinson). Though now in 2020 DreamDoll is sharing with women who her surgeon was and somewhat redacting on her initial sentiments of getting your body done, it does not erase her experience and all that she had to go through in order to be confident.

A journey that I believe every woman, whether they get a BBL or not, is going to have to work through, is how they view themselves, and why they believe having a more significant behind will complete them or not. It seems that the one thing they feel is missing from their identity is having the perfect rounded behind when in all reality, we know that it is not that simple, which seems not to be realized until the healing is over.

Because we live in such a visual society, it is understandable why we are so caught up on our looks, and why even with all the self-esteem or access to plastic surgery, we all have moments of inadequacy. But it is what we do with those moments that determine whether we fall victim to what society has regarded as beautiful or acceptable. I genuinely believe that this is just the beginning of the BBL phenomenon. With more and more women from various ethnic backgrounds getting it done, more surgeons becoming certified in the procedure and paired with the rise of social media, where much of the BBL popularity stems from.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

We have seen so far how social media and the world of capitalism has used Black women's bodies and culture, but I now want to focus on how Black women use social media for their benefits. On the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) has a series titled *Black Women Own the Conversation*, where various Black women from all times of backgrounds come and discuss a topic affecting their lives. The very first episode was *Black Women Discuss Social Media*, where Black women speak on the pros and cons of using social media and how it affects their mental health. The clip available was only two minutes long, but the women who decided to speak summarized quickly how they use social media and the steps they have to take to manage their time and mental health accurately. The host Carlos Watson probes the question to the audience stating, "I feel like social media is impacting us all. Is it adding to our stress? Is it decreasing or stress? What is social media doing?" (Watson). Handing it off to the first lady in the audience, who believed it could be both, she states that "it depends on how one uses it" being that she is a media personality, and therefore she is on social media a lot. However, she has to stop herself because she finds herself beginning to compare herself to others, using herself as an example she states "I just turned 32 this year, I do not have any children yet, and I'm not married yet" (Watson). Though this is her personal choice to not have kids or be married, it is because of social media that she still feels pressure to obtain these life

goals. She goes on to say that when it comes to self-care comes; it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to know when to take breaks from social media and understand that their reality is not wrong or incomplete. Taking a three-week break helped for this particular woman, she was able to re-center herself and not the world of social media influence her too much, she ends by stating “you have to be in control of your thoughts” (Watson).

Being in control of one’s thoughts is essential when you have opinions and advice being given to you from multiple outlets and people you may never meet. For many, like myself, it can be hard to take extended breaks from social media, for no other reason besides feeling that you are missing out on what is happening in the world. Social media is not just a place to look at selfies, but a place where one can learn and grow. Still, social media is also a very toxic place that can be the ultimate downfall for many, especially when one begins to compare themselves to what others are doing. As the first lady [Who is nameless] (mentioned, no matter how sure and comfortable you are with your decisions and achievements, you can quickly find flaws in your life if it does not match up to your friends or peers. This can also be seen in how one views their bodies or beauty. Similarly, a second woman spoke about how easily one can compare themselves to others, but her solution is to “love yourself more, and you have to forgive yourself.” She goes on to explain that because of social media, she has been more encouraged to eat right and work out more. Still, on the days she may not do one or both, she forgives herself immediately, she does not beat herself up for not sticking to something that’s very strict because she’s a human, and knows that every day is different (Watson). Her

reminder of being merely human is a powerful reminder, it keeps one grounded and understanding that they may never be as perfect as those they see on Instagram, and that's okay.

The only drawback from this short clip is that the women sharing their stories are in their 30s, so though like every person still has plenty of moments of insecurities and moments of comparison. They also have a more solid foundation of themselves compared to those who are pre-teens, teenagers or early twenties, in her article *Does social Media Really Foster #Sisterhood or cause #Separation* Davina Britt, shares how she believes social media has become a disheartening place. While scrolling on the internet, she saw a picture of this beautiful dark-skinned Black woman and she expected to go through the comments and see other Black women commenting on how pretty she was. But instead, she found a battle between Dark skin women who found her picture as an 'exception' while Lighter Skin Black women were making comments like "yeah she is pretty and all, but what women who look like me?". Around the same time, she came across another article celebrating curvy women; instead of uplifting remarks, the comment section was filled with hate. Black women were making comments like: "only dogs like bones, real men like curves," This impacted Britt, a self-proclaimed non-curve Black woman; it made her feel less than, like she was somehow not a "real" woman (Britt). This made her think that despite belonging to one of the most diverse racial groups, despite all the hashtags, memes and articles, have Black women really learned to celebrate diversity among themselves? (Britt).

To answer her question, I would say no, because even with all the uplifting hashtags and articles that encourage us to love the skin we are in, our unique hair textures and body types, we still find negatives. Britt goes on to say, “In the midst of all this empowerment, however, sometimes I feel that it’s becoming counterproductive and it is causing more separation versus sisterhood. Hashtags that are designed to celebrate our melanin, curves, hair, and accomplishments have turned into a conversation that starts like “real women look like this” or “real women do this,” and it begins to pit us against each other” (Britt). Britt is absolutely right in her assessment; it is something I witness daily. On a certain Black run blog ‘The Shade Room,’ which by its name declares it is intended to be ‘shady’ or ‘devious’ they will often post a picture of a Black celebrity, a socialite or Instagram influencer with a status. Under the post it will be an onslaught of negative comments. For example, in a more recent post by Instagram model Ariana Fletcher, who has admitted to having a BBL, she poses in a FashionNova romper. The status is quick and to the point, “Ari is looking cute in her @FashionNova romper! #FashionNovaPartner.” Surprisingly, the very first comments you see under her picture are not negative but an observation. One commenter writes, “I honestly think y’all post her just so she can be made fun of” while another commenter states “Y’all (the masses) about to hate on this Black woman.” These comments capture a reality of Black women’s experience on social media. Though there were both positive and negative comments under her picture, it says something when one of the very first comments prepares readers for attacks against these Black women, simply because they can. Many celebrities and social media influencers like Ari have blatantly stated that they do not want pages like

‘The Shade Room’ posting them because they know, unlike their own pages, they do not have the capacity to edit out negative comments on other pages. This can take a toll on any individual, especially those who make a living through social media; there is no escaping the negative feedback.

Women as a whole are the reason social media is as successful as it is today. In an article *Women are driving the social media revolution* published by Connect Americas, they detail how several studies reveal that women outnumber men in use and time spent on social media. This is because, as the article highlights, due to women’s leadership in social networks, it can tear down old stereotypes and demographic categories, generating a real impact on media, advertisement, and entertainment. Women are not only on social media mindlessly scrolling, but they also participate more than men. Soraya Fragueiro, Connect Americas Social Media Strategist, affirms that the increasing active participation of women and teens is in part due to an emotional component that prevails in each action that they carry out on social networks, including purchases. Fragueiro states, “this is why many brands and institutions have strategies that directly target women with messages using touchy pictures, warm colors, direct but kind language, and videos with catchy yet sophisticated music” (ConnectAmericas). This strategy can be seen on pages such as Dr. Miami who works on both men and women, but most of his post are directed to his potential female clients. Throughout the time of Covid-19 and the temporary shelter-in-place regulations out, surgical clinics like Dr. Miami’s are closed, this does not stop him from engaging with those who are patiently waiting for his business to reopen. Every week Dr. Miami uploads a post of a collage of six individual pictures of a White

woman's body with a pink background, and in each frame of the picture, there is a specific body part. The first picture is a woman covering her nipples but showing an enhanced bosom; the next picture is a woman holding her small waist, and the last picture on the top row is showing just the buttocks. Above the images in white words, it states, "What's your wish list for your body?" under the picture the status written states, "I know, I KNOW. I'm ready to open back up too, but we just aren't there, YET! But until then, go to tobuildmybod.com/drmiami!!! Some things are still in your control (laughing face emoji). Stay safe and healthy!!!" (TheRealDoctorMiami).

A lot is happening in this one post, beginning with the color, pink as we know a color assigned to girls at birth, whether they like it or not, and it is still clearly being used as a way to catch the attention of women. Secondly, the usage of only female assigned body parts, again targeting women and women only, reiterating that plastic surgery is only a woman thing when men are known for using it as well. Lastly, Dr. Miami's contrasting ones' inability to control COVID-19 with controlling the way one looks, and that's just as good. Not only does this play on women's emotions, but it is using something as scary as a virus to lure women in, and it works. Throughout the seventy-one comments on the post, the women are happily listing things like "breast lift, tummy tuck, fat transfer," while others are commenting "mommy makeover." The Mommy makeover like the BBL is a new wave of 'snatching back' right after having a baby, promoted by social media influencers like Blac Chyna, Amber Rose, and Khadijah Haqq McCray. They have all posted a picture on Instagram with their surgeon excitedly sharing their plans for a 'mommy makeover' sometimes before the baby is even born. This plays into a

whole other issue that is being pushed forward by social media, causing some regular mothers to question their bodies after having a baby.

Though it may be hard for us to compare the everyday women to the celebrities and social media influencers that we follow, we as a collective are all affected albeit on different levels. For celebrities, it is the pressure of looking their very best at all times, Hollywood does not allow for an off day, they always have to be on and ready for cameras. In contrast, the average individual does not have to deal with those things. They still internalize what they believe is viewed as beautiful. Social media becomes a place of competition, to see how better, how dedicated and how successful you are in comparison to your peers, the same stressors and insecurities celebrities have to face are the same ones we all do. No matter how much positivity is spewed throughout social media, at the end of the day, it is up to each and every one of us to determine what and how we are going to use it. Social media is a double-edged sword, one that should come with limitation of how long we use it daily, I have thought often how social media is both a blessing and a curse. It allows us to connect, to learn, and explore things we may have never known or thought of before, but it also amplifies bullying and makes negativity okay, things that do not help but damage ones' self-esteem. It is vital that one uses social media with moderation and with intention, to know what suits you and to know what will only bring you down.

Similar to many other identities, tropes, and stereotypes that are attached to Black women, there is also the misconception that Black females are exceptionally strong. Alexis G. Stanton explored the implications of the strong Black women in their essay *An*

Investigation of How Social Media Use Impacts Strong Black Woman Embodiment & Mental Health. Stanton looks at the correlation between social media use and Black women self-esteem. Stanton interviews and examines 412 participants and how they use social media and how their social media use can influence their embodiment of culturally specific strong Black woman schema, and how it affects both their mental health and self-esteem (2). The Strong Black woman ideal like the other labels is a complex, culturally grounded representation that can be useful and necessary for Black Women's survival and self-efficacy, but detrimental to their self-care behaviors (Stanton 3). As Stanton points out, the strong Black woman is inextricably linked to the three foundational stereotypes about Black women (Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire), as outlined by Patricia Hill Collins. Along with other scholars, Collins has begun exploring how the strong Black woman and other stereotypes affect Black women's development and shape their ideas about "Black womanhood" (Stanton 3).

Following along the same path as Collins, I would like to add another trope that is affecting Black womanhood, and that is this idea of the ideal imaginative body of Black women. This assumption and belief that as a Black woman, you automatically have to be curvaceous and have a large behind, is just as harmful as the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and the Strong Black women. It not only pigeon holes the expectation and body shape of Black women, and it tells them that if you do not look a certain way, you have 'failed.' The power of social media also plays a significant role in how Black women and girls view themselves. They are being bombarded and overwhelmed with the images of Black women who have been deemed ideal and if unable to emulate that look low self-esteem

can ensue. This happens even with the various hashtags like #Blackgirlmagic, #CarefreeBlackgirl, #Blackgirlsrock, and many other hashtags that are aimed to self-empower, provide support to one another and challenge stereotypic media portrayals. Black women and girls are still struggling to find a happy medium because social media is a very problematic space for many people, especially Black females. However, if we attach the construct of the strong Black women to the Black women's character, we are reminding them that they are naturally obligated to suppress fear and weakness, showcase strength, and resist being vulnerable or dependent on anyone. Though to many, these attributes seem positive; it is ultimately damaging for young Black girls who will grow up to be Black women and who feel they can not show any form of insecurity.

The denigrating tropes such as the Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, the Strong Black women, and now the imaginative Black woman's body all stem from the socio-historical contexts and historical reality of Black women's enslavement, as well as their continuing economic and political marginalization (Stanton 4). As I stated before, this imaginative Black woman's body began with the finding and exploitation of Sarah Baartman. However, the anthropologist Georges Cuvier claimed that Baartman's body was rare even among her race of people, it did not stop the rest of White society and scientific racism to deem her the prototypical body type of all Black women. Though we are centuries from when Baartman was first discovered and exploited for the entertainment and amusement of White individuals, her large bottom is still very much relevant today. Whether we realize it or not our fascination and desire to have a large butt is due to the history and science that marked the Black women's body as a sight of both hyper-sexuality and

disgust, and though Black women have worked to reimagine this image and learned to embrace their bodies.

Nevertheless, the imaginative Black woman's body made to fit into one certain look, causes Black women to self-evaluate their bodies and try to fix what they deem is wrong. This leads to the rise of BBL's and the increased use of illegal methods such as silicone shots; Black women are risking their lives to fit into this new trope of the thick Black women. This image is not limited to just Black women, as we see White and Latina women who are also wanting this desirable and idealized body, but it is Black women who are most affected by this trend. It is Black women attempting to be what they deem a Black woman should be; not only should she be strong, independent, and self-assured, she also needs to have the large butt to match, and if she lacks it, it is up to her to fix it.

Even if a Black woman does go the route to enhance her body to get the ideal Black buttocks, she will still have to deal with any and all the backlash that will come along with it. However, because Black women are labeled as being so strong and sure of themselves, they can never truly admit to when they are struggling with their self-image, which can lead to a plethora of issues. In Stanton's findings of the strong Black woman, they discovered that there is a correlation between the women who accept the label of being a strong Black woman and higher levels of depression and stress. This leaves Black women not only having to maintain a facade that nothing bothers us when in reality we are just as fragile and human as any other woman. Yet Black women continue to walk around as though nothing bothers us it gives the world the ability to pick apart

who we are. From the way we carry ourselves, the way we dress and how our bodies look.

Moreover, the self-surveillance amongst ourselves is so powerful and with social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube that the cycle of self-deprecation and low-self esteem continues. As such, Black women and society need to remove labels and reduce the pressure of what we believe a Black woman is supposed to be and resemble. We need to remove the expectation of having a large butt to feel 'Black enough.' We have to reevaluate why we only see Black women when they have the ideal thick body, and we have to celebrate all the very various ways a Black woman can come to be, whether it is the shape of her body or the complexion of her skin. We have to broaden what it means to be and look like a Black woman. We must do this to remind Black women that you do not have to risk your life, your comfort, and self-worth by undergoing a BBL or illegal butt shots, reminding each of them that the circumference of their behind does not measure their value.

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