Introduction

This paper discusses the depiction of the Black womanhood and Strong Black Womanhood (SBW) within the context of The Wendy Williams Show (The WWS). With over 2.4 million viewers a day, The WWS is a curator among popular culture, celebrity gossip, and daytime talk-shows. The show clutches a top spot in the coveted female demographic and is consistently gaining popularity year after year (Tribune 2014, AdAge 2015). That being said, I place a particular focus on the intersection of race, class, and gender as it pertains to feminist theory and the strategic preservation of our current social discourse which ultimately enforces representational oppression. Despite the so-called "realness" of The WWS, I present how the image and performance of (Strong) Black Womanhood is simultaneously weakened and made novel. Because The WWS is #1 daytime talk show among women, I explore the implications concerning Black womanhood, perceptions of feminism, and social mobility among females in America.

(Strong) Black Womanhood

Existing literature is thick with contextual understandings of Strong Black Womanhood (SBW) as it pertains to feminist thought. Most articles and blog posts online aim to “de-mystify” the contemporary definition of the SBW. In fact, researchers found that “blogs notably represented a venue through which African American women’s personal narratives voiced their resistance to embodying strong Black womanhood” (Black and Peacock 2013:146). Of their sample, 40% of magazine articles and 70% of blog posts were critical of the SBW script. This may be a result of contemporary images of Black womanhood in popular culture. These depictions often imply that Black women face a heightened state of turmoil in their lives which
require strength to overcome. For example, the stereotypical performance of female “blackness” is characterized as combative and argumentative with the desire to always “keep it real” (Dagbovie-Mullins 2013). In an analysis to define Strong Black Womanhood and understand the implications of this phenomenon, Angela Rose Black and Nadine Peacock found two important attributes concerning the daily life management of the SBW script: self-sacrifice (pleasing the masses) and self-silence (emotional suppression) (2013). Their data is pulled from 20 Afro-centered magazine articles from *Essence, Ebony, and Heart & Soul* and 10 blog posts tailored for Black females. In a qualitative study regarding Black women’s views on their own communication styles, Marsha Houston categorizes their responses into one of several perspectives including: evasion, accommodation, celebration, wisdom, fortitude, and caring (2000). One participant of this study described Black women’s talk, “as entertaining and comical in the use of expressions (‘honey,’ ‘child,’ ‘sugar’)”(14), while another discussed truth telling, “Black women will tell the truth if asked, even if it hurts” (15). These discussions, along with many others, are indicative of an arena in which Black women are self-aware of their group identity. Their awareness is seemingly stronger and more debated than any other group which shows a heightened state of instability. Wendy Williams may be a contributor to the instability. For the context of this paper, I argue that Williams incorporates the stereotypes of Strong Black Womanhood in her show and transforms them into novelty for mass consumption.

**The Wendy Williams Show**

In order to gain general perspective on *The WWS*, I went to the official Wendy Williams YouTube page. The auto-play option showed me segments of her show with no explicit relation other than being uploaded to the official Wendy Williams account. The one-hour show starts
with *Hot Topics*, which is a twenty minute segment in which Williams expresses her views on current events in pop-culture. She often pulls from tabloid headlines and gossip-tainment websites. This is the most consistent segment as the rest of the show varies from day to day with no standard format. That being said, William’s usually introduces a special guest after the first commercial break (following *Hot Topics*). The guests range from A-list celebrity to no-name columnists in a tabloid magazine. If the guest is relatively famous, Jennifer Lopez for example, they are incorporated into the rest of the show with interviews, games, and the *Hot Seat* (a segment in which Wendy asks R-Rated questions). However, if the guest is not relatively famous, *Hot Topics* will segway into one of two photo based segments: *Hot Shot of the Day*, in which Williams talks about a particular photograph that has gone ‘viral’ or *Celebrity Fan Out*, where she presents incoming photos from fans in pictures with celebrities. As I became more familiar with the topics, format, and general attitude of the show, I was able to hone in on particular portions of the show where I wanted to focus my analysis. I found the most useful parts of the show was the *Hot Topics* section.

The overall attitude of the show is communal in nature. Williams introduces the audience as “co-hosts” and keeps them involved in her narrative. According to Sharde M. Davis, this is reminiscent of the collective communication practices of Black women (2015). In her qualitative research, Davis studies the Strong Black Woman Collective framework which, “advances the idea that Black women construct strength through communal communication practices” (20:2015). The importance of audience incorporation is amplified if we consider the code-switching techniques William’s uses (ie: *honey, child, sugar*) during her show just like Black women would with one another (Houston 2000). Indeed, Wendy Williams constructs the
image of Black womanhood simply by being a Black woman in the public eye; but she also weakens that image by performing blackness as a commodity. The “two different worlds” that black women express living in are being mocked and dis-essentialized in the context of The WWS. She is employing linguistic techniques (code switching) originally meant to help Black American women have a presence and sense of belonging in a society where they are markedly invisible (Houston 1991, Scott 2000). The techniques and establishment of Black womanhood are transformed into novelty and their origins are lost in the process. Not only does she weaken the image of Black womanhood, Williams also enforces the standard narrative of gender oppression. In the next section, I describe how she is rewarded for a typical performance of “Blackness” and I will show how Williams strategically regurgitates the gender discourses that Pozner sites in her book, Reality Bites Back.

**Keeping Up with the Hegemony**

In 2003, Williams reached unprecedented recognition after an interview with Whitney Houston. Williams questioned Houston about her (now confirmed) drug use which consequently spurred a heated argument on-air and catapulted Williams into the spotlight. The following year, her alma mater, Northeastern University, honored Wendy in an Alumni feature:

> “During her afternoon drive-time show, “The Wendy Williams Experience,” on New York city’s WBLS-FM, she’s a gal on the loose. In a rapid-fire voice that’s all brass and sass, she bounces from gossip, to advice, to in-your-face commentary, to interviews. Sometimes she even spins a song or two. Whether she’s talking about celebrities or herself, you can bet it will be blunt.”
Although it is meant to applaud the success of Williams, the verbiage of the excerpt reinforces Black female stereotypes and encourages the performance of “blackness” in the public eye. Before the on air feud between the two women, Williams was earning a $275,000 salary and making waves in the radio industry (Philly.com). The article was published just months after the Whitney Houston interview. Using the words *loose, sass, and in-your-face*, exoticize Wendy as a Black woman. The origins of the familiar black female exotization are thoroughly studied in academia. However, Sarita Davis and Aisha Tucker-Brown found that the average Black woman does not link slavery with Black sexual stereotyping (2013). This is a result of the above excerpt. Hegemonic performances of Black womanhood in a “sassy, in your face, and loose” manner establish the mentality that stereotypes are true. Furthermore, the article also embraces and commodifies conflict between women in media. In her book, *Reality Bites Back*, Pozner presents four narratives in which women are portrayed in the media (2010). The first trope states that women are catty and not to be trusted especially by other women. The timing, wording, and mentality of the Northeastern Alumni publication seems to be cognisant of Pozner’s trope and rewards the performance of (black) women as catty towards one another. Williams also perpetuates this notion in her show.

On April 2nd, 2015, Wendy discussed a congratulatory gift that Britney Spears sent to Jessica Biel in honor of her pregnancy. The situation was talked about during the *Hot Topics* segment because Britney Spears was married to Jessica Biel’s now husband, Justin Timberlake. The first relationship occurred over 15 years ago and lasted only a few years. However, Williams expressed that it was inappropriate for Biel to send the gift and urges the soon to be mother not
only to return to gift, but to return it unopened. Wendy said, “The way you get under somebody’s nail and make her understand what you mean, is you return the gift unopened.” She goes on, “I mean its hard enough being in a relationship, you know what I’m saying, people are all kinds of sneaky, that’s all I’m saying.” This is one of the countless examples in which Williams embraces the notion that women are catty and not to be trusted by other women. In this instance, she imaginatively created a scenario between two adults in order to remind her audience that women are catty. The rest of the tropes outlined in Pozner’s critique are as follows: two, women are stupid; three, women are incompetent at work and at home; and the fourth being that women are gold diggers. *The WWS* meets the criteria concerning all of Pozner’s tropes. Each segment of the show may embrace one or two of the tropes simultaneously or sometimes all four, but the implications for broadcasting these attitudes go far beyond simple celebrity gossip.

Because Wendy uses the SBW Collective techniques outlined in Davis’ research, viewers are conned into feeling a sense of belonging (2015). The idea that viewers are “co-hosts” combined with a forced audience applause when Williams sets a behavioural precedence based on imaginative celeb interactions create the illusion that this mindset is shared by all of the viewers. There is a wealth of implications if we apply feminist thought to the way in which the current discourse is perpetuated and established in *The WWS*.

**Conclusion**

Everyone experiences the effects of popular culture. Yet we remain thoroughly unaware of how and why the effect exists. There is no common desire to question the unscrupulous moral constructions in entertainment and the contemporary discourse of the media. For example, in the checkout line, we read a dozen female-damning headlines from the tabloid magazines beneath
mouth fresheners and beef jerky. Yes, they are only tabloid magazines, but they are incredibly powerful. Tabloid magazines are unwavering and unquestioned, and admittedly unworthy of our attention yet here they are, undoubtedly anchored at the front of your (non-organic)* grocery store. Images of the rich and famous are splayed across two shelves running parallel to a conveyor belt carrying unhealthy food to an individual living $7,000 below the poverty line who, despite the enthusiasm, spends 40 hours per week behind a cash register (GlassDoor). I call it the Great American Discourse of Consumer Non-Comprehension. Not only does the aforementioned scenario doctor cultural perceptions, but it also teaches us how to preserve them. John Carpenter’s 1988 movie “They Live” captures the subconscious nature of this discourse. The irony is captivating and worth its weight in academia and popular culture itself. One of the issues with the perception of pop culture is the belief that we are rational beings. That is, most people believe we can not embrace two contradicting belief systems; when in fact, we can and we do (Jhally & Lewis).

Tabloid magazines and its more animate twin brother, Reality TV, are integral to the construction of our social identities. They train us to prescribe, perceive, and perform constructs of race, class, and gender that is complementary to the current social hegemony which we continue to embrace despite our generally blatant opposition (Pozner 2010). Further, according to Jhally & Lewis, pop culture directs “the beliefs we form [that] become part of the context within which we understand who we are” (1992:41). Not only do we believe messages from pop-culture, but we also use them to construct a personal identity. As feminist scholars embrace, we should indeed understand all of the images and narratives in place, but we should also
acknowledge what is not being said. In the case of Wendy Williams, her lameness as a woman in power is what speaks most profoundly.

William’s place in the public sphere is deemed a methodological success for the way in which Black womanhood is properly performed and rewarded, yet the aspirations of said success is antiquated in an unequal discourse of gender relations, social inequalities, and weakened state of black womanhood. This journey from oppression to novelty and back to oppression is fascinatingly similar to the method used by Wendy Williams herself when talking to celebrities. That is to say, Williams highlights an unfortunate situation dealing with a celebrity, whether it be a break-up or career lull. In doing she makes this formerly oppressive situation into a novelty. Then Williams oppresses them further by telling them how to handle their own life. However, Wendy’s importance lies in the rehashing of already broadcasted entertainment. She doesn’t create the headlines, but rather expresses them from her viewpoint. Our clouded perceptions of race, class, and gender allow Wendy to become a novelty among the American public. That is to say, because the headlines are being discussed under the guise of what is understood as “Black Womanhood,” Williams is able to garner respect and broadcast her opinion which ultimately enforces the current discourse of representational oppression.

**Future Research**

The target market of daytime talk shows is 25-55 year old women. It is important to recognize the potency in this demographic. A decade ago, Rosalind Gill described/classified talk shows as the New Public Sphere and the New Confessional (2007:164, 169). She applies Foucault’s theories of confession and applies it to talk shows. However, her work is outdated and can use some contemporary re-working. The trend now seems to be a bit different. People are more
progressive in putting their stuff out there. They openly reveal themselves on social media. How
does this relate to the contemporary platform that Gill presented in her analysis?

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