Sample Student Essay and Prompt

**Directions for applicant:** Imagine that you are teaching a class in academic writing for first-year college students. In your class, drafts are not graded. Instead, you give students feedback and allow them to revise their essays before submitting them for grades. In response to your first essay assignment (given below), you have received the following draft from Kim X., one of your students. Write a brief end comment (250 words max.) in which you offer advice to Kim X. about how she might revise her essay. You do not need to submit a marked version of the sample student paper itself. We will be considering only your end comment.

**Kim X.’s Assignment:** Find a problem, tension, or complication that emerges from your textual analysis of a particular aspect of the essay, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life” by bell hooks, and craft an argument about your textual analysis so that it helps a reader understand hooks’ essay in a more nuanced way. You need not use any additional sources.

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An Evaluation of bell hooks’ Definition of “Representation”

In bell hooks’ essay “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” bell hooks suggests to African Americans to use the power of photography in their fight for representation. Throughout her essay, hooks highlights how photography is an essential tool for liberation in the black community and for combating the black images brokered by white society as the black reality. hook wrestles with the idea of visual politics and her belief that blacks could control their own representation by harnessing the power of the camera to capture their own photographic images. Hooks views the “field of representation is an ongoing struggle.” (hooks 57) she defines this “field of representation” as “how we see ourselves, how others see us.” (57) In her essay, hooks emphasizes that the black community must take control of their images
and to be their own photographer in order to have (proper) representation and to establish a black “sense of self and identity” (63).

Clearly, hooks’ definition has two significant parts: “how we see ourselves, how others see us” she fails to emphasize the last half of her definition. Thus, giving the photograph total power. In the essay she states “such is the power of the photograph, of the image, that it can give back and take away, that it can bind” (56). Moreover, does her definition of “representation” also suggest that both the photographer and the viewer have power over an image, and ultimately one’s “representation”?

In the introduction of her essay, hooks shares an anecdote wherein she describes her favorite photo of her father. hooks goes on to describe her father as wearing his white t-shirt with a “confident, seductive, cool” (54) look on his face, which she depicts as him “in his glory.” (54) In an attempt to support her personal need to remain the possessor of her Dad’s affection, she utilized the power of the photograph handling it in a way that would not allow either sister to get close to him. This is evident as she refuses to share it with bell hooks who so passionately desired it and insights outrage in her sister G. who describes the photo gift in complete contrast as “a horrible photograph of dad” further adding “It’s disgusting. He’s not even wearing a shirt, just an old white undershirt.” (55) Following this experience, hooks understands, “we see the same man, we do not see him in the same way.” (55) This is evident in her acknowledgement “Our ‘reading’ and experience of this image is shaped by our relationship with him” (hooks 56). While, hooks wants to “rescue and preserve this image of [her] father” (56) and for it to “represent” her father in her imagination as an image of him she could love, her sister views it as a “horrible photograph” (55) which for her is considered intolerable when considering her past. These opposing views shed light on how representation can be altered based on the viewer relationship and life experience with what they see.
Hooks continues her essay by describing her favorite childhood snapshot, a photo of herself “in her glory.” In the photo, hooks is “masquerading” (56) in a cowgirl costume. Contrary to the “received images, which simply reinforced [her] sense of unworthiness” (56). This photo gave her a “sense of girlhood beauty and capacity for pleasure.” (56) hooks states the feels “most real to [herself]” (hooks 56) when viewing this snapshot. Having the desire to share this view with others who she assumed would share her opinion of her “best image” (56), she headed for her cousin Schuyler’s home, a place “where art and image mattered. Unfortunately, as hooks later reveals, the treasured photo was lost after giving it to her cousin’s wife for “safekeeping”. (57) The mishandling and ultimately loss of this photograph might suggest that the opinion of her “best image” (56) photo was not shared. If it truly mattered as expected, the photo would have been securely protected and would have never been lost. The photo was treasured by hooks as “proof that there was a ‘me of me’” (57) was gone. The viewer’s differing perception caused her to lose “the image of [herself that she could love]” (57) and lose value in her “representation.”

Bell hooks also remarked on a popular tradition in Southern black homes, in which black families would display images of everyday life. She describes the walls as “sites of resistance” and “a space where…dehumanization could be countered.” (59) She gave power to the walls of “true-to-life” (59) that could counter “the degrading images of blackness that emerged from the racist white imagination and that were circulated widely in the dominant culture.” (59) Later in the essay, as hooks began to reminisce about her experiences while looking at her grandmother’s wall, “The walls were different than the photo albums. Rather than shutting images away, where they could be seen only upon request, the walls were public announcement of the primacy of the image.” (61) While hooks acknowledges the power the snapshots on the wall convey the black community’s “visual complexity” and helped “construct [their] identities” (59), she failed to highlight how the power of the viewer was taken into account. When hanging photographs and paintings on the wall, the home owner not only hangs the photo for their own pleasure, but also for the pleasure of others. Thus, when hanging photos of the wall the homeowner is mindful of views of the
perceiver. Furthermore, because the pictures varied and some were difficult to understand, hooks and other members of the black community depended on the “curatorial process” (61) to understand the image on display. Thus without a curatorial process of explaining these images, black images could be misrepresented in the eyes of the viewer. hooks goes on to state “the nationalists black freedom movements were often concerned only with the questions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ imagery” (58) and as a result, they did not “promote a more expansive cultural understanding of the politics of representation.”(58) When hanging photos on a wall and capturing snapshots, there is the same debate.

Before hooks understood the importance of the walls in her grandmother’s southern home, she despised taking photos. She describes how her father, the top the “patriarchy in [their] household.”(60), was known as “picture takin’ man” putting him in charge of making them pose for cameras, thus bell hooks “hated the images that camera produces”(hooks 60) so much that she “refused to be captured by anybody else’s camera”(hooks 61) and to “document her life.” (hooks 61) Her experience highlighted the power of the photographers and the ability they have to choose the image you will portray. How could these photos be “true-to-life” snapshots if they were stages and posed? Bell hooks earlier explains how “contemporary commodification of blackness creates a market context wherein conventional even stereotypical, modes of representing blackness may receive the greatest reward” (hooks 58) Images that would “subvert the status quo are harder to produce.” “There are no perceived markets for them,” hooks claims. From this statement, we can see that within picture taking, the photographer is also influenced by the questions of how the images could be perceived by the viewer, giving the viewer more power than the photographer. In order to create pictures freely, the black community should focus on creating a “perceived market” (hooks 58) that would accept their photos and their true sense of self.
Bell hooks argues that “all colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional subculture within the framework of dominance recognize that the field of representation is an ongoing struggle.” (hooks 57) While Hooks suggests that blacks use photography to seize control over their own imagery and to combat demeaning representations of blackness created by white racists, she fails to include a solution to challenge the perception of the view. While photography has an impact on the view, hooks has seen in her self-image, family, and grandmother’s southern home the effect of perception. In order for the black community to have representation, they must reconcile both sides of hooks’ definition of representation, “how we see ourselves, how others see us”. Hooks successfully describes the tactics the black community to take empower our community through photos, but she fails to resolve how to alter the perception of society. The photographs provided the black community with images that humanized their culture, but the images may not have this effect on Perhaps, having the black community serve as photographers and “curators”(hooks 61) to help create a “perceived market” (hooks 59) by providing understanding of the images presented as representation of the true-self-image. Sharing black history, black opinions, and black perspectives in the media could serve as supportive opportunities for the “curators” as they continue on their endeavors to build the receptive markets and while improving black representation. Until then, the image of the black community will continue to struggle and be altered to in the eyes of the “colonizing eye.” (hooks 59)

Word Count: 1538
Works Cited