



Using a Conditional Matrix to Develop Understanding of Appearance of African American Women in Female Slave Narratives

Eulanda A. Sanders

Colorado State Univ., Fort Collins, CO 80523

Joan Laughlin

University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583

Appearance provides cues to the cul-tural, political, social, aesthetic, and economic aspects of an individual's life. This study analyzed appearance as described in slave narratives written by African American women after emancipation, using semiotics as a theoretical framework. Descriptions of appearance in these texts provide clues to African American women's positioning in society by comparison to a conditional matrix.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) define a conditional matrix as "a set of circles, one inside the other, each (level) corresponding to different aspects of the world around us" (p. 161). The outer rings pertain to actions or interactions farthest from the individual while the inner rings represent those closest. For African American slaves the matrix consisted of seven concentric circles representing from the inner most to the outer most: slave, family, slave community, African American community, abolitionist community, white community, and United States culture.

A conditional matrix allows the exploration of interface between the slave and individuals in his or her environment. The appearance of African American slaves was a vehicle for sending multiple messages to all the levels of the matrix.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.