

“WHAT DON’T BLACK GIRLS DO?” : CONSTRUCTIONS OF DEVIANCE AND THE
PERFORMANCE OF BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

This research interrogates the ways in which Black women process and negotiate their sexual identities. By connecting the historical exploitation of Black female bodies to the way Black female deviant identities are manufactured and consumed currently, I was able to show not only the evolution of Black women's attitudes towards sexuality, but also the ways in which these attitudes manifest when policing deviancy amongst each other.

Chapter 1 gives historical insight to the way that deviancy has been inextricably linked to the construction of Blackness. Using the Post-Reconstruction Era as my point of entry, I demonstrate the ways in which Black bodies were stigmatized as sexually deviant, and how the use of Black caricatures buttressed the consumption of this narrative by whites. I explain how countering this narrative became fundamental to the evolution of Black female sexual politics, and how ultimately bodily agency was later restored through sexual deviancy.

Chapter 2 interrogates the way "authenticity" is propagated within the genre of reality TV. Black women are expected to perform deviant identities that coincide with controlling images so that the "authenticity" of Black womanhood is consumed by mainstream audiences. Using Vh1's *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives* I analyze the way these identities are performed and policed by the women on both shows.

Lastly, Chapter 3 is a reflexive analysis detailing the ways in which Black women process the performances of deviant Black female identities on reality TV using ethnographic methods.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped me and guided me through the trials and tribulations of creating this manuscript. In particular, my family, my thesis committee and close friends who stood by me throughout the time taken to complete this work.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In U.S. society, Black female sexuality is portrayed historically as either exaggerated or non-existent within the dominant imagination. This hypersexual/asexual binary is imposed on Black female bodies and continues to be manufactured through various outlets of popular culture overtime. Building upon black feminist critiques, I examine the extent to which Black women have internalized this sexual binary, used it to police other women, and work to negate it or reclaim it.

Understanding the way deviancy is ascribed to Black female bodies is crucial to understanding the ways in which Black female sexuality is produced and consumed in society. Blackness is constructed as the antithesis of whiteness, and thus deemed non-normative, inferior and deviant. This includes definitions of masculinity and femininity. White womanhood is equivalent to true womanhood, while Black womanhood is considered aberrant. Historically, “authentic” representations of Black womanhood were manufactured through two primary controlling images: Mammy and Jezebel (Collins, 84), both of which were not only used during slavery and Post-Reconstruction to justify the denial of “true womanhood” to black women, but also to enact their sexual exploitation. Mammy was considered unattractive and asexual while Jezebel was sexually deviant and scandalous. These images permeated society during the 20th century through paraphernalia, film, theatre, and literature. Today, the predominately white entertainment industry generates revenue by exploiting these controlling images, specifically

through the genre of reality TV. I argue that sexuality is the focal point in determining who is seen as “respectable” and who is not on reality TV shows that focus predominately on black women. My research specifically looks at Vh1’s *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives* because both shows propagate “authentic” narratives of heterosexual Black women in heteronormative and non-normative relationships. I am an avid consumer of both shows, and while they are entertaining, they also perpetuate deviant Black female identities as “authentic” portrayals of Black womanhood. These negative portrayals are often challenged by members of the Black community because they buttress dominant narratives of Blackness; however, they are consumed as “authentic” by mainstream audiences because they coincide with the controlling stereotypes that have been used in the manufacturing of Black female identities since the 20th century.

Though I understand why these portrayals are problematic, I still tune in every week to see the ways both groups of women negotiate love within their romantic relationships in hopes of experiencing a degree of familiarity with the predominately Black casts. I will not be credulous and say that I believe every interaction on these shows to be “authentic”, because I realize that maintaining good ratings is of utmost importance to the network and producers behind them. I expected the fights because they made for good entertainment, and while I do not condone violence amongst women, especially Black women on television, it was cathartic to watch these women experience a range of emotions. Part of this is because as a Black woman living in the U.S I perform to some degree every day for acceptance. I know that in social settings where white people are in close proximity I must be on my best behavior. If I get upset I do not have the luxury of expressing “authentic” emotions for fear of being labeled “sassy or “angry”. I have to refrain from wearing revealing clothing for fear of being eroticized, and I have to be content

with the fact that I may be considered emasculating at times for holding Black men accountable for their actions as well.

When I watch *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives* I envy the way the women on the show can explore the extent of their emotions and sexuality freely. I often find myself thinking “If I was in that same situation I would have done the exact same thing”, so it is refreshing at times to be entertained by women who “keep it real”. On the other hand I am also aware of the ways in which “keeping it real” has been projected onto Black female bodies in detrimental ways, and the effects it has had on the representation of Black womanhood in mainstream culture. As the popularity of reality television increases, so does the number of Black women reclaiming the Jezebel stereotype for profit. With the aid of reality TV this has become a potential career path; however, despite the performance of sexual deviancy, there is still a sexual binary that remains that is imposed upon Black women. I argue that the legacies of black women’s sexual exploitation inform the ways in which deviance is both constructed and performed in contemporary popular culture. These legacies, I argue, affect the way Black women process and negotiate their sexual identities.

Importance of Study

In this thesis, I argue that by understanding the way Black women process representations of deviant Black female identities, we can better interrogate the myriad ways that they negotiate the meanings of their sexual lives. Prior to entering graduate school I can recall having a conversation with my mother about what it meant to be a “lady”. One of the fundamental differences between a woman that is a “lady” and one that is not is her ability to maintain a respectable identity, especially in the public sphere. This meant that she would either negate her sexuality completely, or adopt a monogamous identity. “Real ladies” did not have numerous

sexual partners, and if a woman did, she was expected to keep them discreet. As our conversation progressed I realized that those standards were only reserved for Black women, as it was implicit that white women are inherently presumed to be “ladies” even if they were salacious in the public sphere. Where did my mother get this definition of a lady from, and why was it only relative to Black women? Why can white women have sexual freedom and still be recognized as “ladies”? If you can be a “lady” and still develop and embrace your sexual identity, why is this not the case for Black women? Will Black women ever have the chance to access womanhood in the same manner as white women? Do they want to?

These questions inspired me to analyze the construction of Black female sexuality, and the ways in which it has evolved since the 20th century. I examined the role of controlling images in the production and consumption of “authentic” Black female identities in reality TV, the methods of resistance to these controlling images, and how Black women have internalized these images to police each other. This needs to be analyzed because it directly affects the way Black womanhood is identified by not only mainstream audiences, but by Black women themselves. Interrogating “authenticity” is of the utmost importance because it ultimately influences the way knowledge about Black women is produced. The “authentic” portrayal of Black womanhood, especially in regards to sexuality negates the nuances and multiplicity of Black women’s lived experiences. The construction of Black female sexuality is too complex to be encapsulated into a sexual binary, and the performances and policing of deviant behaviors on reality TV re-affirm this. When interrogating the sexual oppression of Black women and the performance of deviant sexual identities, I took into consideration the role that intersectionality plays in shaping their realities. Black feminist theorists Patricia Hill Collins, Evelyn Hammonds, Kimberle Crenshaw,

and Tricia Rose have all used intersectionality as a framework for analyzing different forms of oppression, and I have used them as references in developing my own approach.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses how controlling images are imposed on Black women and used to justify their oppression. As referenced previously, the “Jezebel” stereotype is of importance because it has been used as justification to sexually exploit and oppress the bodies of Black women. It was also used to create a sexual binary between white women and Black women. Evelyn Hammonds speaks to this and discusses the ongoing effects of this binary in “Towards a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence”. She argues that this binary is one of the primary factors in the construction of black women’s sexuality from the nineteenth century to the present. She also discusses the resistance to this binary and how it has been executed by Black women during different time periods and the limitations of those strategies of resistance. Both theorists give an historical perspective of the way this sexual binary has developed and continues to progress, but neither discusses the internalization of this binary by Black women in the 21st century. This is the gap I used to situate my research using reality television.

In “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection”, Patricia Hill Collins elaborates on the pivotal ways stereotypes have been used in denying Black women access to true womanhood because they specifically perpetuate the symbolic dimension of oppression. Central to symbolic oppression is the use of controlling images and stereotypes attributed to various racial, class and gender groups. When applied to traits and characteristics of “true womanhood”, Black womanhood is devalued so that White womanhood is deemed credible. Collins also explains that when there is a universal gender symbolism ascribed to masculinity and femininity, without considering how race, class and

gender play a role in the experiences for certain groups of people, these people can be rendered invisible.

Kimberle Crenshaw elaborates on this in “Anti- Discrimination Framework of Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”. She states that the boundaries of sex and racial discrimination are defined by white women and Black men. If for some reason the experiences of Black women do not coincide with those of white women and Black men, they are no longer protected and are seen as “outside” of these boundaries. Based off of this theory, the issues that complicate the perception of Black women’s sexuality are not seen as discriminatory and are normalized because white women and Black men do not experience these complications in the same manner due to intersectionalities. When this happens dehumanization occurs. It is clear that this is occurring for Black women in reality television. The way they choose to express themselves to one another, how they internalize sexuality, and how they choose to police each other can all be attributed to the way they have been positioned in society.

I modeled the methodological approach to my research after Tricia Rose. *In Longing to Tell*, she gives Black women a platform to talk openly about how they view sexuality and intimacy, and the ways that both of these concepts have shaped their lives. Through various narratives, she gives us an insight into the way certain variables impact the ways Black women negotiate their sexual identities. While she gives a voice to Black women through interviews, I did the same through two, three hour focus group discussions. The focus groups were comprised of eight University of Alabama female students ranging from ages 19-25 that self-identified as African American. The reality television shows that I chose for this research project were *Love*

and Hip Hop Atlanta and *Basketball Wives*. I chose these shows specifically because sexuality is expressed and discussed explicitly, and they both reflect a heteronormative Black women's narrative. This was important because I was specifically examining Black women involved in heterosexual relationships. Prior to developing the focus group I watched every season of each show to ensure that the episodes I choose were the most suitable for the direction of my research. I did a content analysis on the episodes where naming and policing occurred most often.

Contribution to the Literature

My methodological approach to the way Black women navigate and develop their sexual identities is essential because I use narratives of Black women to truly understand this process. Additionally my research also applies the theories and concepts already presented, and ties the historical context of sexual exploitation and deviancy, to the way Black women process their sexual identities from a standpoint that is reflected on reality television. I argued that they have internalized the binaries placed upon them through the use of the good/bad woman dynamic that is evident in reality television. How does reality television complicate this binary in depictions of Black female sexuality? For example, when we look at the binary of white womanhood vs. Black womanhood, it tends to be very rigid. White women can be sexual and still be women, Black women are either seen as deviant or forced to negate their sexuality. On reality television, it is possible for Black women to showcase their bodies without being seen as deviant by each other depending on their positionality. The way Black women on reality television view acceptable sexuality is more complex than just identifying certain women as being either desexualized or hypersexualized. If women can reclaim certain aspects of the Jezebel stereotype without being seen as hypersexualized, then how does naming and policing occur by their peers and significant others? Without white privilege Black women are only allowed to occupy the extremes of this

good/bad binary. Sexuality is seen as a defining characteristic in how they present themselves instead of an extension of who they are.

The reason I chose interviews as my ethnographic method was to not only show the complexities of Black womanhood, but to prove that sexuality is a facet of womanhood that Black women have not had the luxury of exploring on their own terms. Because of the way deviancy is ascribed to Blackness, sexuality serves as a space of restraint for Black women rather than an intrinsic right. Although providing literature of Black women's sexual oppression is a start, my contribution is the ability to make what is generally relegated to the private sphere public using a Black feminist epistemology. The significance of a Black feminist epistemology lies in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters their empowerment (Hill-Collins, 256). The narratives I have documented show the ways in which Black women process and negotiate their sexuality for a promise of respectability they may never attain simply because they are Black. As fatalistic as it may seem, it is empowering to know that their lived experiences will contribute to the knowledge produced about Black womanhood. This contribution to the body of knowledge further will affirm why lived experience is crucial in conceptualizing the experiences of Black women because it truly needs to be understood if they will ever have the privilege of being considered "ladies".

CHAPTER TWO

Planting the Seeds of Deviance: The Formation of Black Female Sexuality and the Politics of Respectability in Early U.S. History

Introduction

The deconstruction of deviancy is essential to understanding the positionality of Black female bodies in America. Deviancy inevitably shapes the way Blackness is manufactured and consumed, and is essential in buttressing the normality of whiteness. “Ideas about white racial normality and Black racial deviancy draw heavily on ideas about gender and sexuality” (Hill-Collins 73). The construction of whiteness requires the exclusion of Black bodies from hegemonic gendered identities and in doing so Blackness is inherently constructed as deviant. The use of sexuality to propagate this dichotomy has historical precedence. I specifically examine the Post-Reconstruction Era because it is within this time period that the construction of Blacks as sexually deviant is most salient. Sexual deviancy ultimately denied Black women access to womanhood, and constructed Black men as brutal rapists in need of castigation. To protect the purity of white womanhood, Black men were lynched at alarming rates by white men. Lynching was a spectacle used to re-affirm the superiority of whiteness through the degradation of Blackness, inciting Black fear through the normalization of sadistic behavior. Black women were also susceptible to violence through rape by white men, and were offered no protection by the law because they were not considered women. The Black women’s club movement, comprised of affluent and educated women emerged in the late 1800s in attempts to counter the

narrative of their supposed sexual deviancy. They propagated the performance of respectable identities by assimilating to ideas of white womanhood, and encouraged their working class counterparts to do the same. Performativity would be central in the construction of Black female sexual identities, as Black women would have to assimilate to survive. With the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance and the “New Negro” movement, there was a shift in the response to Black deviancy. By allowing Black women the ability to explore sexuality on their own terms, they were able to negate respectability politics and reclaim agency over their bodies. It is through analysis of Black womanhood during the Reconstruction Era, Post-Reconstruction Era, and the Harlem Renaissance, that I critically examine the foundation of Black female sexual politics.

Strange Fruit: Lynching as a Political Statement

Recognizing the connection between race, sexuality, and political power during the Reconstruction era and Post Reconstruction era is imperative when interrogating deviance and the practice of lynching as it pertains to Blackness. Lynching was a political statement that explicitly shaped America. It was the gruesome and sadistic white response to the social and political advancements of Blacks as a result of the Reconstruction amendments. “Honest white men practically conceded the necessity of intelligence murdering ignorance to correct the mistake of the general government, and the race was left to the tender mercies of the solid South” (Wells, *The Black and White of It*). Whites were looking to restore the political power they had lost, and in doing so they sought to reduce Black men and women to sexual deviants to justify the immense amount of violence towards them. “Politics, sexuality and race were already inextricably linked in the U.S., but the problem established by this link reached new heights of visibility during the period of Reconstruction through the increased lynching of Black men and women by the early decades of the twentieth century” (Hammonds 174). Performativity and

public consumption made lynching a staple punishment in the South. Both elements were necessary for it to be an effective agent for intimidation. Because lynching was a spectacle enabled by the government, the psychological messages about whiteness and Blackness conveyed through this heinous act permeated society in such a way that forced Blacks to acquiesce white domination.

Knowing they could be targeted at any moment without protection from the law and executed so conspicuously incited Black fear, and public consumption was vital to sustaining it. Through photography even the most confined lynchings could be made public. From the anguish of Black bodies to the contentment of white spectators, the semblance of a lynching could be consumed by anyone who could afford to buy a photograph. These photographs also served as a way to assuage white anxiety in regards to rape and Black aggressiveness. “The images acted as an extension of the actual spectacle, offering them vicarious access to these particularized thrills...The photographs not only allowed viewers to experience, or re-experience, the brutal ‘justice’ of the lynching, but they could also serve as justifications for the violence after the fact” (Wood 153). It was very common for these photographs to appear in mainstream newspapers, and be used for postcards and birthday cards that sold as souvenirs from the event.

While lynching is contemporarily categorized as sadistic and repulsive, they were surprisingly considered very ritualistic. “Ritualistic castration” was prevalent in many rape cases as a physical manifestation of the denial of manhood to Black men. In *The Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*, Anna Pochmara explains the rationale behind the castration of lynch victims. Pochmara states:

On the one hand, such a practice was ideologically justified by a need to contain and appropriate Black male sexuality; it symbolically denied the privilege of the phallus and political citizenship to Black men. It animalistically sexualized the black male and simultaneously excluded him from the masculine political privilege (Pochmara 20).

Manhood was not a matter of sex for Black men; it was a privilege they were forbidden to acquire. The idea that Blacks were emotionless, unstable creatures in need of white guidance to be able to properly function in society stemmed from slavery and was internalized during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “In an ironic appropriation of the old abolitionist argument used against slaveholder insensitivities, segregationist maintained that Blacks could see and hear terrible things and remain unmoved. Such stolid insensibility demanded the utter violence of lynching” (Smith 59). Through this ideology whites could credulously maintain the notion that Blacks were subhuman and incapable of matriculating into society as free people. They could also justify paternalistic, inhumane treatment towards them in attempts to reclaim and sustain the white nostalgia that preceded the Emancipation Proclamation.

The dismantling of slavery in 1863 symbolized two things for southern whites. First, the agency being restored to the African American community had the potential to shift the power imbalance that had once been prevalent. Secondly, the southern economy suffered tremendously because the free labor that was once used as an economic catalyst was now abnegated. Though the emancipation of slaves was needed for the progression of race relations between Blacks and whites, many of the new implemented policies were met with white resistance. Prior to the Civil Rights act of 1866, whites relied on “Black codes” to maintain control. “Black codes were designed to limit the personal freedoms and economic and social opportunities for former slaves. These new laws kept Blacks from buying firearms, voting or serving on juries” (McNeese 46). Southern whites believed that order was needed to restore the privilege that the Reconstruction era attempted to neutralize.

As Black men gained political power, anxiety amongst white southerners heightened for fear that the racial caste system put in place during slavery would cease to exist. Southern whites

also believed Black male sexuality was a direct threat to their power, and as a result, the stigma of deviancy was perpetuated to justify brutal acts of terrorism towards them. “Following the war, white anxiety about Black male sexuality reached an unprecedented level of intensity. During the Reconstruction era Black male sexuality first became a major theme in white Southern politics, thereby commencing an era of terrorism and lynching” (Holdes 403). Although whites were disgusted at the thought of unrestrained Black male sexuality, it is what “unrestrained” Blackness represented that terrified them most because it had the potential to precede miscegenation. For white men, if this occurred the superiority of white masculinity would be debilitated, and the purity of white womanhood would be debased in such a way that would obscure the boundaries of an “inherent” racial hierarchy. White womanhood represented a degree of prestige and morality that was legitimized by white patriarchy, thus granting white men the ability to protect it by any means necessary (DuRocher 55). The preservation of white womanhood meant more than taking preventative measures against miscegenation. It also meant possessing the authority to define what could be ascribed to true womanhood, and who can be excluded. By definition Blacks were seen as intrinsically barbaric with an insatiable sexual appetite, so abnegating Black women access to womanhood was not only probable but extremely justifiable. Conceding to the idea that white women consensually engaged in sexual intercourse with Black men would not only force white men to acknowledge Black men as their equals, but they would also have to interrogate the ways in which Black womanhood was also vilified.

To repudiate or at the very least circumvent this reality, the idea of the “Black brute” was constructed and perpetuated to systemically oppress Black male sexuality. The Black brute epitomized the barbaric and perilous nature inextricably linked to Black masculinity, and white men feared that the most vulnerable demographic of their population, white women, would be

susceptible to sexual assault. This caricature would also become a staple in the minds of whites through literature and various outlets of popular culture. Charles Carroll's *The Negro Beast* (1900) used skewed biblical and scientific evidence to exclude Blacks from the human family, and proclaimed miscegenation to be an abomination before God. Thomas Dickson's novel, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) argued that emancipation had transformed Blacks into beasts that needed to be feared, while Dr. William Howard detailed in 1903 that "the black birthright was sexual excess and madness" in the *Journal of Medicine* (Napolitano 134). In 1915 D.W. Griffith released *Birth of a Nation*, a film that contextualized the repercussions of unrestrained Blackness through violence against white men and the rape of white women.

In *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law In All Its Phases*, anti-lynch crusader Ida B. Wells repudiated the validity of the Black brute by detailing several instances where white women conceded to seducing Black men. Wells also emphasized that white southerners were less concerned with castigating "rapists" and more concerned with vilifying Blackness. She states:

Hundreds of such cases might be cited, but enough have been given to prove the assertion that there are white women in the South who love the Afro-American's company... Hence there is a growing demand among Afro-Americans that the guilt or innocence of parties accused of rape be fully established. They know the men of the section of the country who refuse this are not so desirous of punishing rapists as they pretend. The utterances of the leading white men show that with them it is not the crime but the class (Wells loc 114).

Because Blackness had been inseparably linked to deviancy, Black men were still constructed as brutes even when there was evidence that proved otherwise. The validity of this caricature was also buttressed through the stereotype that Black women were salacious and animalistic as well. "Now released from the constraints of their white masters, the Black man found white women so 'alluring' and 'seductive' because, according to [Phillip] Bruce, of the 'wantonness of the women of his own race' (Giddings 31). This made Black women deviant and inherently

nefarious, while also making them the most hypervisible/invisible demographic of this era. Unlike Black men, whites were not fearful of Black women contaminating whiteness or disrupting white patriarchy; however because they were also presumed to be sexually aggressive, they were susceptible to the perversities of white men with no protection from the law. Rape also functioned as a response to the political gains of Black men. Rather than accept the change the Reconstruction era provided for African Americans, white men forced Black women into a space of sexual subjection as a way of restoring their white privilege. By showing that Black female bodies had little value, white men were able to ensure Blacks internalized their inferiority as well as white superiority in every aspect. The idea that white men could manipulate the fear of Black men through the safety of their wives, sisters and daughters, allowed rape to be used as a method of terror and control similarly to the way it was used during slavery. This lack of protection was yet another way to make the deviancy of Black womanhood more salient.

The Racial Politics of Respectability

Essentially, Black womanhood is defined as the antithesis of white womanhood; white womanhood is synonymous with true womanhood. Feminist scholar Barbara Welter suggests that true womanhood could only be evident through the characteristics of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity; therefore, naturally creating a hierarchy amongst white women and women of color (Carby 23). This was especially evident during the twentieth century when Europeans colonized “communities” in the third world. In “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures”, Ann Stoler details the privilege of European women in colonial societies. She states:

Male colonizers positioned European women as the bearers of a redefined colonial morality...The presence and protection of European women was repeatedly invoked to clarify racial lines. It coincided with perceived threats to European prestige, increased

racial conflict, covert challenges to the colonial order, outright expressions of nationalist resistance, and internal dissension among whites themselves (Stoler 640-641).

European men used European women to solidify the racial and gender divides between them and those who were being colonized. Through the implication of white women being superior, it automatically positioned women of color as inferior. A narrative is then constructed of white womanhood being so pure that it required defending on the part of European men against primitive natives. An understanding of this made it permissible for white men to have native concubines, while native men were restricted from engaging with white women (Stoler 641). Although it may seem as if European women were authoritative in regards to requiring natives to position her in a space of privilege, it is really European men that initially created that space. Within a space of patriarchy, European men possessed the authority to dictate the definition of true womanhood and what it entailed.

Motherhood in particular was presumed to be a casualty of true womanhood because it was seen as the “purpose of a woman’s life” (Stoler 644). Because women have the ability to reproduce, there was an expectation for them to do so to help Europeans maintain their position of privilege. This was called the cult of motherhood. In the context of the antebellum south, if white women were supposed to be pure and reserved sexually, Black women were supposed to be sexually aggressive with an exorbitant sexual appetite. Black women functioned as caretakers in the home, field workers and reproductive agents, while simultaneously being sexually exploited. They were seen as property and had no rights, so it was very common for them to be sexually assaulted by their masters. Because they did not have access to womanhood, they could not be protected from rape. This was also evident after emancipation. In “Bloody Terrain: Freedwomen, Sexuality and Violence During Reconstruction,” Catherine Clinton suggests that

failure to expand definitions of “womanhood” warranted the raping of Black women by white men. Clinton states:

We know that southern whites were unwilling to expand their prewar definitions of ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’ to include formally enslaved persons. Although postwar law might recognize an African American woman as a person and wife, and a Black man a citizen and voter, Lost Cause ideologues promoted white supremacy with vengeance (Clinton 321).

Essentially, the inability to be seen as “men” and “women” in the eyes of southern whites proved to be detrimental for African Americans. Through the perpetuation of antebellum themes, Black women and men were not only violently oppressed, but were also stigmatized and misrepresented sexually.

For Black women, the two biggest sexual misrepresentations came in the stereotypes of the Mammy and Jezebel. The construct of the mammy represents how society viewed the archetypical relationship between that of a “good” Black female slave and her white family. She was loved for her obedience, and was happy to take care of her white family even if it meant she neglected her own. She was in charge of other house servants, and was a staple in many southern white family structures because she was a surrogate mother to her mistress’ children. Mammy also functioned as a liaison between whites and Blacks, and to a degree, received a certain level of respect from her white family (Innes 107). The mammy was never seen as a threat to white women because she was considered asexual and enslaved. In addition to her relationship with white families, mammy also represented class distinction amongst the slaves. Slaves were divided into two groups: those who worked in the field, and those who worked in the house. Those who were perceived as capable of subduing their innate fondness for uncontrollable violence and sexuality were considered suitable enough to be domestics in white homes. Mammy

was considered the epitome of a respectable Black woman because she abnegated her “Blackness”, thus making her deserving of her position in the house.

The “Jezebel” stereotype, on the other hand attributed sexual deviancy to Black womanhood.

According to *Writing African American Women*, the Jezebel stereotype has biblical roots. It states:

The Jezebel stereotype takes its name from the Biblical Queen Jezebel, wife of King Ahab. Jezebel’s foreignness (as the Phoenician wife of the king of Israelites), her active support for the worship of pagan deities, and her influence over her husband have earned this figure, one of the Bible’s more notable women characters, a lasting reputation as the incarceration of female evil, gender transgression, idolatry, and sexual discretion (Beaulieu 474).

The Jezebel stereotype stigmatized Black women as “seductresses” who were always aroused and ready for sexual activity. It was presumed that Black women had an immense sexual appetite that could not be satisfied, making them the counter image of white womanhood. “The Jezebel stereotype differs from the Mammy stereotype in that it seeks to underscore rather than repress or deny the sexuality of African American women” (Beaulieu 474). Through the construct of the Jezebel, the raping of Black women by white men during slavery could be justified because she was portrayed as the initiator of sex. It is important to consider that the sexual abuse and ascribed sexuality given to Black women was not just about the needs of the slave master. Sexual abuse affirmed the superiority of white womanhood, and continued to reinforce the sexual binary between white women and Black women. Patricia Hill Collins argues; that “Sexuality and fertility were neither designed for Black women’s pleasure nor subject to their control. The system was designed to stamp out agency and annex Black women’s bodies to a system of profit” (Hill Collins 56). As property, Black women had no say in how their bodies were used, and to what extent they could be accessed. They were not seen as women with feelings and boundaries because they did not have that privilege.

Her salacious nature was considered so enticing that sexual assault was permissible by both Black and white men. According to Dorothy Hall; “This early dichotomy between the natural Black woman who is sexually licentious and the respectable Black woman whose sexuality is erased marks the origins of the contemporary paradox of something that is at once concealed and displayed” (Roberts 46). Because of the narrative ascribed to Blackness, sexuality is effectual in linking deviancy to Black female bodies even when they are presumed to be respectable. This inevitably makes sexual deviancy palpable even when sexuality is negated, ultimately rendering Black women sexually oppressed no matter which side of the dichotomy they were ascribed to.

Black Womanhood and the Caricature of Sexuality

Amongst other stereotypes like the Black Brute, the Mammy and Jezebel permeated popular culture during the 19th and 20th centuries as commodified caricatures. Artists and entertainers used these caricatures to shape and perpetuate racial ideologies about Black men, women and children using common stereotypes such as pitch black skin, wooly hair, grotesque lips, bulging white eyes, and other items associated with Blacks in popular imagination (DeMello 34). Portrayed by white men in female garb, both Mammy and Jezebel were fixtures in minstrelsy. Shortly after their vaudeville¹ debut in the late 1800s, their popularity proliferated as they continued to be manufactured as sources of entertainment in popular culture. Many of the Jezebel objects of the 19th and 20th century eroticized and caricatured African women. These caricatures were often divided into two groups: the Pathetic Jezebel and the Exotic Jezebel.

The Pathetic Jezebel shades into the mammy image because it depicts African and African American women with aberrant and unattractive physical, cultural, and social traits (e.g., with exaggerated lips or sagging breasts, uncivilized, inebriated, etc.). Unlike

¹ Vaudeville: Popular source of entertainment from the late 1800s to early 1920s that showcased quirky performers capable of holding the attention of an audience for over three minutes (PBS).

the Mammy image however, the Pathetic Jezebel is always sexualized and depicted as nude or seminude. The Saartjie Baartman/ Zulu Lulu/Angelfood McSpade caricatures are examples of the Pathetic Jezebel, while the mulatto Hot mama is a representative of desirous Exotic Jezebel (Brown & Stentiford 658).

Event in the depiction of hypersexual caricatures white supremacy manifests itself through the aesthetic appeal of the Jezebel. The exotic jezebel, often depicted as the “tragic mulatta²” possessed more European features (light eyes, light skin, straighter hair etc.), and was considered more attractive than the Pathetic Jezebel whose “Blackness” was more salient. While the Exotic Jezebel was more commonplace in film, television, and theatre, the Pathetic Jezebel was more prevalent in memorabilia. In the early 1900s, novelties such as fishing lures, post cards, license plates and other household items could be found exhibiting pitch black, nude African women (Brown & Stentiford 658).

Mammy was also illustrated on greeting cards, children’s games, cartoons, *paraphernalia*, and to advertise various household items under the alias’ “Aunt Jemima” and “Aunt Sally”; though Aunt Jemima was by far the most popular. With her signature red bandanna, large breasts, and pitch black skin, she became the face of domesticity in the Antebellum, Reconstruction and Post- Reconstruction eras. Aunt Jemima’s popularity soared when she was use to advertise Pearl Milling Company’s pancake mix in 1889 after her caricature was discovered by co-founder Chris Rutt during a vaudeville minstrel show. “Aunt Jemima” was actually the song performed by the minstrel while he wore a bandana and apron. Shortly after the song gained notoriety, Rutt decided that should be the name of his pancake mix, and the mammy figure has since been synonymous with pancakes (Jones xiii).

Black actresses during the 20th century had a very difficult time being casted for roles outside of domestics, so in addition to being the face of various advertisements, the mammy

² Tragic Mulatta: A woman of white and Black ancestry. Product of miscegenation (McLendon 13)

figure was also used in a number of films. *Imitation of Life* (1934) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939) starring Hattie McDaniel, who would later become the first Black woman to win an academy award for her performance. By the 1950s the mammy caricature started to slowly fade away, though the Jezebel caricature would remain prevalent in film and television. During the 1970s, urban themed movies known as “Blaxploitation” films featured the Jezebel alongside other Black stereotypes in an attempt to provide Black actors and actresses work. White directors and producers used these films to depict their interpretations of Black life by giving agency to these exploitive caricatures, and constructing them in such a way that would allow them to continue to manifest through other identities. “During the Blaxploitation period, Jezebel reincarnated as the militant, more independent but still ‘foxy’ and hypersexualized woman who bared her butt and breasts while solving mysteries and fighting for justice” (Burrell 74). The Blaxploitation era obscured the Jezebel dichotomy by ascribing positive characteristics to hypersexualized Black female bodies and giving them purpose outside of sexual servitude. Slowly but surely the “new” Jezebel would be used to authenticate Black female experiences in mainstream media, making this caricature a staple in American popular culture well into the 21st century.

The Black Club Movement and the Politics of Respectability

At the turn of the 20th century, Black businesses became increasingly popular throughout the south. Even though segregation forced a lot of Black entrepreneurs to limit their business to Black clientele, they were still able to thrive. In *Three Black Generations at the Crossroads: Community, Culture, and Consciousness*, Lois Benjamin discusses the gains of Black businesses despite the effects of segregation. She states:

The political, social, and economic restrictions of that [post-reconstruction] era curtailed black business activities, limiting them to the Black consumer market. Despite the forced economic detour to “develop separate enterprises and to sell in a restricted race market,” blacks made significant gains in businesses, particularly in the South (Benjamin 133).

Black leaders such as W.E.B Dubois and Booker T. Washington encouraged Black entrepreneurs to start businesses as a way of maintaining financial freedom from whites. Black businesses that served the special needs of the Black community, such as barbershops and beauty salons flourished immensely. In addition to Black businesses, the Black press³ also became popular, as they were the voice of the Black community. Black journalists used this platform for advocacy and to affirm the Black community. Blacks no longer wanted to be misrepresented by whites, and used the Black press as a way of sharing their own perspectives regarding the effects of segregation. “The publishers and editors of Black newspapers were primarily motivated to deliver information that centered African Americans in the dialogue of what it meant to be American and Black” (Smith 79). The Black press was very instrumental in voicing the concerns of the Black community, especially in regards to lynching.

Ida B. Wells in particular was a journalist that devoted her life to informing the public about the lynchings of law-abiding Black men. In 1892 three of her close friends, Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart were lynched after an interracial dispute took place outside of their grocery store in Memphis, Tennessee. The three men owned People’s Grocery Company and were accused of stealing business from a neighboring white grocer. Because of this their store was invaded by a white mob, and in attempts to defend themselves they shot and injured three white men. They were quickly summoned to death without a fair trial. Shortly following the incident she used her newspaper *Free Speech and Headlight* to urge Blacks to

³The Black Press was comprised of Black newspapers that vocalized the concerns and needs of the Black community during the post-reconstruction era. The Freedom Journal was the first Black publication beginning in 1827. The editorial’s purpose was “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations of the things which concern us so dearly” (Smith 79)

leave Memphis due to their inability to effectively protect their property and well-being. Unfortunately this message was not received well by the white community, and as a result she received death threats, and her newspaper office was destroyed. She responded by embarking upon a nationwide anti-lynching campaign, and in the north and south, Black women began collectively organizing an anti-lynching crusade⁴ “She hit hard at the commonly used alibi for lynchings, the charge of "rape", and dared bring out into the open the most taboo subject of all in Victorian America-the habitual sexual abuse of black women by white men” (Lerner 160). The work of Wells was instrumental in making not only the nation aware of heinous crimes towards African Americans, but also initiating dialogue regarding Black female bodies.

In the same way Wells candidly discusses the fallacious rape allegations against Black men in *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, she also speaks to the ways in which white men contradict miscegenation laws through sexual assault against Black women. “The miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women” (Wells, *The Black and White of It*). Wells understood how vulnerable Blacks were in the south, so she urged them start exercising their agency by boycotting white institutions with segregatory laws, migrating north, and protecting themselves against whites who harassed them. She also admonished Blacks who failed to speak out against injustice, and pegged them as part of the problem.

Amongst her biggest supporters were the women of the Black club movement. As early as the 18th Century, Black women organized to create mutual aid societies to help address the needs of impoverished Blacks. Many were started inside of churches, and through morality and

⁴ A group of Black women dedicated to raising 1 million dollars to support the passage of the Anti-Lynching Bill, introduced by Congressman Leonidas Dyer in 1918. This group was led by Mary Talbert of the National Association of Colored Women (Davis 39).

acculturation they sought to maintain the integrity of the Black family by keeping as many as they could out of the shelters in urban cities (Brown et.al, 347). These societies created safe spaces for the development of Black feminist consciousness, and became the foundation for the emergence of the Black women's club movement in the 19th Century. Comprised of educated, affluent Black women, the Black club movement sought to address the dire needs of the Black community through numerous voluntary associations. There were clubs in both the north and south. Many desired to be involved in social and political organizing, but because they were barred from white women's clubs, they created their own. On a local, state, and national level they helped initiate various educational and philanthropic activities in response to the cruel treatment and discrimination Blacks constantly endured on a daily basis. Social welfare services in the South were exclusive to whites, so Black women worked together to establish similar institutions that would grant Blacks the help they desperately needed. "The major thrust of the various associations centered on welfare issues such as financing schools, orphanages, homes for the elderly, providing health care, and food for the poor" (Ford 65). Overall, the mission of the Black women's club movement was to improve the lives of impoverished Blacks.

In 1890 the first Black women's organization, The Colored Women's Progressive Association was established by Mary Ann Shadd Cary to help women broaden their occupational horizons, mobilize for children, and become more politically active; initiatives included suffrage, education and lynching (Brown, et al. 348). Following Ida B. Wells' anti-lynching rally speech in 1892, Black women chartered women's clubs in major metropolitan areas. The National Association of Colored Women was founded in 1896 by senior founders Harriet Tubman, Frances E.W. Harper, Charlotte Forten Grimke, and junior founders Ida B. Wells, Mary Church

Terrell⁵ and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin⁶ in Washington D.C. (Cullen-Dupont 175). It became the largest Black women's organization during this time period. Mary Church Terrell was very vocal that morality should be at the top of the NACW agenda. “As the first president of the organization, Terrell stressed uplift. Indeed the NACW adopted ‘Lifting As We Climb’ as its motto, encouraging Black women to lift other Black people up to higher social and moral conditions as they themselves improved” (Whitaker 851). They did their best to be “good women” by assimilating to the construct of white womanhood and ascribing to the “politics of respectability”. “The ‘politics of respectability’ marked an attempt to instill dignity and self-respect while also challenging the negative, stereotypical images of African Americans” (Griffin 72). This meant internalizing the idea that femininity is best exhibited through piety and monogamous identities.

By doing so they believed they could create a more positive image of Black women's sexuality to counter the sexual stereotypes that had been ascribed to them previously. This came at a price. No longer could Black women in public leadership positions partake in outward expressions of sensuality. “At the core of essentially every activity of NACW’s individual members was a concern with creating positive images of Black women’s sexuality. To counter negative stereotypes many Black women felt compelled to downplay, even deny, sexual expression” (Hine 45). Black club women felt it was necessary to do all that they could to change the perception of Black womanhood in America. They believed it would be the role of the educated, middle class Black woman to lead her poor counterpart by example, so that she too would emulate this moral standard. Access to a college education and class status was often an

⁵ Mary Church Terrell was the first president of the NACW. She was very active in suffrage issues and civil rights issues (Marable 165).

⁶ Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin served as president of the National Federation of Afro-American women, and in 1896 she merged her organization with the NACW. She also served as vice president of the NACW (Marable 165).

indicator of respectability, and in the same way white women were venerated for being the moral guardians of whiteness, Black women sought to do the same for the Black community by showing whites that they were capable of abnegating mainstream ideas regarding Blackness. They discouraged the use of makeup, public displays of affection with the opposite sex, or anything else that could be mistakenly read as an act of indecency (Hine 45). In the public sphere they promoted the image of asexuality or a respectable married identity. White and Black women were expected to find husbands and have children. They were not supposed to be promiscuous if they wanted to be respected. Essentially, to adopt a married identity implied morality.

Respectability was also the motivating force for the participation in the women's suffrage movement. Though the suffrage movement first gained momentum in the 19th century, women had yet to receive the right to vote. During the 20th century, Black and white suffragettes marched in Washington D.C. to protest the unequal treatment of women. When contemplating the extent of their involvement, it was Nannie Burroughs who insisted that receiving the right to vote would mean that legislation could be passed that would grant Black women legal protection from rape. "Calling the ballot a 'weapon of moral defense she [Nannie H. Burroughs] exploded, 'when she [a Black woman] appears in court in defense of her virtue, she is looked upon with amused contempt. She needs the ballot to reckon with men who place no value upon her virtue'" (Hine 45). Legally it was still not a crime to rape Black women. They did not possess the privilege needed for protection against white men. The NACW knew that they could not depend on anyone else to protect the bodies of Black women, and it was understood that in order to attain the status of "women", it would require more than just assimilating to what they believed

white womanhood consisted of. Acquiring the right to vote meant that they could have a voice in how legislation shaped their realities, and it was imperative that their voices be heard.

“Lifting as We Climb”: A Middle Class Struggle

Black Middle class women involved in the club movement also made sure to distinguish themselves from working class women. They too internalized this notion of “sexual deviancy” ascribed to Black female sexuality by their white counterparts, and associated it with Black women of lower socio-economic class groups. Ironically, the emphasis on middle class respectability and material achievement tended to displace sexual immorality onto the working class. Among club women the desire to protect or uplift working-class women often went hand in hand with the belief that working class women were actually or potentially licentious (Batker 201). Club women worked hard to perpetuate the idea of “sexual immorality” as a class issue instead of a race issue. In “Love Me Like I Like to Be”: The Sexual Politics of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women's Club Movement”, Carol Batker discusses a statement given by a club woman regarding sexual immorality and class status. She states:

In her statement against racial prejudice in 1925, social worker Elsie Johnson McDougald displaced sexual “immorality” onto the working class arguing that “the women of the working class will react emotionally and sexually, similarly to the working class women of other races,” and that “sex irregularities are not a matter of race but of socio-economic conditions” (Batker 201).

By attempting to police the sexuality of working class women, club women were unknowingly perpetuating the same discriminative practices they were trying to eliminate. Fortunately, not all club women shared the same idea of sexually conservative politics, nor did they feel that working-class women were the problem. Aware of the elitism within the club movement, Civil rights activist and club woman Nannie Burroughs worked hard to protect the image of working

class and poor women by promoting a different discourse of respectability. She wanted to bring attention to the idea that working class women could also function as “moral agents” (Batker 202). She understood that the stigma of sexual immorality would never be resolved if blame was placed on working class women instead of white supremacy.

During the 1900s, Black women had very few employment opportunities. They were usually either teachers or domestics in the homes of white families. As domestics, they would be expected to take care of household duties, nurse children, and in some instances live with the families they worked for. Although the earning potential varied depending on the region, most domestic workers earned low wages. It was also very common for them to be sexually exploited. Many of them endured sexual abuse for fear of being unemployed. Because they were usually the only source of income in their households, they could not afford to lose their jobs and instead ascribed to the culture of dissemblance. “Far from having a racist, sexist persona thrust upon them, black domestics negotiated their own image as a means of survival, what [Darlene] Hine called a culture of dissemblance” (Manring 56). Essentially domestics created this false persona and shielded their inner selves from their employers. This was the same ideology perpetuated by the NACW in attempts to portray a respectable identity in public. Dissemblance allowed for domestics too be able to function within white, patriarchal spheres while also maintaining personal lives outside of the work place.

Along with women’s clubs, historically Black colleges and universities also internalized the need for demonstrating a degree of respectability. Like their predecessors in the nineteenth century, they too were expected to help change the image of Black womanhood. “Primarily attending segregated Black colleges established by white missionaries, African American college women faced the burden of rewriting powerful texts of their presumed immortality and

inferiority” (Tice 35). Black college women were not only expected to purge any immoral sexual behavior, but their appearances were also under scrutiny as well. Black sororities in particular emphasized this point, and embodied a lot of the same ideals as Black women’s clubs. “Membership requirements for Black sororities overtly called for scholastic achievement and strong moral character, yet some were just as likely to select members based on skin color and beauty” (Ramsey 36). To be a member of a Black sorority meant that you were the best and brightest of your peer group. Unfortunately in some cases this meant choosing women based off their skin color, popularity, economic status, and family background. At times, Black sororities mirrored the elitist mentality perpetuated by Black club women. They were expected to embody middle-class values, which usually meant assimilating to what most perceived white womanhood to be. It was only if they embodied these values could they demand to be called and treated like “ladies”. Essentially, the black college woman was supposed to be the face of respectability in the twentieth century.

Exploring Deviancy: The Sexual Politics of the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was one of the most instrumental time periods for Blacks in the twentieth century. “The word Renaissance which in French means ‘rebirth’ was used to show the advancement of culture and the arts in Harlem” (Schaefer 4). In the beginning of the 20th century, a large number of Blacks migrated from the South to northern cities in search of jobs. Many Blacks settled in Harlem where they created an emerging middle class. During this era, the Black artist, musician, scholar and writer were cultivated, and the concept of the “New Negro” was born. Led by Alain Locke, the “New Negro” movement was supposed to eradicate southern stereotypes of the “old negro” through art, music, drama and literature (Buck 926). “The Old Negro, we remember,” Locke writes, ‘was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy.

His had been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism” (Hutchinson 29). The “New Negro” represented a generation of critical thinkers that perpetuated an ideology of self-pride and political awareness.

Unlike some of the prior movements in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the Harlem Renaissance could not be defined by a single ideology alone; however, what was shared by those that fueled the movement, was the commitment to channel the Black experience through artistic expression. “Within this diversity, several themes emerged that more clearly defined the nature of the Harlem Renaissance. No single black artist expressed all of these themes, but each addressed one or more in his or her work” (Gates and Higginbotham ix). One central theme was to showcase the influence of their African heritage, and for some their southern roots.

Progressive ideas regarding sexuality also emerged during the Harlem Renaissance. In “Transgressive sexuality and the literature of the Harlem Renaissance”, A.B. Schwarz creates a visual of these progressive ideas. She states:

Elaborately costumed cross dressers at Harlem drag balls, public wedding ceremonies for Black lesbian couples, speakeasies entertaining racially and sexually mixed crowds with illicit drinks and sexually explicit performances-transgressive sexuality clearly represented a visible facet of life during the Harlem Renaissance (Schwarz 141).

No longer were Blacks expected to adopt middle class values and internalize respectability. Instead they were encouraged to explore their sexuality in ways they had not been able to openly do so before.

Performed primarily by Black female blues singers⁷, Jazz became a staple in Harlem night clubs. Contrary to the respectability politics of the Black club movement, sexuality was fully embraced by Black female blues musicians. With the emergence of the jazz age came more awareness of self, sexual pleasure, and independence for Black women. Although the jazz age

⁷ The blues is a spontaneous form of expression that is a component of Jazz music (Lawn 7).

represented a shift in gender politics, it was not received well by whites and middle class Blacks. Middle class Blacks in particular wanted to distance themselves as much as possible from Jazz for fear of being perceived in a manner that they resisted for so many years. “A significant source of the black middle class’s distaste for jazz was its seeming complicity in primitivist conceptions of Black female sexuality” (Dubey 133). Many Black organizations⁸ also shared split views on this new music phenomenon. Although the older Blacks of the middle class were completely opposed, the younger generation embraced it. Jazz served as a bridge between the youth of the middle class and youth of the working class.

Part of the reason why Jazz in the 1920’s had such a bad reputation is because of what it was generally associated with. Most of the time it was usually performed in night clubs and saloons, and was surrounded by illegal activities like gambling and prostitution. Black female blues singers also sung very sexually explicit lyrics, making them very popular in the urban music market. Blues captured the female perspective on sexual partnerships, extra-marital affairs, and domestic violence. “Women Blues singers frequently appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence; they are representations of women who attempt to manipulate and control their construction as sexual objects (Carby 11).

Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley, and Ethel Waters were just a few Black female blues musicians that identified as bisexual or lesbian. Gladys Bentley in particular used her bisexuality as shock value in her performances, and Ma Rainey professed her love for women in her song “Prove it to me Blues” (Zimmerman 356). In *Blues Legacies and Black*

⁸ The NAACP in particular preferred soft blues and swing rather than “hot jazz” to cater to their “high class” audience (Butler 41). On the other hand Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) supported jazz music and believed it could advance the group’s social agenda. The UNIA featured jazz music at its events, marches and venues as a way to increase the confidence if the Black community.

Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Black Feminism, Angela Davis details what blues music represented during this time period. Davis states:

What is distinctive about the blues, however, particularly in relation to other American popular musical forms of the 1920s and 1930s is their intellectual independence and representational freedom. One of the most obvious ways in which blues lyrics deviated from that era's established popular musical culture was their provocative and pervasive sexual, including homosexual imagery (Davis 3).

They also challenged the idea that a woman's place was in the home, and some even mocked the idea of marriage. If marriage was discussed it was generally from the perspective of an abandoned or abused woman. Children were also rarely discussed. "The absence of the mother figure in the blues does not imply a rejection of motherhood as such, but rather suggest that blues women found the mainstream cult of motherhood irrelevant to the realities of their lives" (Davis 13). Black female blues musicians represented independence, and did not feel the need to be validated through domesticity. Angela Davis suggests that there are historical reasons for marriage and domesticity to be absent from women's blues. She states:

Normative representations of marriage as the defining goal of women's lives blatantly contradicted Black social realities during the half-century following emancipation. A poor Black woman of the era who found herself deserted or rejected by a male lover was not merely experiencing private troubles; she also was caught in a complex web of historical circumstances (Davis 18).

While white women were focused on building families, poor Black women had a different burden to bear. Their main concern was not domesticity because they were trying to survive being raped and harassed by white men of the south. Blues music became a platform to bring a voice to their plight and also helped counter the narrative of deviancy Black middle class women projected onto them. Because of the lack of job opportunities, many Black men traveled for economic opportunities. For some this meant an opportunity to also experience other lovers, which ironically contributed to a lot of the "infidelity" rhetoric in blues songs by female

musicians. It is important to note that these songs did more than just proclaim the pain and angst of a scorned lover. They also expressed asserting their desire to be respected and the courage to move past a toxic relationship into their own independence.

Along with jazz, a rich literary movement was also conceived. The literary movement was initiated by the Civic Club dinner in 1924, and during this dinner the accomplishments of Black writers were acknowledged. “The Civic Club dinner, in addition to formally acknowledging the literary activity that was already underway, furthered the movement by bringing together the three major players in the literary renaissance: the black literary-political intelligentsia, white publishers and critics, and young Black writers” (Gates and Higginbotham vii). Essentially, the literary movement gave new meaning to middle class Blacks. Rather than using their education privilege as a way of maintaining prestige and class status, they used their artistic gifts as a way to discuss issues affecting all African Americans. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance were thought to be very self-conscious and their writing usually reflected their racial and sexual politics. Black writers wrote literary pieces that received support from mainstream publishers, and they also influenced white authors to write on what they believed to be the Black experience in America. Along with Black artist and performers, Black writers felt as if it was their duty to restore the creativity and culture within the Black community.

While the respectability politics of the Black middle class is understood, we would be remiss not to explore how homosexual identities were also performed by Black women during the Harlem Renaissance. “For lesbian and bisexual African American women, the Harlem Renaissance was a period in which expressions of erotic desire between women could be both represented in art and literature and publicly displayed” (Zimmerman 356). The Harlem Renaissance was a pivotal era for different representations of Black female sexuality. For Black

female writers⁹, sexuality played a major role in their literary works. Black lesbian writers subtly incorporated bisexuality into their writing. Angelina Weld Grimke, a lesbian poet wrote love poems that reflected rendezvous with her female lovers although she never openly admitted to being homosexual. Alice Dunbar-Nelson was also another writer that used her heterosexual relationships as a form of protection from homophobic critics. While same-sex male artists of the Harlem renaissance could explore their sexuality to a greater degree, female same-sex artists were in a less privileged position (Schwartz 23). This is due to the ideology of the Black middle class and the belief that the Black woman had a duty to change the negative sexual stigma they had been resisting since slavery. “Lesbians were consequently regarded as a disaster: they undermined the aim of racial uplift, posed a threat to African American’s future by rejecting a reproductive role, and were additionally suspected of corrupting black youth” (Hutchinson 143). W.E.B Dubois criticized Harlem Renaissance writers for celebrating “primitive” qualities of lower class Blacks because he believed they reinforced negative stereotypes (Soitos 96). Though his criticism was directed at both male and female writers, there is an implication that lesbianism countered the positive image of Black female sexuality. Lesbianism was perceived as the opposite of “true womanhood”, and women who wished to attain the status of “women” should not engage in it.

Conclusion

The public spectacle and consumption of Black female sexuality has played an integral role in denying Black women access to true womanhood in early US history. To justify inferiority, economic exploitation, and sexual assault, Black female bodies have inextricably linked to lasciviousness in ways that made attaining respectability an arduous feat in the 19th and

⁹ Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was instrumental in providing a different perspective on Black female sexuality from a heterosexual standpoint.

20th century. Primarily influenced by the Black middle class, the Black community worked to re-appropriate definitions of “masculinity” and “femininity” as a way to counterbalance the narrative of deviance ascribed to them. For Black women, assimilation was necessary for their survival because the law offered them no protection against the sexual assaults of white men. The Black club movement sought to use middle class values as a way to uplift their race and bring new meaning to Black womanhood.

Respectability represented status and the progression of the African American race; however it is worth noting that in some cases respectability represented a disconnect between middle class and working class women. By assuming that the working class was responsible for the tainted image of Black female sexuality meant that the plight of working class women was either not taken into consideration or that it was ignored. It also speaks to the class and educational privilege Black club women had. The irony is evident through the idea that a college education could purify the image of Black femininity without acknowledging the ways in which Black domestics also ascribed to the culture of dissemblance. Nevertheless their contributions helped shape the discourse regarding Black female bodies. Working class women also contributed to this discourse through the diversification of sexual attitudes during the Harlem Renaissance Era. Using jazz music and literary traditions as a social platform, Black women were able to express themselves openly and honestly regarding the themes of homosexuality, domesticity and sexuality.

Even with the historical transitions Black female sexuality as undergone; there is still a sexual binary of asexuality and deviancy imposed on Black women currently. This binary has been used to authenticate Black female identities in popular culture due to the way the commodification of the Mammy and Jezebel caricatures shaped Black womanhood in the 19th

and 20th century. Prominent voices within the Black community have criticized the perpetuation of Black tropes in film and television, and have even admonished Black directors and producers who too perpetuate disparaging narratives of Blackness. With the emergence of reality television and other sitcoms reflecting Black female narratives, the repudiation of authentic portrayals is invariable when respectable identities are not performed. What constitutes authentic performances of Black female identities, and who has the ability to validate them? The “Lifting as We Climb” ideology of the Black women’s club movement is still conspicuous today for the same reasons it was almost two centuries ago. Accessing true womanhood is also still pertinent for Black women in the 21st century, however with the ability to generate revenue through the reclamation of the Jezebel caricature, is it as pertinent as it once was?

CHAPTER THREE

When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong: The Performance of Deviancy in “Authentic” Representations of Black Female Identities on Reality Television.

Introduction

Reality television is defined as an “unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties, than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim that the discourse is real” (Murray and Ouellette 3). More than any other medium it is used as a platform to promote and reaffirm certain ideologies regarding race, sex, gender, and sexual orientation, and market them as authentic, monolithic “realities. Reality TV, I argue facilitates racial misrepresentation. To interrogate the ways in which Black female bodies are manufactured and consumed within the genre of reality TV, I analyzed the performances of sexuality and intimacy by the women on *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives*. Through this analysis I discuss the construction of Black female sexuality on both shows, the extent to which their performances reflect sexual stereotypes regarding Black female bodies, the ways in which they have processed the deviancy of these stereotypes, and the ways they police each sexually through the repudiation of these stereotypes in attempts to assume respectable identities.

People of color are unfortunately not as prominent on mainstream broadcasts as their white counterparts, so when they are seen, specifically on reality television, their one dimensional portrayal is often mistaken for a palpable reality. “As reality shows are some of the

only places viewers regularly see people of color on TV, their imagery takes on greater significance” (Poizner 94). If people of color are exhibited on reality TV performing racial caricatures, then inadvertently these controlling images are buttressed due to an exiguous exposure of counter-narratives in mainstream culture. Most of the negative images reflect what Patricia Hill Collins characterizes as controlling images of the matriarch, jezebel and sapphire. As a result of this consumption, we inherently begin to associate these performances with reality, and use controlling images to gage the “authenticity” of minority representations. “Authenticity can be understood as producing the impression of reproducing reality, rather than giving a specific version of reality” (Bauwel and Carpentier, 131). Essentially authenticity is achieved by giving viewers the impression that they are privy to the daily interactions of other people without the influence of metonymic realism; controlling images influence metonymic realism, metonymic realism legitimizes authenticity. This becomes detrimental because it stifles the ability of mainstream audiences to consume minority representations that do not coincide with controlling images, while simultaneously leaving certain demographics of these minority groups to either reclaim them or produce counter-narratives through their lived experiences in attempts to repudiate them.

Both *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives* offer consumers an insight into the nuances of heterosexual relationships from the perspective of both working class and upper-middle class Black women. The premise of both shows relies on the ability to be exposed to the personal lives of celebrities through the lived experiences of their wives, girlfriends, and children’s mothers. The performances of the women are invariable in buttressing dominant ideas about both Black femininity and masculinity.

Metonymic Realism and Authenticity

The “realism” consumed by reality TV viewers is constructed and manipulated to reflect the ideas of those producing the show. When contextualizing the performances of reality TV participants and interrogating how these identities are manufactured, scholars Mark Andrejevic and Dean Colby describe the mode of producing the real that succeeds by simply permitting participants the opportunity to reproduce identities comporting to the logic and rules sanctioned by the show’s producers and director as “metonymic realism”(Andrejevic and Colby 198). If the minority identities on reality television shows are intended to reflect a certain stereotype or exhibit specific behaviors, then countering those same stereotypes is almost impossible.

Though metonymic realism makes for great ratings, it also helps perpetuate racial misrepresentation by constructing scenarios that highlight and exacerbate racial differences using stereotypes. On the other hand if for some reason metonymic realism is thwarted and these scenarios began to destabilize the premise of the show, the producers will do what is necessary to sustain their “vision”. Jon Kraszewski discusses how this occurred on the first season of MTV’s *The Real World* after a confrontation¹ between Kevin Powell and Julie Gentry. In this particular case, Kraszewski claims that MTV never casted anyone else that openly shared Kevin’s sentiments on racism and classism. Kraszewski states:

Another moment where Kevin calls attention to the racism of white liberals comes in an episode where Becky, another white liberal states that America is a great country and everyone has the opportunity for success; Kevin insists that the economic system denies

¹ On season 1 of the *Real World* Kevin Powell and Julie Gentry got into a verbal altercation regarding Julie’s behavior while Kevin was on the phone with a potential employer. When the altercation escalated, Julie claimed that Kevin spit on her, threatened to break all of her fingers, and told her to “suck his dick”. Kevin denied any of that to be true, and the two had another passionate conversation about race during the following episodes (*Real World*).

African Americans the same opportunities as whites...Never again would the show cast someone who so explicitly critiques economic systems of racism in the United States or devote so much narrative time to having a character like this express his views (Kraszewski 216).

Kevin was constructed to be this “aggressive” and “angry” Black man who had little respect for anyone that did not share his views; however, it was much more than “anger” that he was trying to convey. He wanted his fellow cast members as well as the audience to understand the plight of Black masculinity in America. Rather than to allow him the space to do that, MTV framed his Blackness as a threat that needed to be policed by those around him. This was especially salient when juxtaposed with Julie’s performance of white femininity, thus invoking the narrative of the Black brute caricature. When Kevin no longer performed as the Black brute, and redirected his anger towards structural inequality, he undermined the construction of metonymic realism on the show and a cast member possessing his same tenacity was never casted again. This is how controlling images are manufactured through reality TV.

This trend reflecting the perpetuation of an “aggressive” or “deviant” monolithic Black experience is also evident in shows that center around women. Kimberly Springer argues, “Reality TV cannot accommodate Black women who do not fit the few sanctioned contemporary roles (e.g., the ubiquitous Black woman judge, the abusive single mother, or the police captain without a capacity for significant action)” (Springer 267). There are also other variations of the overtly sexual and aggressive Black female tropes, including the “emasculating bitchy” Black woman and the “successful and hopelessly single” Black woman. The lack of diversity in the depiction of Black womanhood contributes to the sustaining of controlling images, and obligates

Black women to perform them if they desire to be cast members within this genre. This is similar to the ways in which Black women had to perform as domestics in the early 1900s and as variations of the Jezebel in the 1970s if they wanted to be in film. It was only through demeaning caricatures that mainstream audiences could consume Black womanhood, as is still the case today. What is most interesting is the way these tropes remain consistent despite class differences. Whether the premise of the show consists of upper class or working class Black female cast members, they are still expected to validate the authenticity of these tropes through their performances.

The premise of *Basketball Wives*² is to “follow the lives of six women who are best friends as they juggle the successes and stresses of building businesses, battling groupies, and searching for stability in the stable arena of being the significant other to a basketball star” (www.vh1.com). During her interview with CNN in 2010, O’Neal implied that as the executive producer, she wanted viewers to be able to see the women outside of their lavish lifestyles, and be able to connect to them. Through *Basketball Wives* she wanted to eradicate the notion that “wives” or “significant others” have no real aspirations or desires outside of being financed by athletes. She states:

When I went into the concept of the show, it was really to prove all the people wrong who think that everyone sits around and gets mani-pedis all day, every day. These ladies have businesses, and while they are wild and crazy and having a good time, I don’t think they

² *Basketball Wives* premiered on April 11, 2010 on Vh1. The show’s cast consisted of Shaunie O’Neal (ex-wife of Shaquille O’Neal), Evelyn Lozada (ex –fiancee of Antoine Walker), Gloria Govan (wife of Matt Barnes), Royce Reed (ex-girlfriend of Dwight Howard), Jennifer Williams (ex-wife of Eric Williams), and Suzie Ketcham (ex-girlfriend of Michael Olowokandi). In addition to being a cast member, Shaunie O’Neal also serves as one of the executive producers. After the first season, Gloria Govan was replaced by Tami Roman (ex-wife of Kenny Anderson), who has remained a fixture since her debut. Though there were other wives introduced sporadically throughout the next four seasons, Shaunie, Evelyn, Royce, Jennifer, Tami and Suzie were the most prominent of all the cast members (vh1).

are any different from the average woman in a relationship. They just have to deal with things on a whole different level, such as the groupies (France, 2010).

Basketball Wives offers a counter-narrative that allows upper-middle class Black women to seem not only relatable to their working and middle class counterparts, but also to women of other demographics involved in heteronormative relationships. O’Neal is also able to repudiate the idea that women involved with professional athletes are merely trophy wives, and in doing so she ingeniously creates a space where affluence can be linked to Black womanhood. Mona Scott-Young, executive producer of Vh1’s *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*³ had similar aspirations. Although Mona has been criticized for creating what some members of the Black community may perceive as an exploitive docu-series⁴, she insists that her intentions were to shed light on the stories of the women involved in a male dominated industry that she too had to learn to maneuver. In an interview with Vibe magazine she stated, “I’m not a sociologist, I’m not a psychologist, and I’m not trying to use that as a cop-out. I’m a producer. I’m trying to cover a specific segment of the population, one that I felt I knew well because I had navigated that world” (Hope 2014).

Performativity vs. Authenticity

One of the most prevalent criticisms of the genre of reality television is its inability to truly reflect authenticity (Orbe 346). Although reality television is marketed as medium that allows viewers to observe “real” people negotiate the nuances of their own lives on a public platform,

³ The show’s original cast consisted of Erica Dixon (Ex-fiancée of rapper Lil Scrappy, Joseline Hernandez (Rapper and "common-law" wife of Stevie J), Karlie Redd (Model, R&B singer/rapper, former girlfriend of rapper Yung Joc and Benzino), Mimi Faust (Ex-girlfriend of producer Stevie J), Rasheeda (Rapper and wife of Kirk Frost), and K. Michelle (R&B/hip hop singer). In the second and third season we were introduced to Traci Steele (Atlanta DJ and Ex-girlfriend of DJ Babey Drew), Tammy Rivera (Wife of Waka Flocka Flame) and Kaleena Harper (singer/songwriter and married to Tony "T.Vick" Harper).

⁴ Docu-series: Documentary that is telecasts in a series of programs.

there are speculations as to what “real” actually entails because of the effects of metonymic realism. Some viewers believe that it is credulous to think that RTV can guarantee unmitigated content due to the editing of footage that inevitably occurs for any television show. Though that can be inferred, Rose and Wood (2005) argue that unfortunately this perspective ignores the complexities of constructing authenticity because the symbolic requires the real to be able to be sustained (292). In other words, there must be something palpable about the content of RTV. But what happens when the symbolic is constructed using racial caricatures? If so, who is being affected and what does this convey to the audience and RTV participants? Symbolic annihilation is the “omission, trivialization, and condemnation of certain groups by the mass media” (Tuchman 17). When in conversation with the way Black womanhood is depicted on RTV, I argue that Black women are being symbolically annihilated. In this case there are rarely positive images of Black womanhood perpetuated by RTV, and the omission of these positive images are extremely detrimental to everyone involved, especially when perpetuated by Black writers and producers. Patricia Hill Collins speaks to the perpetuation of these images by Black institutions. She states:

Confronting the controlling images forwarded by institutions external to African American communities remains essential. But such efforts should not obscure the equally important issues of how African-American institutions also perpetuate these same controlling images. Although it may be painful to examine, especially in the context of a racially charged society always vigilant for signs of Black disunity, the question of how the organizations of Black civil society reproduce controlling images of Black womanhood and fail to take a stand against images developed elsewhere is equally important (Hill-Collins 86).

There must be some accountability on behalf of Black producers and cast members in regards to legitimizing these representations. When they fail to do so, they inadvertently buttress dominant narratives of Blackness and create spaces for symbolic annihilation to occur. Images indubiously create working definitions, so if the images viewers see perpetuate flawed definitions of Black

womanhood, then naturally they are expected to process these images within this paradigm. This becomes increasingly complex when Black women actively commodify this paradigm.

During the reunion show of Season 1 of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, executive producer Mona Scott-Young asked cast member Mimi Faust if she believed the show contributed to the negative portrayal of Black women in relationships. Throughout Season 1 Mimi found herself in volatile and vulnerable situations with other cast members because of the behavior of her boyfriend Stevie. This was most evident during their verbal altercations after discovering his disloyalty on multiple occasions. Mimi responded to Scott-Young's question by denying that the show perpetuated a negative portrayal of Black heterosexual relationships, and insisted that her relationship issues just happened to coincide with the taping of the show. While Mimi suggests the exposure to Stevie's deviant behavior was a coincidence, I argue that his performance of Black masculinity facilitated the disclosure of his affair because it was conducive for the premise of the show. *In Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual TV*, Annette Hill suggests that to understand performance in reality TV, we can observe the way it takes place in docudramas or drama-documentaries⁵. She states:

When real people who have experienced an occurrence or situation are involved in a drama documentary (usually as minor 'characters'), they are there to authenticate the dramatization of the events. Even though their somewhat self-conscious acting style may differ from the naturalist/realist style of professional actors, their performance draws attention to the truth claims of the documentary (Hill 63).

Stevie's repeated performances as a liar and cheater has since gained him notoriety in popular culture for being a misogynist, and has subsequently continued to exercise that identity on the second and third season. Though Scott-Young explicitly states that *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* was not intended to be a representation of all Black romantic relationships, her intentions cannot negate the consumption of these deviant behaviors. The airing of the Season 1 premiere

⁵ Drama Documentary: a television program whose story is based on an event or situation that really happened although it is not intended to be accurate in every detail (Cambridge 415).

attracted 1.6 million viewers, and since then the number of viewers has only proliferated with each season. According to Vh1, the Love and Hip Hop Atlanta season 3premeire attracted 5.6 million viewers ranking it the number one show amongst adults 18-49, women 18-49, and women 18-34 in its cable time slot on Monday nights (Black 2014). Because deviancy is being manufactured as a variable in Black romantic relationships, viewers will begin using deviancy as a qualifier for authenticity.

Groupies and Side Chicks vs. Girlfriends and Wives

When observing the cast of *Basketball Wives*, executive producer Shaunie O’Neal only casted women who had some romantic affiliation with players in the National Basketball Association. Though the majority of the women were not wives, the implicit hierarchy created by O’Neal reflected that of “woman” and “deviant” with the expectation that the women would operate within that binary due to the premise. The women who were wives or girlfriends took pride in their status because it separated them from other women involved with professional athletes. They ascribed to a politics of respectability, and believed it was through this behavior that they should be venerated as a respectable woman and have the ability to police women they deemed as deviant. “A politics of respectability is almost always deeply ambivalent; concerned above all with social acceptance, it entails efforts of some members of a marginalized group both to disprove dominant stereotypes about the group and to regulate and improve the behavior of its members in line with socially approved norms” (Gould 89). Any woman that was not introduced as an extension of an athlete was automatically perceived as a threat, as she was portrayed as a salacious woman that used her body as a way to secure class mobility, and was also incapable of respecting the relationships of other women.

Within minutes of the first episode, it was apparent as to who had the power to name the deviant. The distinction between the two was extremely ambiguous, but ironically understood by the cast members and viewers watching it. The dancers, cheerleaders, or any woman rumored to have had an affair with an athlete was not respected in the same way that a cast member who had dated, been married or engaged to an athlete would be. O’Neal used respectability politics to maintain this hierarchy as was evident in the depiction of Royce Reed.

The wives and exes equated dancers with “groupies” because they wear skimpy costumes and have access to the players in ways that the wives do not, as implicitly stated by the rest of the cast members. They have also insinuated that the proximity of dancers and players makes them apprehensive because the dancers may try to seduce them. Royce was stigmatized the entire first season solely because of this, and her actions were under close scrutiny by the rest of the cast as they often stated that she had “groupie” tendencies that would tarnish their reputations. When we were first introduced to Royce, we are told that she is a dancer for both the Miami Heat and the Orlando Magic. She also has a child with NBA superstar Dwight Howard, although that was never disclosed on the show for legal reasons. Immediately Royce is shunned by the rest of the group because they believed she was the “enemy” due to her occupation. Whereas other cast members who would be allowed to have boyfriends, date, have sex, or even suggest infidelity, Royce could not do so without her character being called into question. She was castigated by Jennifer Williams for having a new boyfriend every six months, even though she openly admitted to being a “relationship girl” that had no interest in dating multiple men or sleeping around. Royce attempted to seek their approval through being vulnerable in group settings, and even allowed Jennifer to give her a makeover so that her image would allow her to fit in with that of the rest of her cast mates; however Royce soon grew tired of trying to

propitiate their desires and decided to behave as she desired. This included publicly dancing in a lascivious manner, dating whomever she desired, and having open discussions about her sexual preferences.

Though Royce's salacious dance displays and multiple romantic relationships contributed to her performance as the deviant, it was ultimately the implicit claims regarding dancers perpetuated by the show that caused her actions to be policed more than her cast mates. At times it seemed as if she grew to expect the criticism, but wanted to prove that her sensuality did not have to be restrained in order for her to be in the company of the wives, thus solidifying her position as the deviant on the show. "Participants on RTV shows perform for the camera, either unwittingly or explicitly, just as people perform in their daily lives to suit the imperatives of a given situation" (Dubrofsky & Hardy 375). During the premiere episode of Season 1, Royce and the rest of the cast attended a celebrity charity pool party where Royce proceeded to participate in the "How low can you go" challenge. The competition evaluated women based on their ability to dance as provocatively as possible. During Royce's performance she not only superseded the presumptions of her other cast mates, but also danced salaciously with another woman. Though Royce understood that her rapport with the other women was imperative to her status as a member of their group, she did not let that deter her from performing as she would if there had not been cameras present. In her own words, "When they turned on the music I just started jamming".

Whether or not Royce was aware, her performance was not only indicative of her own identity politics, but it also coincided with the way the show constructed the image of the "groupie" or the woman that should not be trusted. From the first episode the wives and girlfriends characterized a groupie as a woman who was overtly sexual, willing to seek attention

from athletes or men in the entertainment industry at the expense of self-respect, and had a reputation for casually dating athletes. The reactions to Royce's behavior also coincided with the construction of respectable womanhood that is presumed to be inherent for wives or girlfriends. Some of the women described Royce after the performance as "being in need of an intervention", "not their type of woman" and wanted to distance themselves from her because they did not want to be "guilty by association". Therefore any display of sexuality after the pool party would only reaffirm the binary constructed by O'Neal of deviant dancers/groupies and respectable wives/girlfriends.

Like O'Neal, Mona Scott-Young constructs a salient dichotomy that materializes in the form of girlfriends and "side chicks"⁶ on *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*. She uses the misogynistic space perpetuated by the Hip Hop genre as a platform to situate the show and the narratives of the women involved with Hip Hop celebrities. "Hip Hop offers us a racialized context of for the performance of gender and sexuality... The performers present and represent a particular performativity of gender, forcing and reinforcing perceptions of Black sexuality (and even Black morality) globally" (Gines 102). The respectable woman/deviant binary plays a pivotal role in shaping the role of women in Hip Hop culture, and Scott-Young applies this same framework to legitimize the "realness" of the scenarios on the show. The centrality of the framework is dependent upon the infidelity of the male cast members so that the women on the show are able to police each other through the lens of the girlfriend/side chick dichotomy. This is partially because the public spheres of sports and entertainment validate and encourage patriarchal notions of maleness and sexual prowess. In the premiere episode of the show, as also evident in *Basketball Wives*, the construction of the deviant and woman is conspicuous. When we are introduced to Mimi Faust and Stevie "Stevie J" Jordan, we learn that they have a two-year old

⁶ Side Chick: Woman dating a man who she knows is in a serious relationship with another woman.

daughter and have been in a relationship on and off for fifteen years. Mimi's status as a "respectable woman" is legitimized through her performance of heteronormative ideals, often referencing the desire to keep her family intact as a justification for being involved with Stevie J. In contrast when we are introduced to Joseline Hernandez she is constructed as the antithesis of Mimi. She is young, provocative, and an aspiring music artist. Joseline is also a former stripper, and is often overtly sexual in her mannerisms and attire. She is depicted as a threat to the relationship of Stevie J and Mimi because of her audacious attitude, relegation to Mimi as just Stevie's "baby mama", and is automatically coined as a "side chick" by her cast mates. Mimi has described her as a slut, slut monkey, and cast member Ariane Davis has even asked during her confessional where Stevie finds these "trash bags". What is interesting is that unlike Royce who attempts to eradicate the presumptions of dancers by her cast mates, Joseline embraces her status as a former stripper. She prides herself on being overtly sexual in her attire and mannerisms, and on her ability to seduce powerful men. For Joseline, being considered a "bad bitch" takes precedence over being considered a "woman".

This complicates the side chick/ girlfriend dichotomy imposed on her because she does not ascribe to respectability politics in the same manner as her fellow female cast mates. Joseline is not concerned with social acceptance, and sees her body as a way to secure class mobility. She understood that as long as she was intimate with Stevie she would no longer have to be a stripper because he would fund her dream to be a pop star. Her performance of womanhood and femininity counters that of a "respectable woman", while simultaneously re-appropriates characteristics of Black masculinity as perpetuated in Hip Hop music. In her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity (2003)*, bell hooks states "At the center of the way Black male selfhood is constructed in a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of

the brute, untamed, uncivilized, unthinking and unfeeling” (hooks xii). When manifested in the genre of Hip Hop, Black masculinity reflects misogyny, the hypersexualization of Black women, aggression, and street credibility. The only Black women venerated by Black men in Hip Hop culture are their mothers, while everyone other woman is seen as a sexual pawn. The more those characteristics are exacerbated, the more “authentic” Black masculinity becomes. During the first episode, before Joseline introduces herself, the camera scans her body from bottom to top. She is scantily clothed in cut off shorts and a crop top, and it is conveyed to the viewers that she is unlike the other women on the show.

As the season progresses, Joseline not only states that she only wants Stevie for sexual pleasure (though we know that not to be true due to the longevity of their relationship), but she is often aggressive in her interactions with her other cast mates, and even incites violence to prove how “tough” she truly is. She has gotten into a physical altercation with Stevie and cast mate Erica Dixon, has gotten into a number of verbal altercations with both Mimi and Stevie, and has threatened to physically assault cast mate Karli Redd. Unlike the rest of her cast mates, viewers rarely experienced the vulnerable side of Joseline because she was always trying to prove her strength through her ability to be “tough”. “Uncontested toughness re-creates what Black feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine calls a culture of dissemblance... They achieve this in part by using an impenetrable veneer or by performing toughness that masks and privatizes their pain” (Ulysse 189). During the third episode of the first season, upon discovering that she is pregnant with Stevie’s baby, Joseline confesses that she came from a poverty stricken background where she was one of six children to a mother who abused drugs for twenty five years. She also ran away at twelve years old, and became a stripper so that she could earn fast

money to survive. While in tears, Joseline also confesses that if she decided to keep the baby, that Stevie would destroy her career thus thwarting her opportunity for class mobility.

Stevie's paternalistic approach to his relationship with Joseline also contributes to the construction of deviancy imposed on her because their dynamic mirrors the relationship between that of a pimp and a prostitute. Instead of physically abusing her he threatens to send her back to the strip club when he feels as if she is becoming too independent, and he has also stated several times that "he owns her" and that she can never get rid of him. In contrast Stevie's relationship with Mimi mirrors a more legitimate romantic partnership because he often performs respectability by professing to Mimi how much he desires to keep his family despite his incessant displays of infidelity. Though his words and actions are incongruent, he venerates Mimi for being his support system and the mother of his child, thus legitimizing her performance as a "respectable" woman.

Black Heteronormativity and Infidelity

Central to respectability politics are heteronormative relationships. Historically many middle class Blacks ascribed to heteronormativity as a form of assimilation to white ideals of respectability. In order to counter the image of sexual lasciviousness imposed on them by their white counterparts, Black women believed they could be seen as equals in the eyes of the government and other prejudicial institutions through negating sexuality in the public sphere. Heteronormativity is still perpetuated by influential institutions (Black church, government, etc.) as the ideal manifestation of respectable gendered identities. Part of this is because the "norm" of respectability in the private sphere for some within the Black community manifests itself as a non-normative sexual identity or what Roderick Ferguson describes as "Black

nonheteronormativity⁷”. This classification is reflected within the construction of the prototype of Black romantic relationships; however respectability is not ascribed to Black masculinity and Black femininity in the same ways. Black men are not required to be monogamous, lead households, or even consistently support their children for them to be given respect in nonnormative relationships. They must only be able to prove that they are capable of disassociating themselves from any gender performance that could be perceived as feminine by being aggressively heterosexual. Some of these performances include but are not limited to showing emotion, allowing his significant other to police his actions, and being associated with any man or activity that can be perceived as homosexual. “As such, it keeps men living inside the heteronormative borders fearful of being emasculated and deprived from a range of gender performances, sexual possibilities, and life pleasures through a lifelong labor of ‘proving’ their manhood” (Sears 395). In contrast Black women are expected to be monogamous, be capable of leading a house hold without emasculating her significant other, and prove that she is a good mother if she does have children. Unlike Black men, Black women do have the ability to engage in what can be described as “deviant” sexual activities (being intimate with other women), as long as it is for the pleasure of her significant other.

One commonality between the women on both shows is their expectation of and ironically lack thereof of monogamy within their romantic relationships. Women who date professional athletes or musicians come to the realization that they are expected to abnegate their expectations of fidelity in exchange for their sumptuous lifestyles. In 2010, *Essence* magazine interviewed *Basketball Wives* star Jennifer Williams about her relationship with husband Eric

⁷ “A classification of Black nonheteronormativity, especially as it was imagined in the postwar era, is instructive: common law marriages, out-of-wedlock births, lodgers, single-headed families, nonmonogamous sexual relationships, unmarried persons, and homosexual persons and relationships” (Ferguson 87).

Williams and the lack of fidelity in their relationship. On the first episode of Season 1, Jennifer called the lifestyle of basketball wives “dysfunctional” because they had to deal with issues that the average woman would not due to the occupation of their significant others. When asked to elaborate on her comment and her personal experience with infidelity, she gave the following statement:

I meant that if you're not in it then you don't understand. Yes, we can go shopping and buy whatever but you're by yourself a lot of times because your husband is traveling. You deal with a lot of these issues, whether it be infidelity or being alone... I definitely have had some issues. A lot of wives deal with that, whether they choose to admit it to their friends or not. That's why I think it's important to have a set of women who are going through the same things as you because they understand (Sangewi 2010).

It is through these shared experiences that the wives and girlfriends are able to build a community that allows them to be vulnerable with each other; however, for those who have not experienced infidelity, it makes it hard for them to be empathetic. This consequently creates a dissension amongst the women, and allows for policing to occur.

During Season1 of *Basketball Wives*, Gloria Govan fiancée of Matt Barnes explicitly repudiated the idea that all athletes cheat since her husband had been faithful. She then accused the other women of being envious because she was able to attain what they “desired”. She had her nuclear family and successful courtship with her fiancée in an environment where expectations of monogamy were futile. The other women begged to differ and characterized Govan’s attitude as credulous and insensitive, stating that although they hoped Matt could be faithful, there was a high probability that he would not be. The perpetuation of heteronormative ideals implicitly creates a hierarchy amongst the women, and those whose relationships more closely mirrored heteronormativity were seen as more legitimate compared to those that did not. When the relationship between Gloria Govan and Matt Barnes is juxtaposed with the relationship

of Jennifer and Eric Williams, Gloria's relationship is seen as more legitimate because of her and Matt's performance of parenthood and monogamy, along with also expressing the desire to be married.

During the first season Jennifer Williams was the only woman legally married at the time of the taping. She had been married to her husband for two years, they had no children together, and they were working through issues of infidelity. Although she enjoyed the perks of being married to a basketball player, she was vocal about her contempt for her marriage. Because of Jennifer's disdain for her own relationship, Matt insisted that she and Evelyn were only trying to "corrupt" Gloria by projecting their negative experiences onto her. Knowledge of Jennifer's deteriorating marriage engendered ambivalent responses from her cast mates. Some suggested divorce, while other encouraged her to also be unfaithful. Jennifer's relationship was viewed as an unfortunate situation when juxtaposed to the "legitimacy" of Gloria's relationship. Though her and Matt were technically just engaged, she had the family, children, and within her relationship perpetuated stereotypical gender roles of the man being the protector and provider while the woman cared for the home. Her relationship was considered most ideal because it more closely resembled a heteronormative relationship. Jennifer's relationship was viewed as toxic or deviant because it lacked monogamy and children.

Even when Gloria Govan's relationship is juxtaposed with Evelyn Lozada and Chad Ochocinco's relationship in the third season, there is still evidence that this hierarchy exists. Evelyn and Chad met on twitter during the second season, and by the third season they were engaged and planning a wedding. During Season 4 episode two, Evelyn has a conversation with Chad about her expectations of monogamy and his interactions with other women. He voices to her that monogamy is something new for him, and that although he is trying, the temptation on

the road can become very intense. Evelyn's responded to him by saying that she is not naïve, and that if he does have an urge to cheat he should tell her first, and then proceed to get condoms to protect himself. He then responds by stating that if he sees a woman out that he finds attractive, he should be able to invite her into their bedroom, contingent upon her meeting Evelyn's approval. Evelyn concedes to having an open marriage under those terms, thus making her non-normative relationship "deviant".

All of the women are not policed or revered in the same capacity. Royce for example had several boyfriends throughout the first four seasons, all of whom she claimed to love and had planned to eventually marry. One boyfriend even conceded to waiting six months to have sexual intercourse with Royce, despite their being in a committed relationship. Expectations of monogamy appeared to be present within all of her relationships, yet the only variable the other women focused on was how many boyfriends she had been involved with since the show premiered. Evelyn also conceded to being romantically linked to a number of men throughout seasons one and two, and even admitted to sleeping with Chad on their first date. She was even called "loose" by two of her fellow cast mates, although she repudiated their claims, and also slept with Kenny Anderson (ex-husband of cast mate Tami Roman) while they were still legally married.

Wives, Wifeys and Motherhood

Unlike Royce, Evelyn is able to maintain her status as "respectable" because she is upper-middle class, and was afforded the luxury of being able to defend her ability to be sexual because she had already attained the status of "girlfriend" previously. The status of "girlfriend" or "wife" implies that the woman is respectable and worthy of class mobility, status and wealth are indicative of respectability even when the relationship dissipates. Because Evelyn had

previously been in a relationship with an athlete (and was currently in one during taping), she not only had the ability to name and define deviancy, she also had the ability to police her fellow cast mates' ability to determine acceptable behavior. Through this we see how fundamental class is to attaining not only heteronormativity but also respectability.

In *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, however women are venerated through their ability to sustain non-normative relationships. Unlike *Basketball Wives*, the status of wifey⁸ does not require marriage or children for a woman to be seen as respectable. The qualifications of being “considered” wifey are contingent upon how well you are able to perform a non-normative identity. Though children are not required to be a wifey, a woman should be willing to if a man requires that of her, as well as support him financially, emotionally, and mentally even if she does not receive support in the same way. It must also be evident that a woman is willing to do these things for an extended amount of time so that a man never has to question her loyalty, and above all else she must be monogamous. It is important to note that “wife” and “wifey” are interchangeable in theory but not in practice.

The title “wife” actually entails a marriage certificate while “wifey” is a performance without the legality. Kirk and Rasheeda Frost are seen as the ideal couple because their relationship is the closest to heteronormativity on the show. They have been together for seventeen years and married for thirteen, and also have two children together in addition to five others Kirk had from previous relationships. Like many of the other men on the show, Kirk has also struggled with infidelity. After it is brought to his wife's attention, she holds him accountable and forces him to leave their home. For the duration of the season two and most of season three he works tirelessly to win her back, offering monogamy as a way to secure her love.

⁸ Wifey: A phrase often used to describe a girl whom you feel possess certain qualities that qualifies her to be the model wife for you (Urban Dictionary).

Unlike the women on *Basketball Wives*, Rasheeda expects monogamy from her husband. This positions her as not only deserving of the title “woman” because only women ascribe to respectability politics, but also legitimizes her status as a “woman” by the rest of her cast mates.

Kaleena and Tony Harper are the only other married couple on the show, and have been married for nine years, have two children together, and Tony has seven children from previous relationships. Despite being married and having children, their relationship would be classified as non-normative because they believe in having other women join them in their sexual endeavors. While on the show Kaleena was very vocal about her love for women, and Tony accepts it because he loves women so much that he could not see himself with a woman who did not. This is evident when Ashley, Kaleena’s best friend who she also maintains a sexual relationship with, comes to visit her and Tony. When interviewed about the unorthodox nature of his marriage, Tony gives the following statement:

I’ve had the opportunity be with my wife, and very beautiful women in the past. If one situation doesn’t go well I’m not tripping because I’m totally into just my wife. It was something we did in the past. It was cool for the moment, but it’s a dangerous situation. I say that because people pick up feelings... We had already kind of been slowing down because we had to get focused on what we were doing. Instead of us going out and partying and picking up chicks together, we decided to kind of like settle down and get the album done. Again, we don’t chase it so we could be in Paris and run into a young lady that my wife maybe is like ‘Yo I think she can get it,’ and that’s just what it is. It’s not something where we like to go out hunting for a chick. Like we’re not going to go to the club tonight to pick up some chicks cause really we don’t have to. Especially now – there’s so many willing to get involved with Kaleena and I... (Caroll 2014).

Though maintaining an extra-marital sexual affair could be characterized as deviant, their fellow cast mates embrace their lifestyle and see it as a healthy way to enliven their sexual life.

Legitimacy and respectability are both maintained because both Kaleena and Tony are content with their arrangement, and Kaleena is legally Tony’s wife. Because their extra-marital affairs are consensual, monogamy is still enacted to a degree as they are not going outside of the

ramifications of their own definitions of monogamy. Therefore what would traditionally be labeled as deviant behavior now serves as a space for regenerating a non-normative sexual identity into one that is respectable.

Wifey is also a space of dehumanization and patriarchal repression because women are expected to submit and apotheosize their significant others knowing that her efforts may not be reciprocated in the same ways. This does not negate the intense love a man has for his “wifey”, because he is very much in love with her; however, his love for her does not curtail his inability to be faithful. Although wifey would be considered a non-normative identity, heterosexual men involved with these women are still expected to perform masculinity as if he is in a heteronormative relationship to be seen as a “real man”. A man does not “wife” a woman that does not adhere out of fear that her reputation (i.e. sleeping around) will thwart his enactment of “proper” manhood. The performances of “wife” and “wifey” also work to create a hierarchy amongst the women and the side chick who is the epitome of the deviant.

When the relationship between Erica Dixon and Daryl “Lil Scrappy” Richardson II is juxtaposed with Stevie J and Joseline, we see the ways in which respectability politics are negotiated within non-normative relationships. Erica and Lil’ Scrappy had been together for over ten years prior to the taping of the first season, and they also have a daughter together. One of the biggest issues in their relationship appeared to be infidelity, and Erica made it clear that she would not tolerate it, especially since Lil’ Scrappy had a public relationship with another woman during their relationship. One reason Erica seemed to be framed as a “good woman” is because she had a narrative reflecting resilience and respectability. She was seen as a survivor who was able to graduate from college and take care of her daughter despite having a mother addicted to crack cocaine. Erica also made it clear that like Mimi, she was willing to play “wifey” for the

sake of her family. She wanted her daughter to have the opportunity to grow up in a household with both of her parents, and insisted on creating an environment where the relationship between her daughter and Lil Scrappy could be cultivated. Her ability to refrain from vacillating despite Lil Scrappy's multiple instances of infidelity earned her the respect of the other women, because like her, some were also willing to sacrifice their own desires for the sake of their families. In this case it is through motherhood that Erica amasses legitimacy as a "woman".

Joseline on the other hand does not have children with Stevie, and attempts to gain legitimacy through marriage as was evident through her proposal to Stevie in season two. She wanted to be viewed as Stevie's "woman" as opposed to his side chick like she was portrayed in the first season. Even though Joseline no longer worked as a stripper, she never demonstrated that she was able to assume an occupation that did not involve sharing her body with men. By the second season she had gained notoriety as the "Puerto Rican Princess" in the Hip Hop industry; however, this was only because she was sexually linked to Stevie, not because of her own musical talent. Despite not being venerated as a "respectable woman" by the rest of the cast, she has successfully become a fixture in the Love and Hip Hop franchise, and has been able to generate revenue through her ability to perform deviancy on and off the show. She has made a name for herself as the outspoken former stripper who is not afraid to post salacious photos on social networks, and be overtly sexy on the show. In her own words "I like to show ass, that's what the people want to see" (Season 3 episode 5). Like Kaleena and Tony Harper, Stevie and Joseline were also vocal about inviting other women to partake in their sexual endeavors; however, they did not receive the same embrace that their castmates did. Because of her status as a deviant, her sexual encounters with women were considered slutty and expected, while Kaleena's was seen as experimental and sexually adventurous.

What is evident on both shows is that respectability is acquired through a woman's performance of heteronormativity. Even in non-normative relationships, those that more closely re-appropriate components of heteronormativity are deemed as respectable, and even still there is a hierarchy amongst those components. Marriage, class and motherhood are absolutely necessary for maintaining respectable identities. All three are ideal, but showing evidence of at least one will guarantee respectability to a degree. The only one that can be complicated by deviancy is motherhood, and when the ability to be a good mother is questioned, a woman's ability to be seen as respectable is threatened.

Deviant Mothers: Sexualizing Motherhood

The construction of motherhood is central to the perpetuation of heteronormativity and women's relegation to the private sphere. In *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930*, Molly Lad-Taylor discusses the ways in which "scientific motherhood" became synonymous with true womanhood and respectability. She states:

The concept of motherhood popular at the turn of the twentieth century was in many ways a continuation of the family ideals formed in the early national period. 'Scientific motherhood', as the later ideology was called, resembled and perpetuated Republican motherhood and the Victorian cult of domesticity in three ways: it considered motherhood women's chief duty and function; it assumed children should be raised in their own homes; and it emphasized women's need for instruction on their domestic responsibilities (Ladd-Taylor 4).

Mothers or "true women" are deemed the moral guardians of their family, hence and as such pious, submissive, and pure. Essentially this could only be applicable for white upper class women, as women of color and poor women were denied access to womanhood and motherhood in the same ways. Motherhood in contemporary society rely on representations that indicate 'what constitutes good or bad mothering' and, even, those 'for whom motherhood is or is not

appropriate” (Harding 110). Generally “good” mothering requires ‘selflessness’ that materializes in the form of denying certain pleasures to women with children. This can entail anything from partying and romantic rendezvous, to active participation in the workforce and sexual deviancy. Often good mothering is connected to what Mary Frances Rogers describes as “maternal desexualization”. In *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*, she states:

The divergence between maternity and sexuality points to the modern Western mind/body split, which in turn separates spirituality from sensuality and cognition from emotion. Like other cultural binaries, these presuppose either/or thinking; one cannot be both spiritual and sensual, just as one cannot be both maternal and sexual. Maternal desexualization also derives from a cultural pattern whereby women’s passions and erotic energies are stifled or even denied in the interest (it seems) of attuning them more to men’s and children’s satisfaction than their own (Rogers 115).

While men experience sexual autonomy, the institution of motherhood arguably stifles the sexual agency of women. When poor mothers or mothers of color exhibit sexuality they are generally policed through the desexualized/hypersexualized dichotomy; whereas white mothers are not policed in the same way.

I argue women have also internalized this good/bad mother dichotomy, and use it to police each other as evident on the third season of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*. Throughout seasons one and two, Mimi Faust was venerated because she appeared to be a good mother and a respectable woman. She was always visibly concerned with the well being of her daughter, and even sacrificed her personal happiness to be with Stevie despite him being unfaithful, to keep her family together. During the season three premiere, her estimable image was repudiated due to a leaked sex tape⁹ that featured herself and her boyfriend Niko Smith. By agreeing to publish the

⁹ According to Niko, the sex tape was allegedly leaked when the two of them returned from a vacation overseas. His bag was stolen, and the tape ended up in the “wrong hands”. There were speculations that Niko himself leaked the

tape, she would also have to knowingly submit supplemental footage as the tape in its initial format would not suffice. Mimi stated that her biggest concern was that it would embarrass her daughter, and that people would see her as an unfit mother. Once the sex tape officially released, she was castigated by not only her castmates but also on social media. In an article on Mommy Noir, a counterpart of the popular Black women's blog Madame Noir, blogger Chuck Creemur wrote an article entitled "Call Child Services! Mimi Faust and Stevie J's Daughter Needs You", that discussed why Mimi should be shamed for her actions. He states:

OK, I confess. A part of me is disappointed in me. I thought Mimi was better than this. In 2012, she championed a cause called "Saving Our Daughters," a nonprofit organization geared towards empowering teen girls and young adults. She even had a bit of class which was underscored by Joseline and Stevie J's wacky ways. The 41-year-old Mimi was considered the victim on Love & Hip-Hop Atlanta, as Stevie J cheated on her time and time again. Now, she's unwittingly become the very thing she hated and, in turn, victimized her own daughter. Somebody call child services. A crime is being committed against an innocent kid and we're just watching (Creekmur 2014).

What is implied through Chuck's assessment of Mimi's situation is that good mothers do not overtly express sexuality in the public sphere. If they do, they run the risk of being denied access to true womanhood, because "real" women are supposed to be the moral standard.

Mimi's friends also voiced their disapproval of her actions, stating that she needed an "intervention" because she is losing sight of who she really is. In other words, she is compromising her chances of attaining respectability because of her own sexual endeavors.

Stevie even threatened to take Mimi to court in hopes of receiving full custody of his daughter because he believed Mimi was "unfit", despite the fact that he too has leaked explicit pictures in the public sphere. It is within the institution of motherhood that Mimi's image is crucified and

tape, especially since he claimed he wanted to "exploit" Mimi's sexual abilities. When the tape was recovered by Steven Hirsh of Vivid Entertainment, the biggest porn company in the world, Mimi and Niko were offered a large lump sum to release it. The idea was that by doing so they could capitalize on what became the most pirated sex tape in history.

resurrected. In spite of attacks on her maternal capabilities, she assured those around her that the money she earned from the sex tape would fiscally put her in a better position to support her daughter. She expressed a number of times throughout the second and third season that she cannot depend on Stevie for financial support, so she will do what she can to make sure that she is financially independent. Mimi also expressed using her royalties from her sex tape to start a college fund for her daughter as well. Essentially she is being dehumanized for something that was initially out of her control, yet Stevie is not held accountable in the same manner for his incessant displays of sexuality and misogyny. Through this we see how deviancy is inextricably linked to public displays of sexuality on behalf of “bad mothers”.

Conclusion

Reality TV has served as a genre that has been used to reclaim and perpetuate Black caricatures. Both Black masculinity and Black femininity have been constructed through various stereotypes in the name of “authenticity” through the process of metonymic realism, and have had a major influence in the way that Black narratives are consumed in mainstream culture. Because of the exiguous exposure of counter-narratives, dominant ideas regarding Black womanhood are often produced to coincide with controlling images.

The performance of deviancy for mainstream audiences has continued to be a trend for Black women since they appeared in films in the 20th century and interestingly enough, Black producers have also used reality TV as a platform to sustain this cycle in the name of “reality”. Vh1’s *Basketball Wives* and *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* are two shows produced by Black women that offer consumers a chance to experience “authentic” displays of Black womanhood in the 21st century. Using the narratives of working class and upper class Black women in

tumultuous relationships with high profile celebrities, viewers are able to watch as these women negotiate the performances of respectability and deviancy in order to be venerated as women. What was once a mechanism for survival during the Post-Reconstruction Era, and a display of bodily agency during the Harlem Renaissance has now become commodified as a spectacle for public consumption. In exploiting what can be contextualized as the struggle for womanhood, viewers are also given the opportunity to see how Black women name deviant behaviors. Similar to the way affluent Black club women had the ability to police the deviancy of their working class counterparts in the late 1800s, the cast members on both shows with class privilege are also able to do the same despite them too partaking in “deviant” behavior.

Respectability politics also play a major role in who is venerated as a woman and who is not. The women on both shows that best perform heteronormative identities are seen as more respectable in comparison to the women who perform non-normative identities. Similarly, the women who are best able to perform desexualized performances of motherhood have the authority to police the mothers who are sexualized. Through these shows it is apparent that the ways in which Black women have processed and negotiated their sexual identities historically, manifests itself in the way that they do currently. But does this still hold true for Black women who are not on reality TV? When metonymic realism is no longer an influence, do Black women still internalize and police deviancy in the same way? If so are they able to identify with the way deviancy is named and policed in *Basketball Wives* and *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*? I conduct interviews in the following chapter to see if this is true.

CHAPTER FOUR

Looking for Self: Black Women Interrogating Representations of Black Women

Introduction

Implicitly, controlling images ascribed to Black female bodies have a significant influence in not only the way they are perceived by society, but how they perceive themselves. Through the bolstering of “authenticity” these narratives arguably frame Black womanhood through stereotypes for mainstream audiences to consume, but how do Black women themselves internalize these images? To answer this, I conducted focus group interviews with eight, self-identifying Black women between the ages of 19-25 at the University of Alabama. I met these young women for two, three hour discussions where we viewed the first two episodes of the first season of *Basketball Wives* during the first meeting; and the first episode of the first season of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* during the second meeting. Afterwards we discussed the ways Black female sexuality is displayed in each show. Using Gerbner and Gross’ *cultivation theory*, and hooks’ *oppositional gaze* as frameworks, I analyzed the extent to which the participants internalized the portrayal of Black female identities, as it relates to sexuality and intimacy, and the ways in which their own identity politics influenced this process.

I used the cultivation theory because mainstreaming and resonance are important components in the process of knowledge production. In the 21st century, television is one of our primary sources of knowledge. We come to know what we know by continuously seeing the

same images and internalizing the messages these images convey. These messages directly affect how we perceive the world around us, including the way we view groups of people. In this case, when images of Black womanhood frequently coincide with stereotypes, or images of true womanhood mirror heteronormativity and whiteness, audiences naturally begin adding ethos to them. Through my interviews, I analyzed the extent to which this occurs.

To truly understand the way the participants engaged this process it was essential to also include hooks' theory of oppositional gaze. It is not enough to name negative portrayals of Black womanhood without also discussing the ways in which the participants resisted these images. This is necessary because it speaks to the way Black women interrogate authenticity using their own lived experiences as they simultaneously define it for themselves; hence the reasoning for using a Black feminist epistemology. Lived experiences are fundamental in critically analyzing representations of Black womanhood because it conceptualizes the agency of Black women's voices, thus allowing me to demonstrate the complexities of Black womanhood.

Constructing Realities: Exploring the Effects of Cultivation

Cultivation theory is a social theory developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross used to examine the long term-effects of television consumption. Cultivation occurs through mainstreaming and resonance. Through mainstreaming, television viewing dominates other information sources regarding ideas about the world (Baran & Davis 328). Television audiences begin to add ethos to the images they see on a consistent basis, without taking into consideration that the images themselves may lack the ethos needed to accurately characterize them as "real" and "authentic" thus creating a "pseudo reality" (McQuail 52). Though cultivation effects are strongest for audiences that have little interaction with the groups they are observing, these

images also resonate to some degree for those that do. Resonance manifests itself when viewers see things on television that are most congruent with their own everyday realities. In essence, these people get a “double dose” of cultivation because what they see on the screen resonates with their actual lives” (Baran & Davis 328). I apply this theoretical framework to explore how the portrayal of Black women as Jezebels affect the ways Black women who view these shows assess the authenticity of these representations and police each other sexually.

When viewing the performances on *Basketball Wives* or *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta*, the participants never repudiated the validity of the interactions between the women, but rather responded to the questions I posed from their own personal experiences. There was a familiarity about these interactions that resonated with them, that for the participants was derogatory enough to criticize, yet distinctive enough to identify with. “Inevitably audiences draw on their own personal experience of social interaction to judge the authenticity of the way ordinary people talk, behave and respond to situations and other people in reality programmes” (Hill 78). For example, in the focus group interviews I asked “How do your own experiences inform the way you see each cast member?” A number of the participants conceded to the idea that many of the female cast members on both shows lacked self-worth because they were willing to endure emotional abuse from their romantic partners, and some even validated their responses by pulling from their own experiences in toxic relationships. Participant #8 disclosed that in her last relationship her boyfriend was unfaithful, and though it was difficult, she learned from that experience that she had to love herself enough to move on. She concluded by stating that if she could do it, other women have the power to do so as well. Participant #3 also agreed and disclosed that she had a similar experience with an ex-boyfriend who failed to claim her as his girlfriend in a public setting. In contrast, Participant #5 detailed her mother’s experience of

infidelity with her father during her childhood. She could recall having conversations with her mother, and her mother telling her that she should never stay in a relationship where she is not respected. In this sense, being “respected” was incompatible with infidelity. Thus participant #5 could not empathize or identify with the decisions of the women on the shows.

In regards to internalizing performances of sexuality, participant #6 stated that it was hard for her to process the overtly sexual behavior of Joseline Hernandez and her pride in being a former stripper because of her conservative upbringing. She also stated that her parents would never allow her to be exposed to such behavior. In contrast a number of the other participants attempted to empathize with Joseline’s overt displays of sexuality by saying that she was not afforded the same opportunities or parental support that they take for granted, so to a degree they respected that she had to use her body to survive.

The participants also stated that at times the lack of integrity on *Basketball Wives* made it easy for them to disassociate themselves from the women they were viewing because certain situations did not seem “authentic”. During the first meeting, participant #2 criticized Shaunie O’Neal for trying to rehabilitate her strained relationship with Gloria Govan. Govan’s sister allegedly had an affair with O’Neal’s ex-husband while they were still together, and because of it there was dissension between them. Participant #7 stated that she has three sisters and would never associate with anyone who allegedly slept with her sister’s husbands.

Authenticity was also a qualifier when naming “good” representations of “good motherhood”. When asked “Does being a ‘good’ mother and practicing monogamy equate to a respectable identity?” Participant #6 stated that “Monogamy (as it relates to motherhood) is important for the stability of the child”, while participant #3 agreed and stated that “It does not guarantee respectability but it definitely helps.” Participant #5 shared that since she has been in

college her mother has been very open with her about her sexuality as it relates to her dating life, but that when she was younger she would have never been privy to that information. Participant #6 stated that “Evelyn Lozada of *Basketball Wives* uses her status as a mother to gain respect that she otherwise would not have gotten because she likes to fight and act like a hoe sometime.” Ironically Erica Dixon and Mimi Faust of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* were exonerated from their physical and verbal altercations because some of the participants perceived their performances of motherhood to be conducive in maintaining a stable environment for their children. Just as quickly as the participants were able to validate “respectable” performances of motherhood, they could also concede to the fact that the media influenced their ability to do so. The portrayal of “good mothers” on TV as desexualized beings coincided with Participant #6’s idea that a woman’s body is a temple. By juxtaposing the qualifications of a respectable father with that of a respectable mother, they realized that sexuality was a variable in naming good performances of motherhood, though participant #7 did not agree with this logic. She stated “There shouldn’t be a double standard with motherhood and fatherhood. Moms can’t be sexual but Dads can be, so being a good parent shouldn’t be in conversation with respectability”. Even though they all agreed after her statement, it was still evident that the media had an immense influence on their respectability politics.

Through mainstreaming, we can infer that femininity and morality are generally in concordance when cultivating “authentic” images of true womanhood. In addition, motherhood is also used to validate the existence of “real” women, and “good” mothers are desexualized. Through various depictions of women in the media, young women and men internalize these images, not realizing that what they are really doing is succumbing to a social construct. Unfortunately even when they do realize this, it is very hard not to allow this ideology to

influence the way they name “good” and “bad” mothers. The focus group participants were not exempt.

Answers to the previous questions validate the cultivation theory in two ways. First the way the participants identified with the authentic portrayal of Black women in toxic non-normative relationships using their own experiences. When compared to the many positive images of white heteronormativity, Black heteronormativity is less prevalent in these shows. Even though some participants did not necessarily agree with the decisions made by some of the female cast members in regards to their significant others, a few of them could understand why the women made those decisions. The second is with naming respectable identities when in conversation with motherhood. Because of the portrayal of “good mothers” in the media, the viewers were able to use those definitions to name respectable performances of motherhood. Through their own experiences, they validated why good mothers are identified as either monogamous or desexualized.

Countering Controlling Images: The Oppositional Gaze

Though there were some aspects of the shows the participants identified with, they also stated how they experience some level of resistance when watching the women perform in ways that coincide with controlling images. Black feminist theorist bell hooks describes this process of resistance as the “oppositional gaze”. The oppositional gaze resists images rooted in racist ideologies and allows Black women to not only interrogate these images, but it allows them to recognize them as well (Hooks, 199). I use the oppositional gaze as a framework to show how the participants resisted and interrogated performances of the Jezebel in both of the shows.

Sexuality was a subject that was received differently by all of the participants; though most of the answers centered around the idea that Black women's bodies are hypersexualized. When I asked "Is any sexuality displayed in the public sphere appropriate for Black women? Have you observed anyone on either show that does this?" Participant# 5 stated "Black women cannot be sexual like white women because it will not be looked at the same." During the second focus group interview, Mimi Faust's sex tape became the topic of discussion and participant #4 sparked a fierce debate when she compared Mimi to Kim Kardashian. She discussed how she believed Mimi was a hoe because she leaked her own sex tape, and that at least Kim was able to gain status with hers. Participant #3, #5, and #6 told her she only believed that because Mimi was Black, and participant #3 took it a step further calling participant #4 "brainwashed". Initially participant #4 to offense to that comment, but with more deliberation she too conceded to the idea that she had been conditioned to see Mimi differently because she was black. While many of the participants believed that it was unfair that Black women are held to a different standard sexually, they also stated "that's just how it is". In regards to who displays sexuality in the public sphere appropriately, the participants stated no one for *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, and participant #6 stated Tami Roman on *Basketball Wives*. When asked how so, she stated "She does it best because she really does not display it all, but she polices other women that do".

When asked "In what ways do the women police each other's sexuality? Does it coincide with how you police other women? What does it look like?", many of them said that they do police each other like the women on the shows. On *Basketball Wives* specifically, the participants discussed the way Royce Reed was verbally policed by Evelyn Lozada after her overtly sexual dance display at a celebrity pool party. Participant #3 said that she too polices women verbally, and believes that Royce should have been characterized as a "hoe" because of

the things she says and does. She also stated that she does the same thing for her peers, though she usually just shares her observations with her friends. Participant #1 chimed in and stated “I usually just give them a look like ‘why would you do that?’ It’s only a couple of us (Black women) here (in attendance at the University of Alabama), now they are going to look at all of us like that”. Participants #4 and #5 said that they give each other a specific look when they identify Black women who are “acting like hoes”.

Drawing from her own experience, participant #4 also stated that “Fat women do not get policed in the same way others do because they are seen as the home girl”. She went on to discuss that she is very comfortable in her sexuality and does not mind showing it though she has never had intercourse, but that people would never think she could be intimate with her male friends because she is a “big girl”. Participant #6 discussed how she cannot even visit her friend who is also an athlete at UA without people assuming that she is sleeping with him. She stated “When I went to visit my friend, I had my little cousin with me and people automatically assumed that I was trying to sleep with him. Like really? I got a little kid with me. But that’s because of the way these white girls act when they visit them (athletes). The participants viewed Joseline Hernandez of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* the same way they viewed Royce, and suggested that it was because as Black women they work so hard to resist stereotypes while these women seem to embrace them. Participant #6 even admitted to being resentful when watching Joseline stating “All she has to do is show her body to get ahead, but I am actually in school and I do not feel like I am progressing as fast.” Some of the participants also admitted to jumping to conclusions about the women they police based on what they perceive about them without actually taking the time to get to know them. What I can infer through their statements is that

race is always salient for Black women within the context of sexuality, and it especially evident when Black female sexuality is exploited through mainstream consumption.

When asked “How does the performance of masculinity affect the way we ascribe respectability to the women on the show?” gender became the most salient self-defining characteristic influencing their critiques. Though there was diversity in the way each participant answered the question, the responses were ultimately framed through ideologies mirroring patriarchal constructions of gender. For example, participant #3 stated “The responsibility is with the woman because she knows what she is dealing with”. On the first two episodes of the first season of *Basketball Wives*, the participants witnessed the fragile relationship between Jennifer Williams and her husband Eric Williams. After the disclosure of infidelity on behalf of Eric, Jennifer continued fighting to make her marriage work, despite voicing her ambivalent feelings in the process. As the participants watched Jennifer divulge this information to the rest of the cast, many of them lacked sympathy for her, and stated that because she failed to immediately leave her husband, she could not be characterized as “respectable”. It was not until participant #7 stated “Women get on each other but do not hold men accountable for their shitty behavior” that the participants realized the double standard they were imposing on the female cast members of *Basketball Wives*. In contrast the participants had different views regarding the women on *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*. In a discussion amongst themselves, one participant suggested that if a woman endures heartache for the sake of her family she should be respected, while another stated that no respect should be given to Mimi because she endured such a horrible relationship. Participant #6 stated “I cannot respect Mimi or Erica because they use their children as pawns in their relationships with their boyfriends.”

When unpacking the responses of the participants, I can see that respectability is arbitrarily bestowed to women while indubitably granted to men when interrogating performances of intimacy and sexuality. While most of the participants were avid consumers of both shows, they did voice their disapproval of the narratives they embodied. One of the biggest reasons is because the participants believed that the popularity of these shows continue to proliferate due to the exploitation of Black stereotypes by both the cast members and the network. When considering the narratives of sexuality and intimacy, the stereotypes invoked for both Black men and women are that they are incapable of having healthy relationships. He is either incapable of maintaining fidelity or she is seen as unworthy of fidelity, and in both cases there is a buttressing of Black deviance because he is praised for being sexually aggressive while she is demonized for it. One of the most salient narratives of non-normative relationships perpetuated within Black culture is the idea that a woman should prove her loyalty to a man by negating her own needs to sustain the longevity of the relationship. If she is able to do so until the man is willing to commit to her completely, then she is venerated and considered a “ride or die”, or essentially deemed as a woman worthy of his respect.

When asked “How do you ascribe respectability to the women based on how well they are able to endure toxic romantic relationships?”, many of them said they would respect the women on both shows more if they were able to pick better men. Participant #2 stated “The women’s roles in these relationships are vicarious because they are either being mistreated or they are fighting based on the “status” they have with the men they are involved with.” Many of them also referenced superficiality as a reason not to ascribe respect to the toxic relationships on *Basketball Wives* and *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, because they perceived the women to be more concerned with money and fame than they were love. Participant #6 stated “They are in

relationships for the wrong reasons, and that is hard to respect.” Although non-normative relationships cannot be linked to the Black community alone, heteronormative relationships are generally associated with white romantic relationships in popular culture. This is not to confuse toxicity with deviance or automatically deem all heteronormative relationships as healthy, but it is to make note of the ways in which deviancy functions as deviant when juxtaposed with heteronormativity. Had all of the women on both shows been married I do not believe the participants would have come to the same conclusion due to the fact that heteronormativity is usually perpetuated as the “correct” way to be in love even if it too is rooted in superficiality.

Out of all the questions posed, the oppositional gaze was more apparent when I asked the question “Do you believe that your ability or inability to identify with the women on the show affect the way you characterize them as respectable? Why or why not? Participant #8 stated “None of these ‘women’ are women to me. A woman is someone who is strong willed and does not have to depend on a man”. A couple of the other participants agreed and gave their own working definitions of a woman. Most of them reflected the traits: independent, mother, and carries herself with respect, and that is why they could not respect the women who were cheated on and stayed with their partners. Participant #5 stated “I can only identify with the way the women police each other because I handle certain friendships in the same way.” Some of them also discussed the burden of representation, and admitted that they did not like these shows because of how they are projected onto all Black women. Participant #1 stated “I am always on the defense because of these shows”, while participant #6 stated “This is what I am compared to”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found that my experiences watching *Basketball Wives* and *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* both compared and contrasted with the experiences of the participants. We both agree on the idea that these shows influence the ways Black female bodies are consumed through both popular culture and in our daily lives. The burden of representation makes it hard for Black women to have access to womanhood in the same ways that white women do, specifically in terms of performing sexuality in the public sphere. Interrogating why deviancy is ascribed to Black bodies and why deviant Black female identities are presumed to be authentic helped to further unpack the burden of representation. It has also helped me conceptualize why this is endemic in the Black female experience. Understanding the ways in which deviant Black identities have served as a spectacle since the 20th century makes it easy to understand why it is so easy to propagate them as authentic; however, the ability to make that connection speaks to the way Blackness has to be manufactured for consumption within the genre of reality TV.

The impetus behind conducting research on the construction of Black female sexuality was the idea that I could capture women's agency by listening to their narratives of their experiences and better understand their knowledge. For centuries Black women have been told who they are and what they are not, and consequently it has been a struggle to maintain our own voices in the midst of resistance. We too have internalized these notions of deviancy, and used them to police each other with the hope that through respectability we could demonstrate why we should be considered "ladies". While this may be perceived as divisive, it is a method of resistance that has become a survival mechanism for Black women in America. It is important to note however that our narratives and methods of resistance are not monolithic. Demonstrating this has been of the most enriching aspects of this experience. Undoubtedly Black women share

the experience of what it means to be “Black” and “female”, but how they navigate through society varies due to their positionality. This is why it is imperative to show the historical evolution of the construction of Black female sexuality because it illustrates how Black women have grappled with sexual oppression and why that process is relevant to women in my generation. The negotiation of sexuality was dependent on class, sexual orientation, and a number of other differences that are still apparent today. Through the focus group interviews I was able to see how each participant processed representations of Black womanhood using their own subjectivities. What one participant could identify with another one could not due to her own lived experiences. This does not invalidate any of their responses, but rather it shows the multiplicity of Black female experiences.

As I think about the way the participants resisted the portrayal of “authentic” Black female identities in *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives*, I would argue that it was more than just resisting controlling images. I argue that it is resisting the idea that an “authentic” Black female experience exist. There is no way to name “authenticity” without silencing another narrative. It is in fact dehumanizing to relegate Black women’s experiences to merely caricatures for the sake of entertainment without considering the effects it has on their lived experiences. When the participants shared their own experiences with policing, negotiating resistance and exploring sexuality, they proved that Black womanhood was more complex than it is generally portrayed to be. Their willingness to be reflexive allowed me the opportunity to illustrate a process that is generally reserved for the private sphere, and in doing so they were able to contribute and enhance the conversation regarding Black womanhood.

This research experience has been rewarding because I have not only discussed the evolution of the Black female experience, but have also given Black women a platform to be

able to interrogate it. Their voices are extremely important because it is rare that that their lived experiences are actually valued. Had I not conducted this research, there would not have been a more thorough understanding of the ways in which Black women internalize and resist deviancy. Black women should be able to experience womanhood in the same ways white women do, but they will not as long as knowledge is produced that buttresses the idea that they are complacent in their deviancy. My hope is that I can challenge that idea with this contribution to knowledge production.

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APPENDIX

Office for Research
Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA

R E S E A R C H



358 Rose Administration Building
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May 1, 2014

Kiara Hill
Dept of Race and Gender Studies
College of Arts & Sciences
Box 870272

Re: IRB#: 14-OR-153 "Black Female Experiences of Sexual Discourses"

Dear Ms. Hill:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on April 30, 2015. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent/assent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,


Carpanjato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office of Research Compliance
The University of Alabama