“FUCKING WITH THE GRAYS”: BLACK FEMALE RESPECTABILITY POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY BLACK FEMALE SEXUAL REPRESENTATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2013
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To my Mother. You have paid for this with your love, encouragement, resilience, persistence, and life. No words can express how much I miss you. I love you. Rest in peace.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Jonathan for the many sacrifices he has made to allow me to embark on this journey. I thank Danielle who has been a huge help with Jahsiri throughout my program at the University of Florida. I thank my son, Jahsiri. He has kept me on my toes. He is the sun and makes my life so much brighter.

I thank Tace Hedrick who has pushed me to dig deeper with my ideas. I am grateful to her for her patience with my many drafts and for being a wonderful thesis chair. I hope to become as dedicated a teacher and mentor as she. I thank Debra Walker King for her time and example. She instilled confidence in me at a critical moment and modeled for me the strength and professionalism necessary not only to survive but to thrive in this profession.

Last, but never least, I thank my sisters Natasha and Antionette, specifically, who have been pillars of support, reading countless drafts and babysitting Jah with little notice. I thank my family generally. In myriad ways, you each have contributed to my growth and to the fruition of this project.
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Charged with reifying negative stereotypes of black women, black female performers who engage in sexually transgressive performance work are often perceived by black feminists and black folks alike as uncritical participants in their own sexual objectification. Rather than viewing sexually transgressive black female performers as uncritical subjects because they fail or refuse to align with the respectable images black communities often demand to see, this thesis explores the sociopolitical potential of sexually transgressive black female performance work and examines the pitfalls inherent in the black community’s desire for “respectable” images of black women. By unpacking popular culture “moments”—pop star Beyoncé’s 2011 MTV pregnancy announcement and 2013 Super Bowl half-time show and rap artist Nicki Minaj’s 2012 “Stupid Hoe” video release—this paper seeks to destabilize the predetermined black feminist analytic framework of trauma and objectification pervasive in discussions of black female sexual expression and ultimately attempts to demonstrate, as Morgan calls for in her treatise on Hip-hop feminism When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as A Hip Hop Feminist, “a feminism that is brave enough to fuck with the grays” (Morgan 59).
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Gyrating her prosthetic buttocks, whipping her blonde wig, and metamorphosing her body into that of an encaged leopard, Hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj has generated fierce black feminist debates concerning the most appropriate ways to represent black female bodies. In her critically denounced music video “Stupid Hoe” (released on January 20, 2012), for example, Nicki Minaj manipulates her own black female body in seemingly endless racist/sexist ways: in one scene Minaj transforms herself into a Raggedy Ann doll; in another she morphs into a distorted, shrunken pink Barbie; and in yet another, she transmogrifies her body into that of a caged leopard. Through this video and other productions, Nicki Minaj has single-handedly become the number one target of contemporary black feminist critique.

Because Minaj’s performances toe the fine line between sexual transgression and sexual objectification, Minaj, and performers like her, is often hastily dismissed by black feminists and cultural critics alike as an unenlightened, problematic, and vapid figure. Charged with reifying negative stereotypes of black women, black female performers who engage in sexually transgressive performance work are often perceived by black feminists and black folks alike as uncritical participants in their own sexual objectification.¹ For, as bell hooks explains in her essay ‘Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister,” “the vast majority of black women in the United States [are] more

¹ Exceptions to this rule are found in contemporary black feminist work that emerges out of queer studies, Hip-hop feminism, and pro-pornography studies. For example, Lamonda Horton-Stallings’ Mutha Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture, Shayne Lee’s Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture, and Mireille Mille-Young’s “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography.”
concerned with projecting images of respectability than with the idea of sexual agency or transgression..."(Black Looks 160).

Rather than viewing sexually transgressive black female performers as uncritical subjects because they fail or refuse to align with the respectable images black communities often demand to see, this thesis explores the sociopolitical potential of sexually transgressive black female performance work and examines the pitfalls inherent in the black community’s desire for “respectable” images of black women. By unpacking popular culture “moments” during which black female performers express black female sexuality—such as pop star Beyoncé’s 2011 MTV pregnancy announcement and 2013 Super Bowl half-time show and Nicki Minaj’s 2012 “Stupid Hoe” video release—this paper seeks to destabilize the predetermined black feminist analytic framework of trauma and objectification pervasive in discussions of black female sexual expression and ultimately attempts to demonstrate, as Morgan calls for in her treatise on Hip-hop feminism When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as A Hip Hop Feminist, “a feminism that is brave enough to fuck with the grays” (Morgan 59).

I begin with an analysis of the historical circumstances that have shaped black female respectability politics, including historical strategies of black collective uplift rooted in the Black Women’s Club movement of the early twentieth century. Next, I explicate contemporary respectability discourses in twenty-first century black American female culture. Through close examinations of several popular culture moments wherein a public discourse of the politics of respectability emerges as a mechanism of community control of black female sexuality, my thesis argues that the politics of
respectability is not inclusive enough of black female heterogeneity and thus fails to uplift all black women. I contend further that the sexual conservatism and Judeo-Christian leanings embedded in respectability discourse often further marginalize black women. Because discourses of respectability require the sanitization and normativization of blackness, sexuality, class, and gender, rather than interrogating the presumed superiority of whiteness and its concomitant stigmatization of blackness, the politics of respectability perpetuates the purported ontological, physical, and intellectual supremacy of whiteness. In the final part of my thesis, I will theorize—working with bell hooks’ notion of a “new aesthetics of looking”—the ways in which a wide array of black female sexual expression is, and still can be, part of black cultural discourse. At the conclusion of my thesis, I will discuss a possible solution to the issue of various kinds of black female sexual representation in the public sphere, a solution which involves what I term “safe space.”

Respectability as Resistance: Constructing the Respectable Black Female Body in the Public Sphere. Since black women’s transplantation to the western world, the social imaginary as well as the material body of the black female has been denigrated in the white cultural imagination through an iconography of images that have been used in American society to, as Cathy Cohen notes, “justify the implementation of marginalizing systems ranging from slavery to, most recently, workfare” (35). More often than not, such images rely on an ideology of deviant and unbridled black female sexuality, a sexuality that requires squelching by “good white (and black) folk” and containment by state apparatuses. Because black women historically had little social and political recourse to quell the sexual and economic exploitation of their bodies, and
since, from slavery onward, their “degeneracy” has so often been confirmed by “science,” they crafted strategies of self-protection.

In *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*, Darlene Clark Hine identifies the “culture of dissemblance” as an integral resistance strategy of self-protection mounted by antebellum and post-emancipation black women who sought to shield themselves from racist/sexist onslaughts and negative stereotypes. She writes:

Dissemblance means the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors, and often from Black men and Black children. They practiced dissemblance in response to rape, the threat of rape, and domestic violence. Not surprisingly, given the prevalence of negative and stereotypical images in the larger society, the facet of Black women’s lives most shrouded from scrutiny has been their sexuality. (xxviii)

In response to negative characterizations and the ever-looming threat of rape, antebellum black women often suffered sexual abuse silently, either constructing facades of coolness or concealing forms of self-expression that could be read as lascivious and wanton. As other scholars have noted, the image of the insatiable, sexually wild black female has been serviced to justify white erotic and capitalist exploitation of black female bodies and has catalyzed black women to suppress their sexualities.2 Although Hine is speaking specifically about antebellum black women, the culture of dissemblance is important for thinking about the historical continuity of Western Culture’s hypersexualization of black women and black women’s strategic

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2 Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Deborah White have articulated that the controlling Jezebel image has over determined ways of seeing black women and has been used to justify the rape, objectification, and exploitation of black female bodies.
responses to such psychic and material abuse. Likewise, Melissa V. Harris-Perry’s “trope of the crooked room” is a more contemporary understanding of the ways in which black women are constantly traversing hostile social terrains and attempting to live humanely in the face of visual degradation and to claim access to citizenship, despite their marginalization. Harris-Perry writes: “[w]hen [black women] confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (29).

Both the culture of dissemblance and the trope of the crooked room reveal that despite the transmogrification of images of black women in the American imaginary, from the Venus Hottentot to the black mammy to the black sapphire to the welfare queen and so on, the cultural currency of racist/sexist images of black women influences, and continues to affect, dominant cultural conceptions of black women. Unwilling to “fit the distortion,” nineteenth-century black women performed “dissemblance” and projected images of respectability in order to uplift the collective condition of black people generally and black women specifically.

Because hegemonic images have so adversely impacted black women, incorporated black women understood their key to citizenship as rooted in constructing “respectable” images of themselves. Thus, in the late nineteenth-to-early twentieth century, black female leaders of Black Women’s Club movements, such as the

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3 Hine locates the more vivid expressions of what she terms “dissemblance” in black women’s novels, citing Harriet Jacobs of Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl as an exemplary model of dissemblance.

4 Black Women’s Club Movements flourished in the late nineteenth century, functioning in part as self-help organizations for Black women committed to black social progress. Working from the self-help motto “Lifting as We Climb,” middle-class Black women worked alongside white female allies to uplift women
National Association of Colored Women,⁵ modeled black female respectability politics after the Victorian principles of “true womanhood” and “domesticity” cults. In doing so, black women sought to debilitate (among other images) the infamous “image of the black woman as chronically promiscuous” and to gain access to at least a modicum of the respect afforded white women (Davis 182).⁶ Though the primacy of black women’s club movements in African-American communities was displaced in the early twentieth century by the primacy of the black church, in addition to greater community attention to black men’s issues, respectability discourses became, from that time on, inextricable from the black progress narrative (White 58).

At the turn of the twentieth century, opportunities for Black social progress appeared to advance alongside developments in technology, industrialization, and urbanization (Banks 66). Such films as Birth of a Nation, however, dispelled some of the euphoria felt by upwardly mobile black folk. Clearly, media was a weapon of the dominant culture and could be strategically deployed to perpetuate primordial myths of black deviancy (Riggs np). However, with more proximity to citizenship, black middle-class subjects continued to hold on to the hope of respectability as a means to an end, deriding and policing those who “made black folk look bad.” As Roderick Ferguson explains, black middle-class subjects fought hard on the American cultural battleground for black social progress and access to citizenship. Wielding swords of respectability,

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⁵ Established in Washington, D.C. in 1896, the NACWC was formed by such abolitionists as Mary Church Terrell and Harriet Tubman.
middle-class black folk sought to distance themselves from pathological images and understandings of blackness. He writes:

As cultural pathology was located within the terrain of the social and the visible, middle-class redemption was staged on that terrain as well. Black middle-class persons had to publicly demonstrate their compliance with heteropatriarchal cultural standards as a way of proving their distance from ‘obviously’ pathological subjects and social relations as a way of claiming access to state and civil society. (Ferguson 75)

As Ferguson makes clear, the hypervisibility of blacks punctuated the race for citizenship. And part of that race involved leaving behind those who could not quite keep up.

Moreover, the hypervisibility of black bodies particularly heightened the pressure for black women to conform to heteropatriarchal notions of femininity. Unfortunately, those who failed to or refused to live up to the dictates of respectability mandated by race leaders remained socially stigmatized both within and outside black communities (McBride 367). So-called deviant black women were also criticized by upper crust black folk for polluting the image of the black woman in the white cultural imagination, purportedly thwarting opportunities for collective black social uplift. For example, Rosa Parks may be the image and icon of such social uplift. Yet, months before, Claudette Colvin, an unwed teen mother, refused to part with her “white only” designated seat. After receiving word of Colvin’s act of resistance, the Montgomery National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) decided that while Colvin’s was a brave and strategic act of resistance, Colvin herself was not a respectable enough figure to act as poster child for what would become the Civil Rights Movement. After some deliberation, the Montgomery NAACP decided that Rosa Parks, a light-complexioned, middle-class, educated black woman was a more intelligible and
assimilable figure, and thus, Parks, not Colvin, could inspire not only black identification, but white compassion (Hoose 2010). Colvin’s elision from Civil Rights history bespeaks the saliency for black political agendas of constructing and presenting respectable images of black women in the public sphere.

In the twentieth century the public sphere became (and remains) a critical battleground in the black freedom struggle, which explains why black folks who publicly deviate from respectability are harshly criticized for “making black folk look bad.” Understanding that black subjection in the cultural realm generates both sympathy and contempt, black leaders have long viewed popular culture both as a tool of protest and a tool of marginalization. When used strategically, popular culture could promote sympathetic images of blacks, thus leading to further support for black uplift. When used strategically in the wrong hands, however, black images in popular culture could potentially “reinscribe the boundaries between the incorporated and the marginalized, the powerful and the powerless” (Iton 108). What cannot be overstated here, though, is the extent to which black women bore (and continue to bear) the brunt of this criticism because black women lack the masculine privilege that would sanction certain behaviors, sexual expression being one of them.

That said, it is clear why black women whose vocation involves performing sexuality in the public sphere are particularly susceptible to the regulatory gaze of respectable race leaders. Following Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins, hip-hop scholar Reiland Rabaka argues that early twentieth-century black middle-class and church-going women sought to distance themselves from so-called rowdy, raunchy, wanton blues women, as blues women represented salacious black female sexuality
and the under-belly of black life, an image and a life with which black middle-class and church-going women sought to unlink themselves (54). Rabaka further strikes an important parallel between black clubwomen’s devaluation of blues women and contemporary black feminist academics’ condemnation of the so-called negative representations of black women in contemporary popular culture. He writes:

there seems to be enough of a similarity between many contemporary black feminist academics’ rejection of hip hop women—if not rap music and hip hop culture in general to warrant comparisons with the ragged relationship between classic black clubwomen and classic blues women. In more ways than one, classic black clubwomen and contemporary black feminist academics can be said to represent elite and college-educated African American women, where classic blues women and contemporary hip hop women disproportionately represent working-class and poor African American women. (43; emphasis in original)

Here, Rabaka not only highlights the thread of respectability dictating black female engagement with past and contemporary sexually transgressive black women, he also illuminates the class desires undergirding the regulatory gazes of the black middle-class and elite. Because contemporary hip-hop culture and classic blues culture has been, with few exceptions, imagined as debased and vernacular, early twentieth century middle-class black women and contemporary black female academics have sought out more respectable subject matter for consumption and critical deliberation.

Rabaka further suggests that black appreciation and condemnation of vernacular black images and culture are not simply tied to black freedom struggle. Appreciation and condemnation of black images are deeply rooted in respectability politics, and such politics do not merely function as a tool of resistance; rather, they function also as a tool of class mobility. When early twentieth century middle-class woman and contemporary academics strike a difference between “those women” and respectable black women,
they articulate that one group is more worthy of the trappings of middle-class life. Thus, one group’s “degeneracy” can seemingly spur another’s mobility. But keen black folks have always been attuned to the controlling function of black images in American culture, understanding the critical ways in which the white anthropological gaze tends to homogenize blackness.

Because blackness is often homogenized, it is not sufficient for middle-class black folks to be respectable, all blacks must be. Thus, respectability politics become a form of cultural policing because of the shared ideology within black communities of, what Cathy Cohen describes as, “linked fate.” “Linked fate” refers to the perceived shared consciousness of marginalized groups wherein, because of a shared history of oppression, members believe their fates to be intimately linked and bound. Thus, issues that particularly threaten privileged segments of the black population are “owned as community issues meriting group political mobilization” (11). Many scholars have now contested the validity of “linked fate” and have discarded the notion of black homogeneity, arguing instead that black populations have always been diverse, even divided, along the lines of class, religion, and sexuality. But recent events, such as the news coverage of the 2008 presidential election and 2012 re-election of President Barack Obama, reveal that many blacks, and other groups, continue to understand blacks as a homogenous group who are similarly, even evenly, affected by social issues and public policies. Despite the heterogeneity of black social class locations and the

7 Cohen notes that such issues as lynching, suffrage, Jim Crow, Affirmative Action, and state violence against black men have warranted group political mobilization, whereas issues affecting black women, black LGBTQ folk, black poor folk, and black people living with HIV/AIDS have gone unchampioned.

8 For example, Marlon Riggs’s film Black Is…Black Ain’t powerfully explores black heterogeneity.
multiplicity of black modes of being, for example, Obama’s win was comprehended both within and outside black communities as a win for all blacks. Hence, Obama’s election and re-election, and the consequent feelings of political representation shared by many blacks, demonstrate that “linked fate” has cultural currency still.

Black adherence to the belief of “linked fate” entwined with the persistence of black respectability politics as a strategy of class uplift has continued a cultural climate wherein many elite blacks, including black women, fully invest in respectability as a strategy of social uplift and self-protection. Because many black folks feel, and not unrightfully, that their fates are linked, that they share a “fictive kinship” with other blacks, to borrow a phrase from Melissa V. Harris-Perry, out of concern for the images and cultural perceptions of black people and their own class desires, elites and non-elites will often police their lower class and/or so-called deviant black counterparts for acting “too black,” “ghetto,” or to invoke a newer term, “ratchet.” More simply, blacks who fail to properly conform to hegemonic ways of being, particularly in the public sphere, risk intra- and inter-community reproach and persecution. As I stated earlier, black women are particularly vulnerable to intragroup and intergroup persecution, particularly when it comes to sexual expression and representation, as evidenced by the black community’s condemnation of, or flagrant disregard for, “bad” or “unrespectable” black women in black presses and the codification of deviant black female sexuality in historical and contemporary American laws, respectively.​

9 For an excellent discussion of black women, citizenship, and laws aimed at curbing and controlling black female sexuality and reproduction, see Melissa V. Harris-Perry’s *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America.*
Current manifestations of black female respectability may be found in the religious ideologies of black churches, representations of ideal black women in black women’s magazines such as *Essence*, *Ebony*, and *O*, and most exhaustively and poignantly, I argue, in contemporary black feminist critiques of black female sexual expression in the public sphere. The critiques with which I contend in this paper include, but are in no way limited to, contemporary academic essays. Taking my cue from Patricia Hill Collins who argues that critically assessing and “[d]eveloping black feminist thought also involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals,” I examine feminist theory put forth not only by academic presses, but also in alternative locations such as the blogosphere (14). In particular, I examine blogs such as *Jezebel*, *Crunk Feminist Collective*, and *The Negress* because these blogs not only feature black women who identify as black feminist commentators, but also keep their fingers on the pulse of contemporary black popular culture.

By examining black feminist blog spots and black feminist bloggers, I attempt to mine black female cultural discussions of various moments of black female public sexual expression. I am particularly attentive to, and try to complicate, respectability discourses that attempt to desexualize or castigate popular moments of black female sexual expression. In so doing, I show that the politics of respectability are deeply culturally ingrained; and I also show how such a politics should be interrogated for the limited ways in which it allows its practitioners to engage with public expressions of black female sexuality.
The following section examines popular culture moments, and the discourse around such moments, involving pop star Beyoncé and rap artist Nicki Minaj. In this section I argue that because Beyoncé has more respectable currency (i.e. she is wealthy, married, childrened, and attractive by white hegemonic standards) she is overwhelmingly celebrated as a black feminist paragon even when her performances of sexuality transgress the dictates of respectability politics. Nicki Minaj, on the other hand, is more subject to the black feminist regulatory gaze because she is deemed unrespectable by black female respectability standards. Furthermore, because Minaj lacks respectable currency, her transgressive performances are routinely denounced as abject and debased.
CHAPTER 2
VIRTUOUS PREGNANCIES AND “STUPID HOE[S]”

“Doing it the Right Way”

An example of contemporary black female respectability politics at work in critiques of black female sexuality in the public sphere may be found in the now widespread celebration of black female pop artist Beyoncé’s 2011 pregnancy. After Beyoncé publicly announced her pregnancy at the 2011 Video Music Awards, black feminist blog sites such as Jezebel and magazines such as Clutch exploded with discussions of black women, pregnancy, public policy, and black female sexual representation. Many commentators and articles affirmed Beyoncé’s route to motherhood, for example, touting a black woman for finally “doing [pregnancy] the right way” (Harris np). Black female journalist Janelle Harris of Clutch magazine, for instance, uses her article “Beyoncé, Baby Bumps, and Doing It the Right Way” to substantiate the prudence of Beyoncé’s route to motherhood by drawing on her own apparently arduous experiences of single motherhood. She writes:

first comes love, second comes marriage, then comes the lady with the baby carriage is a rhyme that didn’t mean much more beyond the playground in elementary school. But to me, it’s the natural order of things, the way the good Lord intended them to be, the modus operandi that makes the most logical sense. I had to find this out the hard way, though. I read all of the comments in the blog posts that I write and one poignant (albeit a bit ig’nant) observer pointed out that my desire to one day have more kids with a hubby must mean that I had a baby with a brother who chose not to marry me in the first place. Ouch. But it’s true: I consciously made the choice to lie down as a teenager with my good, common sense floating somewhere between good sex and first love. So now, after besting 12 years of single motherhood and nine more months on top of that of being a baby mama, I see now that there is a reason why you should wait to be married before you have little ones. This ish ain’t easy solo. (np)
Though Harris’ experiences as a single mother enable Harris to make a valid critique of the challenges black single mothers face, explicit in Harris’ article is the critique of black women (including herself) who have presumably done, or do, pregnancy “the wrong way” by conceiving children out of wedlock. Nowhere in Harris’ critique does Harris consider women who hold religious or sexual politics that may run counter to “the right way” she espouses, but whose choices to mother may be as (or more) considered than were Beyoncé’s.

Leaving unquestioned Harris’ uncritical celebration of Beyoncé, one commentator, KeeKee, declares: “Yes, [Beyoncé] did it the right way. Career, marriage, then comes the baby. And she was a virgin too. Now that’s how it’s suppose[d] to be done. She’s a good example of black women everywhere.” (KeeKee np). In a similar vein, another commentator, Elaine, explains that although she herself is an “educated” and economically stable, unwed mother, she agrees that “marriage before having children is the wisest thing to do” (Elaine np). Unfortunately, Elaine fails to explain why conceiving a child in wedlock is the “wisest thing to do.” Moreover, although she writes that she and her child’s father have an amicable arrangement and that she is content with her life, her own circumstances do not enable her to critique the widely-held idea that there is only one “right way” to do motherhood. Like Harris and KeeKee, Elaine seems to uncritically accept that Beyoncé’s way is “how it’s supposed to be done."

What is most troubling about Harris’ and other commentators’ heteronormative vision of motherhood is that this vision is so widely held by so many Americans that such perspectives are naturalized as morally “good” and
“proper,” taken as unequivocally and evidently right. Folks are not taught to see such values as outgrowths of discursive formations, discursive formations that have historically privileged dominant groups. As such, the uncritical celebration of Beyoncé’s “choice” effectively forecloses dialogue of what it means to do black motherhood “the wrong way.” Instead of critically considering what it means to go against the grain, critics often invoke ideas about the “tangle of pathology” allegedly facilitated by single black mothers and cling to unquestioned ideologies about that which is proper (Moynihan qtd. in Rainwater and Yancey).¹ In doing so, critics then speciously argue that Beyoncé’s hegemonically desirable track to motherhood is the single and only route to successful parenting and collective black female uplift. ²

Thus while Harris’ contention is valuable in its salute to Beyoncé and her ability to get married and produce children (because, following Hortense Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” black women have often been understood as baby-breeding, emasculating matriarchs unfit for wifehood), when only celebratory of “imperialist white supremacist capitalistic patriarchal” values, such contentions fail not only to comprehensively address the deeper ideological and religious implications of Beyoncé’s “choice,” but also neglect the diversity of

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¹ Though the “tangle of pathology” and demonization of the black matriarchal family was formally introduced by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965, white politicians and social commentators have since latched onto this discourse and reproduced it in different sociopolitical contexts. The deviant black mother figure is perhaps most visibly manifest in Ronald Reagan’s 1980s conception of the Welfare Queen.

² Nancy E. Dowd, in her study of American perceptions of single parent families, In Defense of Single Parent Families, argues, for example, that unmarried black female parents are particularly targeted for their “poor choices,” stigmatized as “bad mothers” who allegedly routinely overly rely on and abuse the welfare system. Dowd contends that such thinking about black mothers stems from the overrepresentation of conniving black female welfare recipients in popular culture. She takes great pains, however, to upset such thinking, arguing that “[m]ost welfare mothers are not Black mothers…” (xvii).
experiences black women who do pregnancy differently may have (Spillers 80). Furthermore, popular responses to Beyoncé’s more recent “choices” underscore the tenuousness of respectability politics as a tool for group mobilization. Beyoncé’s 2013 Super Bowl half-time show is one such performance that has garnered divisive criticism, simultaneously throwing into question and securing Beyoncé’s respectability. The princess of black female respectability in 2011 (Michelle Obama is unequivocally the queen), Beyoncé’s performances of sexuality in 2013 compelled many critics to denounce Beyoncé from her respectable throne.³

Bustling, hysterical fans set the stage for Beyoncé’s 2013 Super Bowl performance. This choreographed excitement prefigures the shooting fire and fireworks that combust on stage before Beyoncé makes her grand entrance. Before she begins, however, Beyoncé’s silhouette illuminates the stage, paving the way for Beyoncé’s first song of the evening. Striking sharp, punctuated vogue-esque poses, Beyoncé culminates her first song snippet with a cat walk down the runway stage. As Beyoncé enters the well-lit space of the runway, the audience gets a full picture of her Super Bowl ensemble: a black leather teddy with a ballet skirt attachment, a black coat, black gloves, black thigh-high stockings, and black five-inch stiletto booties. Upon coming into the light, Beyoncé drops to the ground and begins to writhe and grind her body onto the stage’s platform. Singing, Beyoncé kicks up her leg and continues to enact her floor routine. Following this, the camera switches its view from long-shot to bird’s-eye. From this angle, the audience sees two hologrammed images of Beyoncé’s lighted silhouette.

³ Beyoncé was also heavily critiqued for her 2013 GQ cover and spread, which featured Beyoncé in high-cut panties, and a partial breast-revealing jersey. As with her performance at the Super Bowl, anxieties arose about Beyoncé’s conduct, particularly given that she is now a mother.
Quickly, the camera pans the stage, and Beyoncé engages in a dance routine with her all-female dance crew.

As Beyoncé gyrates her body, she first removes her jacket and then part of her skirt attachment. Offered next are sophisticated panoramic shots of Beyoncé, her performers, and her all-female band. She then performs her Caribbean reggae-inspired song, “Baby Boy.” During this performance, she attempts to recreate the dancehall flavor of her “Baby Boy” music video. The camera captures flashing and hologrammed images of black female bodies, and eventually Beyoncé becomes the central focus. Beyoncé gently grabs her crotch and begins to jut her pelvis forward as she alternates between slow winding, dutty wining, and West African dance movements, all of which involve the thrusting of her arms, head, and hips, and the pivoting of her legs.

Next, a fire erupts, smoke dissipates, and Kelly Rowland, former member of Destiny’s Child, appears in the smoke’s wake. Similarly, Michelle Williams, another former member of Destiny’s Child, appears on stage. Beyoncé, Kelly, and Michelle, each clad in black leather dominatrix gear, then group together for a performance of “Bootylicious.” After this, the trio mimes the lyrics of several girl power hits, including their “Independent Women” and Beyoncé’s solo, “Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It).” After thanking Kelly and Michelle, Beyoncé reclaims the stage for a final performance. Kneeling down, Beyoncé sways with her audience as she vigorously belts “Halo.” Emoting the song, Beyoncé then culminates her Super Bowl performance, kneeling down, throwing her head back onto the stage, her body vulnerable and supplicant.

Unsurprisingly, Beyoncé’s Super Bowl performance stimulated both fierce criticism and intense discussions about slut-shaming, sex-positive feminism, and the
cultural responsibility of black female performers. Several commentators from mainstream sources found Beyoncé’s performance crude and inappropriate for TV. For example, S.E. Cupp, host of MSNBC’s “The Cycle,” argues that “we all got a lap dance during the super bowl halftime show.” She further contends that “the Super Bowl halftime show should just be fun, the kind of fun all audiences and the whole family can enjoy.” Likewise, Kathryn Jean Lopez, editor of the National Review Online, encourages Beyoncé to “put a dress on” and raise her standards. She questions, “Why can’t we have a national entertainment moment that does not include a mother gyrating in a black teddy?” (Lopez np). Clearly, Cupp, Lopez, and other commentators from mainstream sources, understood Beyoncé’s half-time show as inappropriate and crude. In critiquing her performance Cupp and Lopez draw on the rhetoric of family—be they spectators or Beyoncé’s own family—to deride her performance of sexuality. Such critiques highlight the ways in which Beyoncé’s motherhood can, on the one hand, function as respectable currency, but on the other hand, package her into a representational bind. In other words, while Beyoncé’s respectable route to motherhood increases her respectable status, her motherhood also narrows, at least for some of her fans, the “right” ways in which she can and should express her sexual subjectivity.

Though Beyoncé has certainly been castigated for this particular performance of sexuality, in a flipping of scripts, if you will, some black women fiercely defended Beyoncé’s performance, describing it as “an evening for the history books” (Bernard np). Michelle D. Bernard, CEO of the Bernard Center for Women, Politics, and Public Policy, for instance, writes of the ways in which the “five intelligent, beautiful, well-respected, and phenomenally successful black women” of the 2013 Super Bowl
redressed primordial stereotypes of black women with their discipline, beauty, and
commitment (Bernard np). For Bernard, the 2013 Super Bowl was less about Beyoncé’s
transgressive performance of sexuality, and more about “[t]he black women of Super
Bowl XLVII show[ing] the world five shining examples of what so many black women are
—committed to their craft, committed to achievement of the American Dream, and
committed to a nation that once rejected the very notion of black womanhood” (Bernard
np). Notably, the five women about whom Bernard speaks, Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland,
Alicia Keys, Michelle Williams, and Jennifer Hudson, can only redress stereotypes
because they are “intelligent, beautiful, well-respected, and phenomenally successful.”
That these women all conform to a very normative white hegemonic self-presentation,
are married or publicly seeking heteronormative unions, and have achieved a certain
class status goes unnoted here. Tellingly, Beyoncé can be so fiercely defended by elite
black women because, though she might transgress respectable sexuality on stage,
once her show has ended, Beyoncé is neatly situated into a respectable package, loved
by the most elite black women in the country. Michelle Obama, for example, tweeted
“…Beyoncé was phenomenal, I am so proud of her” (Obama np). Such accolades beg
the question: If Beyoncé was not as “talented,” “beautiful,” “well-respected,” and I would
add, normative, would (respectable) fans so fiercely celebrate and rigidly defend her?

Another Beyoncé defender, Crunktastic, of The Crunk Feminist Collective, writes:

Let me say as a Christian how disgusted I am with all this supposed
“discomfort” over Bey’s Superbowl performance. It’s a bunch of B.S. What I
saw was Girl Power to the max. And I find it interesting that this narrative
about how the nation is going to hell in a hand basket always happens on
the sexy, powerful bodies of Black women. …And since the conservative
church has by-and-large said that sexuality is only properly expressed by
married people, I’m at pains to understand how Beyoncé’ violated the rules.
She’s a sexual being, as are we all. But she did it “the right way,” and now folk are still trippin? Go.Sit.Down. (np)

Here, Crunktastic, a self-described critic of respectability politics, wrestles with the fact that Beyoncé is more heavily critiqued for her performance of sexuality than other female performers. Interrogating conservative tenets that would seemingly sanction Beyoncé’s performance, Crunktastic demands to know why Beyoncé, a respectable black female by most standards, is still castigated for a performance for which a white female performer such as Madonna would not be as heavily critiqued. While Crunktastic’s unveiling of Beyoncé’s respectable currency is a rhetorical gesture intended to evaluate obviously flawed social tenets, in invoking Beyoncé’s respectable currency, Crunkstastic leaves intact the idea that Beyoncé’s respectable currency should somehow immunize her from caustic critics.

While black feminist celebrations of Beyoncé’s undoubtedly sexually explicit performance raise important questions about contemporary black women’s investment in respectability politics, it is important to note that, in celebrating Beyoncé’s performance as “historical” or “Girl Power to the Max,” some black female critics either desexualize Beyoncé’s performance, claiming her performance as one of female power, not of sexuality, or justify her performance by invoking her respectable currency. Indeed, beyond the Super Bowl stage, Beyoncé leads a very herteronormative and respectable life. Thus it is possible for black women to reconstruct the stage as a liminal space not of sexual exhibition, but of powerful black feminist expression. And when all is said and done, we can unclutch our pearls, assuaged by the knowledge that after the half-time show Beyoncé will return home to her husband and daughter, neatly settled into her respectable life.
Some black women’s disarticulation of Beyoncé’s performance from sexuality and rearticulation to powerful black feminist expression illuminates the ways in which respectability politics inhere even when black women are celebrating a potentially “unrespectable” or deviant expression of sexuality. And such readings beg the question: Can black feminist discourse make room for a sexual expression that is not linked to black female respectability? Moreover, such reclamation of Beyoncé’s virtue and respectability demonstrate that for privileged black folk, one axis of power (class, wealth, fame, or masculinity for example) may mitigate potentially unsavory actions in the public sphere.

Mitigatory power illuminates the ways in which black women who have fewer claims to respectability are more subject to the regulatory gazes of dominant folks as well as other black women. The issue of respectable currency is important to bear in mind for the following analysis of the images in and discourse around Nicki Minaj’s “Stupid Hoe” because there is a marked distinction between black feminist praise of Beyoncé and black feminist contempt for Minaj. This distinction may find an explanation in Reiland Rabaka’s contention that, historically, black female respectability politics has tended to hold disdain for black vernacular culture, most visibly expressed, he argues, in black clubwomen’s condemnation of salacious blues women (43).

“Stupid Hoe”

Despite her critics, black female Hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj is one such figure who has seemed to ignore the interpellation of black female respectability. Embodying both feminist impulses and patriarchal pandering, Minaj has generated much black feminist contempt since her emergence onto the Hip-hop scene. After migrating from Trinidad to Queens, New York, attending performing arts school in New York City, hustling to sell
mix tapes, and signing a contract with Young Money Entertainment (2009), Nicki Minaj exploded onto the malnourished late 2000s Hip-hop scene. Minaj brought with her a voluptuous body, an assortment of colorful wigs, an array of accents, and a prosthetic posterior. Since her arrival, Minaj has received mixed (often polarized) reviews of her sexually explicit song lyrics, controversial public appearances, and often politically charged divisive music videos.

Minaj’s “Stupid Hoe,” directed by prolific videographer Hype Williams, incited perhaps the most negative reactions. Conceived of as a “diss track” to female naysayers in general, and Hip-hop artist Lil’ Kim in particular, Minaj’s “Stupid Hoe” lyrics and video were carefully crafted and constructed in specific response to folks who have pilloried her work. For the purposes of my argument here, a lyrical analysis is not as fruitful as an analysis of the video’s images, as visual displays of black female sexuality seem to incite more criticism than do sexually explicit song lyrics, particularly in this case. Thus my reading here focuses specifically on the images in and critical responses to “Stupid Hoe.”

At the video’s outset, images of an exaggeratedly made-up Minaj are intercut with jump-roping girls. Minaj is fashioned as Barbie: she dons a luxurious black wig and a revealing bikini. She holds an advanced yoga, Grace Jones-esque posture: her leg is bent backward in such a way that allows her high-heeled foot to rest on top of her head in an impossibly acrobatic position. As Minaj raps, her images are digitally spliced, and she hangs a diamond encrusted, Barbie-inscribed name chain outside of her pink convertible. Seconds later, Minaj is shown, rocking a bobbed pink wig, sitting unnaturally straight, and refusing human bodily expression: she stiffens her body and
bats her eyelashes quickly and facetiously. Next, theatrically grotesque facial shots of Minaj are intercut with images of a nude voluptuous black female body, a grinning monkey, and a rapping Minaj and hype man. Soon after that, a Nicki Minaj doll materializes: the doll is freckle-faced, pink-haired, thin-nosed, and abnormally wide-eyed. Dominating the second half of “Stupid Hoe” are screen shots of Nicki Minaj’s animal metamorphosis into an encaged leopard. As Minaj vigorously gyrates her buttocks, psychedelic colors and images flash across the screen. Toward the end of “Stupid Hoe,” Minaj appears as a distorted, shrunken pink Barbie, twirling a multicolored, psychedelic lollipop atop an oversized pink chair. Digitized shots of Minaj as leopard, shrunken doll, and distorted Barbie culminate the video.

“Stupid Hoe” unsurprisingly catalyzed backlash from Lil’ Kim, condemnations from online commentators, and was surprisingly banned from the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network. In an interview with online journal TMZ, a BET representative intimated that “Stupid Hoe” is too explicit for television (TMZ staff np). Black feminist Deputy Editor, Dodai Stewart, of Jezebel reacted similarly, finding the video too explicit for television. Unlike BET, however, Stewart found Minaj’s wardrobe and prop choices racist, sexist and “tired.” She writes:

Most unfortunate are the shots of Nicki in a cage, à la Shakira. [Black female critics] have discussed black women in cages before—most notably Amber Rose and Grace Jones. It’s a tired, troubling visual. In this context, we’re supposed to see Nicki as threatening, wild, dangerous. But the objectification and exoticization of black women is steeped in racism. Our history includes centuries of slavery in which black people were chained, shackled, muzzled, and yes caged. (np)

Although it is tempting to argue that Nicki Minaj’s animal metamorphosis here subverts the long-held white cultural notion of black females as bestial, such tropes come
dangerously close to reifying scientific discourses, discourses which have historically constructed black women as bestial and animalistic. Given black women’s fraught history of sexual exploitation and bodily spectacle, black feminist critiques of Nicki Minaj’s “Stupid Hoe” appear here to not only be fitting but necessary because to leave her performance unexamined potentially allows uncritical consumers to continue to respond to this imagery in unenlightened ways.

Working against a respectability politics, however, Minaj’s encaged Black Venus, Barbie, and animal metamorphosis tropes may be read more complexly. Mike Barthel of villagevoice.com, for instance, interprets Nicki Minaj’s encaged animal metamorphosis as a feminist disassociation from oft-compared rap artist Lil Kim:

Here, Nicki’s real genius shines through. Take the sequence where she’s in a cage. Some people weren’t thrilled about it, but it’s meant to be mocking Kim, not displaying Nicki…. The message is clear. Kim, who’s sacrificed her dignity to be a plaything of men, is caged. Nicki, who retains ownership of her own image, is in the driver’s seat…. (Np)

Here, Minaj is certainly commodifying the myth of the wanton black female, but her’s might be read as a feminist statement, not a regulatory one. Minaj has, on several occasions, asserted that she has agency over her cultural productions and a great deal

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4 Sarah Baartman, popularly known as the Hottentot or Black Venus, was a nineteenth century South African woman of the Khoikhoi tribe. Lured by European anthropologist Georges Cuvier with promises of fame and fortune, Baartman was leashed and exhibited alongside “rare animals” and “abnormal creatures” for her purportedly monstrous buttocks and flagrant labia. Taken together, Baartman’s buttocks and labia “confirmed” the existence of black sexual degeneracy. Because of Sander Gilman’s informative research on nineteenth-century depictions of black and white bodies, Sarah Baartman has come to be recognized as the origin point of European-U.S. medical discourses on the black female body. Gilman contends that “[i]n the course of the nineteenth century, the female Hottentot [came] to represent the black female in nuce…”(206).

5 As Barthel’s commentary intimates, Nicki Minaj and Lil’ Kim have a publicly volatile relationship. Whereas Nicki Minaj has aligned herself with Kim’s aggressive sexuality, Kim has castigated Minaj for “biting her style.” In response to Kim’s public condemnation of her work, Minaj constructed “Stupid Hoe” as a parody of Lil’ Kim’s work and a critique of her critics.
of say in the way in which she is imaged. In fact, before the release of “Stupid Hoe,” Minaj tweeted: “Can't premiere ["Stupid Hoe"] on a network b/c its important that my art is not tampered with, or compromised prior to you viewing it for the 1st time” (Minaj, twitter). Thus, while commentators such as Harris might feel compelled to read the invocation of Black Venus as problematic and “tired,” following Barthel, Minaj may delineate the cage as a feminist critique of Lil Kim’s lack of agency over Kim’s images and cultural productions. A politics of respectability, unfortunately, would negate such a reading because Minaj’s cage performance evokes the traumatic story of Sarah Baartman, and Sarah Baartman’s image has dominated black feminist discourse so much so that Baartman’s story has become, as Jennifer C. Nash argues, “a kind of black feminist ‘biomythography,’ a ritualized retelling of a political parable that demonstrates the dangers of the dominant visual field for black feminist subjects” (52). In other words, because Sarah Baartman has become so ingrained as a cautionary tale in the black feminist cultural consciousness, black feminist critics are taught to read images that appear to hark back to Baartman as always and only problematic. Indeed, Baartman’s story resonates with black women who are hypersexualized and rendered pathologically sexual still. The primary issue with fixating Baartman as the allegorical icon through which we understand the consequences of public expressions of black female sexuality, however, is that black feminists are taught to read black female sexuality as monolithically problematic, unequivocally dangerous, and always traumatic.

As troubling for black feminist critics as her Black Venus allusions is Minaj’s Barbie persona. Black feminism and critical race theory teach us that Barbie epitomizes white heteropatriarchal beauty standards and that such standard have been deployed
historically to cast black women as undesirable, inferior, and unfeminine (St. Jean and Feagin 98). In short, Barbie is antithetical to women of color. Such stigmatization creates tension for the black female respectability project, as contemporary articulations of respectability, like earlier articulations, rely on the performance of white middle-class femininity and heteropatriarchal conceptions of beauty. Keeping with the “Barbie is stigmatizing perspective,” The Negress writes off Minaj’s invocation of Barbie as regressive and disempowering:

But as much as Minaj tries to break through the chains of a mans’ world, she’s still complacent in the very system that confines her. Instead of denouncing the unrealistic beauty standards for women, she fully embraces them. ... and her image of choice, the Barbie, is the most extreme heteronormative icon of beauty in existence. (“Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, and Black Feminism” np)

While at face value it appears that Minaj’s deployment of Barbie is celebratory, Minaj’s adoption of Barbie may be more nuanced than The Negress allows. April Gregory, in “Nicki Minaj: The Flyyest Feminist,” for instance, understands Minaj’s Barbie persona as a critical subversion of Eurocentric beauty standards. Gregory notes that there are “key differences between the blonde, vacuous, dysmorphic Barbie [she] played with as a little girl and Minaj” (np). Gregory further argues that Minaj’s celebration of “thickness,” championing of a “bad bitch persona,” and “black girl” features undermine the archetypal slim, docile, and white Barbie (np). Of note is that Gregory concedes that she had to work through “the hegemony within certain tracks of feminist thought that caused [her] discomfort with Nicki” to read Minaj’s reclamation of Barbie and brazen expression of sexuality as subversive and potentially empowering (np).

Following Gregory, I would argue that Minaj’s deployment of Barbie in “Stupid Hoe” in particular is not merely an uncritical celebration of white beauty standards. I
further contend that the hegemony of respectability would disenable a “disidentificatory” reading of Minaj’s Barbie persona. Because the video denies Barbie full human expression, I argue that Minaj is not simply engaging Barbie and the attendant white hegemonic beauty standards Barbie represents. In the video, it appears that Minaj “disidentifies” with Barbie, and the video evacuates Barbie’s association with idealized beauty standards to assert that Minaj’s own voluptuous black female body is that which should be deemed sexually desirable. While the video’s deployment of Barbie is not original (as female emcee Lil’ Kim adopted her own Barbie persona in the ’90s), this video’s troping of Barbie forces a radical departure from Lil Kim’s and other black female performance artists’ use of Barbie. Moreover, the “disidentificatory” power of Minaj’s troping of Barbie derives not from her subversion of Eurocentric beauty standards through the conduit of her “thick” black female body, but through her disenabling of physiological expression while playing Barbie, which in turn calls attention to the artifice of gender identity, and the artifice of Barbie. Minaj’s enactment of the artificiality of Barbie intimates the artifice and social construction not just of normative beauty standards, but of white and black femininity. Thus, it can be argued that Minaj’s is not an uncritical celebration of Barbie, but a pastiche and parody of white heteronormative ideas of beauty, in general, and the reign of Barbie as iconography of such ideals in particular.

Of all the tropes in “Stupid Hoe,” however, the encaged black female-leopard seems to unanimously strike the wrong chord. Not only does Minaj engage in transgressive cultural practice by caging her black female body, she also metamorphosizes into a leopard, fully inhabiting the long-held stereotype of black
women as bestial and animalistic. While one could certainly argue that Minaj is satirizing and challenging the black woman as animalistic trope by becoming animal, as Stewart reads the visual of Minaj encaged, we have certainly seen this trope before. More interesting is Minaj’s cage-dance, animal metamorphosis. Such a performance could be read as a critique of the myriad ways in which all black bodies are encaged by, what bell hooks would call, “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” However, Minaj’s never-stagnant metamorphosis suggests that one need not be without any agency, that there is room for play and self-articulation, even within the confines of institutional structures that seek to marginalize black bodies in general and black female bodies in particular.

Critiquing the ways in which “black ho’s” are elided from discussions of and concerns for “the black community,” Mireille Miller-Young questions how black folks might have “agency in the context of hegemonic capitalism” (np). For Miller-Young, all black bodies are always already commodified; thus, for her, it is not productive to read all forms of black sexual expression and “sexual self-fashioning” as simply commodified and objectified because said bodies engage in sexual expression. For Miller-Young, it is important to interrogate the politics of respectability that seeks to hierarchize commodification. Thus, Miller-Young explores the ways in which black folks, using their “corporeal resources,” however sexualized or deviant, work in and through hegemonic capitalism. Similarly, Cathy Cohen, in her essay “DEVIANCE AS RESISTANCE: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics,” calls black scholars to cast a critical eye toward deviant behaviors that may on the one hand further marginalize their
practitioners, but on the other demonstrate everyday forms of resistance, which might be mobilized in the service of transformation (43).

While I do not intend to suggest here that Minaj is a feminist paragon from which black women should take lessons, I want to highlight the various ways in which “Stupid Hoe” and Minaj inspire complex discussions around the issue of black female sexuality in the public sphere, conversations that help to illuminate the quandary black female performers find themselves in when attempting to express sexual subjectivity in the public sphere. Furthermore, I work to highlight the ways in which respectability politics is too colored a lens through which to read expressions of black female sexuality, denying black women self-expression and agency, limited as it is, and further denigrating those thought to deviate from the norms within which we have been socialized.

Contemporary manifestations of respectability politics suggest that respectable black women work, (may) have heterosexual pre-marital sexual relations (but always with the goal in mind of finding a suitable husband), take charge of the domestic sphere (cleaning, cooking, rearing children, etc.), all while maintaining slender figures and fashionable wardrobes. Though such aspirations are clearly not utterly unworthy, it is important to recognize such aspirations as part of a white capitalist supremacist patriarchal cultural logic which upholds the “ontological superiority” of the white nuclear family and its attendant white social values (Yancy 3). This cultural logic aims to represent the idealized goals and experiences of American, middle-class, white women, and, as such, idealizes the very white hegemonic American lifestyle from which many black women are excluded and stigmatized because of their inability to subscribe or conform to the economic, social, sexual, and ethnic standards presented as ideal.
Furthermore, such respectability is always contingent on a carefully crafted performance of sexuality. Just as Beyoncé was championed by black folks and the black news press for her “virtuous pregnancy,” she was derided by white mainstream media for her 2013 Super Bowl half-time show. And while Nicki Minaj is routinely subjected to hegemonic and respectable feminist readings, her work is often not analyzed carefully enough for its counterhegemonic potential.

While accounting for both the advantages and consequences of the “right way” and “wrong way” to represent black female sexualities, it is important to account for the grey areas, to ask the difficult questions, and to reject the hard and fast dismissal of black female subjectivities and politics that make us uncomfortable. A more nuanced and interrogated lens reveals that a respectability politics merely forecloses black female sexual expression, measuring black women by their ability to seamlessly adopt “white supremacist capitalist patriarchal values.” If Michelle Obama, arguably the most respectable black woman in the world by black female respectability standards, is constantly under scrutiny in mainstream presses for her wardrobe choices and failure to embody dominant ways of being, it is clear that black women must find another way to resist the hypersexualization of our bodies while working toward a collective appreciation of black female sexual heterogeneity outside a politics of respectability framework.

Evelyn Hammonds articulates in “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence” that there is much more at stake for black women and black feminists who remain silent about our sexualities and/or refuse to engage the sexual representation of black women. While she notes that “… restrictive,
repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers, while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone underanalyzed,” she also recognizes that black women’s reticence to engage in discussions of sexuality outside the frameworks of trauma and abuse has led to restrictions on black female academics’ academic freedom, a collective lack of advocacy for HIV/AIDS-infected black women, and a scholarly overemphasis on black female heterosexuality at the expense of the critical neglect of black lesbians from discussions of black women's lives (99-102). I would add that the politics of respectability has not only amplified the issues Hammonds so eloquently describes, but has also required black women to collude in white hegemonic binaristic thinking (good/bad, proper/improper), thinking that has routinely relegated black women to the sphere of lack.

Though white masculinist voyeurism and respectability as resistance to social stigmatization complicate the issues surrounding the expression of black female sexuality, we must interrogate the political limits of the politics of respectability. Must black women adhere to respectability politics at the risk of their own unique and complex sexual subjectivities? Does cultural policing via the politics of respectability truly transform the social structures and hierarchies that have created and upheld the historical subjugation of black women? If, as previously argued, the politics of respectability has failed to transform the collective condition of black people, what (if any) strategies might black females use to express their sexual subjectivities while resisting white commodification and refusing to reify the stereotypes that dominant groups have long deployed to denigrate black women?
My conclusion attempts to answer the foregoing questions. In this section I argue that black women must find ways to be sexually transgressive while resisting being enfolded into white supremacist capitalist patriarchal modes of being and thinking. The difficulty with walking this line, however, is that black women often have limited agency over the production and circulation of our sexual expression. That said, I contend that we must embrace black female sexual heterogeneity in safe spaces free from scrutiny and regulatory gazes. In these safe spaces black folks should try to disabuse ourselves of respectability politics and work toward, what bell hooks articulates as, “a new aesthetics of looking” (Black Looks 90). While the ultimate goal should always be freedom of expression, I conclude my essay with the realization that, for black women, sexual expression in the (commodified) public sphere always has the potential for material consequences too heavy to bear.
In her essay “Artistic Integrity: Race and Accountability,” bell hooks discusses the ways in which filmmakers of all races must be accountable for the images they construct as well as being accountable to their narrative visions. In particular, hooks challenges filmmakers to interrogate the ways in which their work might undergird and perpetuate racist systems of domination (Reel to Real 87). Compellingly, she writes that “[u]ntil both colonizer and colonized decolonize their minds, audiences in white supremacist cultures will have difficulty ‘seeing’ and understanding images of blackness that do not conform to the stereotype” (Reel to Real 90). hooks claims further that “creating decolonized images” will not alter the perceptions of blacks (or whites) that structure our ways of seeing. This leads hooks to assert that “there must also be a new aesthetics of looking” (Reel to Real 90). Similarly, I contend that the politics of respectability has over determined black female ways of seeing black women in popular culture and in real life. More, the politics of respectability does not alter white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ideologies; rather, it undergirds such ways of seeing black female bodies, ways of seeing which inadvertently undermine the initial goal of respectability of resistance; that is, to uplift all black women.

Expanding on hooks, however, I contend that while decolonization of the mind should be the ultimate goal, it is a lofty one. And meanwhile, images of black femaleness are circulating in ways that undermine the ever-continuing project of black female uplift. That every black woman does not have Beyoncé’s respectable currency suggests that black women must not only find alternative ways of seeing, we must also find safe spaces, or counterpublics, that allow for the articulation of black female sexual
expression and heterogeneity and the development of a critical consciousness around the images with which we are daily bombarded.

Tricia Rose argues, in her seminal piece on black female sexuality, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy*, for example, that black women’s fiction has emerged as one of the only “semi-safe” spaces for dynamic black female sexual subjectivity and expression. Though she acknowledges that in expressing sexual subjectivity in the public sphere black women always risk reinforcing racist/sexist stereotypes of black women, her project affirms the importance of critically engaging fictive and real dynamic black female subjects. She, like Evelyn Hammonds, contends that there is a correlation between sexual reticence in black communities and increased rates in black communities of HIV/AIDS infection, teen pregnancy, intimate partner violence and rape.

Indeed, critical reception of literary black female sexual subjectivity tends to be less pilloried than is the reception of the entertainment world’s visual performance of black female sexual subjectivity. It stands to reason that the internal confines of one’s own mind seem a safer space for black female sexual expression. If not safest, one’s imagination is presumably safer than is the public/digital stage of film, television, and other visual media. For as bell hooks and other scholars have noted, black sexual expression always risks recuperation by white hegemonic media to service the racist and sexist imagination, or may be used to undergird public policies that seek to deny blacks our human and political rights. ¹ Thus, this thesis ultimately contends that black

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¹ In her seminal essay “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” bell hooks argues that while white desire for blackness holds the potential to transform racial and social hierarchies, the political potential of such desire is often undermined by white consumption of the other via critical distance; for example, white youth consumerism of Hip-hop culture and its concomitant disengagement with real black people fails to
women have a right to claim our diverse sexualities, outside the framework of respectability, but to do so, we must constantly find new ways of looking and safe spaces that allow for the articulation of black female sexual heterogeneity, spaces that shelter black women from public persecution. Perhaps it would be fruitful to question if and/or how the public sphere can ever be a space for the safe and unadulterated expression of black female sexual subjectivity—or revolution—structured as it is by “white supremacist capitalist patriarchal” ways of seeing, framing, and consuming black female bodies.

transform social hierarchies because blackness, for white people, merely becomes a spectacle and the “spice” to consume and “season” the blank palette, she argues, that is whiteness.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shoniqua Roach earned her master's degree in English from the University of Florida in August 2013. She received her bachelor’s degree in English from Penn State University-Abington, where she participated in the 2009 Summer Institute for Literary and Cultural Studies and the 2010 United Nations Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. She will continue her graduate work in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University.