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Chasing Afrodite: Performing Blackness and “Excess Flesh” in Film

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Chasing Afrodite: Performing Blackness and “Excess Flesh” in Film

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Dedication

To Alberta, Irma, and Velva for your unwavering love and support of a haphazard grandchild with an unconventional mind.

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Abstract

Chasing Afrodite: Performing Blackness and “Excess Flesh” in Film

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How do you address the continued prevalence of black women’s sexuality as commodifiable, censured, and coveted in mass culture? *Chasing Afrodite* offers one answer to this question through examining explicit cinematic performances of black women’s sexuality in mass media. This project deploys Nicole R. Fleetwood’s performative of “excess flesh” within one of the most visceral mediums proffering authentic renderings of black women’s sexuality: film. Through an analysis of two distinct films featuring non-simulated sexual performances by black women—*Afrodite Superstar* (dir. Abiola Abrams, 2007) and *Ashley and Kisha: Finding the Right Fit* (dir. Tony Comstock, 2007)—*Chasing Afrodite* explores the contradictions and contentions that still make public enactments of sex by black bodies so problematic. Though the directors and participants in both films eschew the label of pornography in favor of erotica or other less pejorative terms, their larger reception places them in a precarious place amongst other films with explicit sexual content. The women in these films refuse to unhinge hypersexuality from blackness and refract the dominant gaze by displaying their desires for a viewing audience. In doing so, their labor in these films intervenes in

common discussions in black, feminist, and film studies that assume these images are inherently degrading.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> *What is sexy? I don't know what's sexy. If a video ho is sexy, am I that kind of sexy? Do I want to look like that? What else do you take from? Even…like in movies, it's like these waifish girls, usually pale, haven't eaten…Where's the other sexy at? I want to be sexy.*
> -Afrodite Jones, *Afrodite Superstar* (dir. Abiola Abrams, 2006)

What is sexy? This simple question, asked in certain contexts, can elicit immediate responses or stifling silence. For Afrodite Jones, the titular character of *Afrodite Superstar*, this question elicits confusion, resentment, cynicism, and ambiguity. Given her response, perhaps a more pertinent question for her and us is '*who* is sexy?' Black women's visibility as desirable beings in mass culture has increased over the last few decades, but in detrimental ways. This is not a novel complaint as many black feminist scholars have argued against the use of black female bodies in mass culture and politics to "transmit distinctive messages about the proper links among female sexuality, desired levels of fertility for working-class and middle-class women, and U.S. Black women's placement in social class and citizenship hierarchies."[1] Recent incendiary occurrences, however, are demonstrative of the need for this argument to be reasserted not only in regard to black women's bodies as pawns in political chess games but within discourses about black sexuality as well.[2]

This project aims to provide one possible intervention in this conversation by focusing on explicit performances of black women's sexuality in film. While such a move may seem oxymoronic given the habitual racist imagery of black women as lascivious and sexually indiscriminant in mass media, I believe it is a necessary step towards shifting discussions of black women's sexuality from the politics of

respectability to the politics of articulation.[3] Through an analysis of two films, Abiola Abrams's *Afrodite Superstar* and Comstock Films' *Ashley and Kisha: Finding the Right Fit* (dir. Tony Comstock, 2007), I explore one way black women may publicly express and explore their sexuality and sexual practices to refute controlling images of their subjectivity in mass culture. By examining two conceptually different films—one is a scripted parody, the other a documentary—I argue that the moments of explicit sex within each push at the boundaries of how black women's bodies are broadly used in film and blur the distinct line between pornography and other film genres. I also look to expand how feminist, film and black studies generally understand narratives of black women's sexuality which refuse to conform to constructions of propriety, silence, and heteronormativity. While the strategies of respectability politics and dissemblance have been vital to the daily survival and arguably the success of many black individuals, they have been conversely detrimental for those black women who refused to play along.[4]

Some women who refuse the sanctity of "proper" black womanhood have done so in ways that recycle some of the very stereotypes these strategies focus on abolishing. Through their participation in numerous sexualized economies from the film and music industries to sex work, these women's experiences further complicate fraught questions about black women's agency, pleasure, and desire both privately and publicly. Such questions can precipitate varied discussions and analyses; thus, by limiting my objects of study to film I parse out how some women use this medium to comment upon the construction of black women's sexuality in cinematic productions. My primary focus for this project will be on the ways in which black women's non-simulated performances of

sexual acts in film disrupt dominant narrative constructions of black women's sexuality and function as enactments of "excess flesh."

Through analyzing two different features, I argue that these films force scholars in black, feminist, and film studies to resist dismissing non-simulated sexual performances as pure spectacle. Both films intervene in these discussions by disconfirming and unsettling the viewer's expectations of what black sexuality looks like, making their reception nearly a non-event. By disrupting the typical narrative structure of black women's sexuality and fracturing the indisputability of the dominant gaze which situates their bodies as inherently sexualized, the women in these films extend and complicate the feasibility of performance as a means of articulating their desires and refuting the idea that black women are always *on*-scene and *ob*scene.[5] This project posits explicit sexual performances as one way of shifting analyses of black women's sexuality from the politics of respectability to the politics of articulation. Said shift is not considered absent of the baggage that haunts the black body socio-politically as both the real and symbolic violence experienced by black women is commonplace and, sadly, unremarkable in mass media. This, alongside the (un)remarkability of typical visions of black women's sexuality in performance mediums partially attributes to the lack of discussion about enactments of non-simulated sex as possible sites of resistance, refraction, and rearticulation of black women's desires. While some scholars have attempted to reassert the importance of understanding black women's articulation of the erotic in mass culture, the call has either been ignored or has been remiss to look at explicitly sexual interventions.[6] *Chasing Afrodite* deliberately engages with these oft-ignored occurrences

in order to center the subjectivities of women who answer Afrodite's call for the other kind of sexy and reassert Keisha's defiance towards antagonistic inquiries of her desires.

SEXING THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

One of the storied schisms that became prominent within second-wave feminism concerned the question of race. Specifically, African-American, Chicana, Asian-American, and other women of color criticized mainstream feminism for decontextualizing and homogenizing the experiences of non-White women in the United States and for reemphasizing the invisibility of race and racial dynamics in Western intellectual history. Audre Lorde explores this racial effacement by feminism in several essays. In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," she states "women have been encouraged to recognize only one area of human difference as legitimate, those differences which exist between women and men."[7] Instead of succumbing to the divisive tensions surfacing amongst the discomforting problematics surrounding the differences of many groups invested in the movement, Lorde pushes for all to "recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles."[8] These differences are not solely couched in racial terms, however. They also include differences of age, class, locality, and most importantly sexuality. Thus, an important intervention of black feminist theory—and women of color feminism more broadly—forces mainstream academic feminism to contend with the fact that Beauvoir's "woman" was not as uncomplicated as once posited.[9]

Recognition of differences was only an initial intervention of black feminist theory. Patricia Hill Collins expounds on Lorde's discussion of how these differences constitute the various frames of oppression faced by black women everyday. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins offers a compelling indictment of U.S. culture and its treatment of black women: "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought."[10] Thus, black women continuously struggle against systematic oppression that partially derives its power from proliferating images of black womanhood as deviant and infantile. Much like Freud's id needs the influence of the ego and superego to regulate its desires, black women and their sexual expressions supposedly need the state (ego) and the rule of patriarchy (superego) to keep them from self destructing or bringing more harm upon the "black community."[11] This harm purportedly manifests from an array of aberrant behaviors including idleness or crudeness but was internally policed via a politics of respectability when those behaviors were most dangerous—primarily those emblematic of excessive sexuality or overt homosexuality.

Collins further interrogates the politics of respectability in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. She explains that in both the early 1900s and today, the politics of "respectability was too high a price" for some black women who had no qualms with publically defining their sexuality and sexual practices as they saw fit.[12] Collins suggests that the U.S. black community combat state and

cultural denigrations of their selfhood by recognizing and refuting the controlling images of blackness and move towards "a body politics grounded in the concept of the 'honest body' that would enable individuals to reclaim agency lost to [these various forms of] oppression."[13] On the surface, such a solution would seem apropos. However, Collins' solution excises this possibility for bodies not engaged in a monogamous relationship—heterosexual, homosexual, or otherwise. Nor does it allow for persons engaged in decidedly sexual explicit arenas to access or claim participation in a politics of honest bodies. As such, Collins situates black women who actively perform in pornography or other realms of sex work or explicit media as perpetual (and perhaps willingly ignorant) victims of the systematic exploitation of black bodies.

Evelyn M. Hammonds offers a way beyond this expurgation by calling for a "politics of articulation."[14] Like Lorde and Collins, Hammonds argues that by utilizing the resistance strategy of silence to combat derogatory narratives of their bodies, "black women have also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality."[15] Whereas Collins argues this can be reversed through honest body politics, Hammonds harkens back to a longstanding contention proposed by Lorde in "The Uses of the Erotic":

> When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences.[16]

For Lorde, the reclamation of the erotic is not solely a sexual expression. It is recognition of the inner strength that comes from wholly loving one's self—body, soul, and desires.

Most treatments of this affirmation by Lorde and other feminists who have taken to the power of the erotic treat pornography and other explicit sexual realms in a manner similar to Collins. Hammonds, however, pushes for the "development of a black feminist praxis that…produce[s] black feminist analyses which detail strategies for differently *located* black women to shape interventions that embody their separate and common interests and perspectives."[17]

Here, I read Hammonds's identification of differently located bodies as not only constitutive of geographical dispersion but of medium dispersion as well. As such, this paper aims to offer an example of how Hammonds's politics of articulation is authored within *Afrodite Superstar* and *Ashley and Kisha*. Such a reading is not without its own limitations or complications, but through the use of Nicole Fleetwood's "excess flesh," I aim to complicate black feminist treatments of sexually explicit media as uncritical frameworks of exploitation. In doing so, I also seek to intercede in discussions on the visual and performative disruptiveness of black women's bodies in film.

POPULARIZING SEX

Growing up in the shadows of Generation X, also derisively known as Generation Sex, my concern with understanding and uncovering the contradictory and empowering perspectives and performances of black female sexuality seems foreclosed. The abundance of reality television, news, and talk shows dedicated to sexual relationships and sexuality during the 1990s and well into the 2000s are demonstrative of a continual paradoxical public concern with prudent displays of desire versus a thirst for consummate knowledge of sex itself.[18] This concern is not limited to television or music videos as

many mainstream and independent films produced during this time were also explicitly concerned with who was sleeping with whom, when, and why.[19] While the variations and degrees of sexual activity discussed or depicted on screens across the country were viewed as bold, trashy, groundbreaking, or immoral, a related debate about the lack of dimensional roles for black women including ones with realistic portrayals of black women's lives, especially their sexuality, occurred simultaneously.[20]

The history of film within the United States has been demonstrative of these cultural tensions. Consequently, debates centering on performances of sexuality and race have been contested by film scholars, practitioners, and in public and private exchanges around the U.S. From concerns about violating the production codes that stringently regulated filmmaking in the first half of the twentieth century to current debates about the dearth of roles for black women in mainstream cinema, questions and contestations about the frequent (mis)representation of non-white, non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered bodies within mainstream and independent cinema are often rooted in the imperceptibility of whiteness and heterosexuality as archetypal of the human condition. Daniel Bernardi troubles the presumption of whiteness as default in his introduction to the edited collection *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (2008):

> In terms of cinema, a dominant cultural institution, the meaning of race and the representation of identity impact our historical lives and future because, like race, cinematic representations, styles and stories are ubiquitous. Cinema is everywhere a fact in our lives, saturating our leisure time, our conversations, and our perceptions of each other and of self. Because of this, race in cinema is neither fictional nor illusion […] Hence, we do not escape reality when watching cinema

> uncritically; we perpetuate real ideologies when we think of cinema as "only the movies."[21]

Overarching effects of racism often preclude questioning these de facto norms in cinema and in our culture at large. Moreover, "the presence of a *system* of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology, seems to be a permanent feature of U.S. culture."[22] This observation is brought into further relief upon recognition that though the effects of Emancipation, alongside several acts of Congress and Supreme Court decisions, would eventually outlaw overt discrimination based on race, deep-seated social meanings and identities constituted by race continually make it one of the "fundamental *organizing principle[s]* of social relationships," both off- and on-screen.[23]

bell hooks articulates the potency of film's impact on day-to-day socialization asserting "whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people [as they] not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues."[24] Films may be entertaining, but they are simultaneously prescriptive about race and other constructed categories including sexuality. Familiar tropes re-emerge as celluloid truths where proper heterosexuality and femininity are coded white and hypersexuality and monstrosity are fastened to forms of otherness, including blackness and queerness. Within this representational stasis, black women typically emerge as antithesis to white women's sexuality, further cementing the "true" binary between the sexes and races. The verity of these representations also situate black women in an untenable place where their sexuality is not merely oppositional to

that of white women—and perhaps to that of other women of color as well—but significantly hypermasculine in form. The conflation of these discriminate traits onto black women's bodies is evidence of the interconnectedness of race and sexuality in filmic portrayals of black women.

In "Ethnicities and Sexualities," Joane Nagel discusses the strength of this connection stating:

> Sexuality is a core constitutive element of race, ethnicity and the nation. Sexual stereotypes are powerful components of ethnic stereotypes. Sexual fears and loathing underlie racial terror and hatred. Sexual rules and protocols are part of the ideological apparatus for imagining nations. It is impossible to understand fully the dynamic and enduring nature of ethnicity without acknowledging its intimate partner – sexuality.[25]

Sexuality, and likewise sexual performance, cannot be decontextualized from the body, especially in cinema. Even critically acclaimed films are subject to the dynamics of racialization which constitute certain bodies with meanings of excess or spectacle.[26] To ignore or miscategorize the effects of racialized bodies in sexual performances is mistaken at best and dangerous at worst. But how does one account for the effects of race upon sexually explicit media? Norma Manatu's content analysis of portrayals of black women's sexuality in films directed by both white and black men is instructive here. She contends that "whether in television or in films, especially films of the last two decades [1980s and 1990s], images of black women too often fall within the category of the 'other' object, replete with negative sexuality."[27] These common images, ranging from mammy to jezebel to tragic mulatto, have been ever present in film since its inception and

became crystallized in the medium with films like *The Debt* (1912), *The Octoroon* (1913), and *The Birth of Nation* (1915).

The transposition of these images within cinema was not random, however. Imagery of the lascivious, animalistic "hottentot" or "colored amazon" circulated widely in the popular presses of the 1800s.[28] Besides trumpeting white supremacist ideology that cast black women as primitive and inherently inferior, these images served to distinguish and celebrate the refined, delicate preeminence of white womanhood, which "embrace[d] the virtues of religious piety, maternal devotion, moral uprightness, and female dependency."[29] Similarly, these ideas served as evidence that black and white bodies were polar opposites of each other such that from Reconstruction well into today, "'technologies of power' at the everyday level—films, school textbooks, art, newspapers—produced and disseminated a 'rhetoric of violence' (to borrow from Teresa de Lauretis) in the form of negative caricaturing and stereotyping."[30] Together these myths function as the fundamental framework for public perceptions of black women's lives. When black women are portrayed in film, the transportation of those images from one medium to another is salient; thus, "whenever dealing with black characters, [film] simply adapted the old familiar stereotypes, often further distorting them."[31]

Many critics have addressed the laziness and dangerousness of these adaptations, but given the recycled, protracted duration of these discussions, film "industry leaders might have us believe no one was interested in stories about black women," unless they were relegated to the role of the 'bitch' or 'ho.'[32] The success of some films, like *Waiting to Exhale* (dir. Forrest Whitaker, 1995), seemingly disputes this view; yet, changing the

unquestioning attitude of filmmakers, industry players and the general audience is not as simple as changing the images on screen—though it most certainly would help. The excessive images of black sexuality circulated on screen are preserved in many mediums because of the "perpetuation of the negative imagery of black female sexuality involves a complex set of social systems and beliefs."[33] Consequently,

> The practice of locking black women into one primary role, the sexual, clearly suggests that, in film, certain roles are assigned to certain subgroups. Images are arranged to suit the given role and then offered up to audiences in a package of "difference," wrapped in an illusion of harmony. The form of the medium (the speed with which ideas are transmitted through visual images) contributes to the illusion because the medium limits critical inquiry of its offerings. The images then appear normal and universal, as if ordained by the Almighty. Beliefs about the immorality of black women are thus preserved, prompting Roberts (1994) to remind us that, culturally speaking, blackness is still "loaded with sexuality."[34]

Recognition of the correlation between blackness and excessive sexuality thus significantly informs this study. Black women laboring in cinema are likely well aware of the duplicitous function of cinematic portrayals of their lives. Yet, this dismal situation does not stop some from using the medium in very deliberate ways to fight against the widely used imagery. I contend that women who choose to do so via the performance of their loaded sexuality drive the moment of critical inquiry which Manatu argues is typically disallowed in cinematic portraits of black women.

METHODOLOGY: CIRCULATING EXCESS FLESH

This study is primarily concerned with the possibilities for the visual to disrupt, contest, and shift mass perceptions of black women's sexuality. I do not seek to usurp one singular prescription for another, however, because to do so would be as problematic as the current situation. Turning to the visual offers one way of exploring how a politics

of articulation is deployed. Nicole R. Fleetwood grapples with visuality and black women's bodies in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* differently.[35] Taking the disruptiveness of black female bodies in visual media as a given, Fleetwood argues that combating the over-determination of their bodies allows black women the "possibilit[y]…to engage with visual practices as a reinscription of their corporeality."[36] Though the book focuses on numerous cultural productions, Fleetwood suggests that some "black women artists, entertainers, and cultural producers [create] cultural productions reliant on the very problem their bodies pose as visible and corporeal bodies."[37] When these productions create "visual and discursive breaches" in "dominant visual culture," these very moments of slippage are deemed enactments of "excess flesh."[38]

Fleetwood defines "excess flesh" as:

> another conceptual framework for understanding the black body as a figuration of hypervisibility. Excess flesh is an enactment of visibility that seizes upon the scopic desires to discipline the black female body through a normative gaze that anticipates its rehearsed performance of abjection….Excess flesh is not *necessarily* a liberatory enactment. *It is a performative that doubles visibility: to see the codes of visuality operating on the (hyper) visible body that is its object.*[39]

Excess flesh is not merely a means of exposing the over-determination and stereotypical fallacy of the dominant cultural gaze. To engage in the production of excess flesh is to reconstitute how pre-established hypersexual bodies are understood by dominant and surrounding cultures. A person enacts excess flesh by consciously stylizing their actions, reactions, and/or inactions as a way of complicating the reception of their performance by dominant culture. Excess flesh does not imply a complete reversal of dominant

conceptions of black female bodies, however. Its implementation is similar to the José Esteban Muñoz's deployment of "disidentification" by minoritarian subjects through its incorporation of "the productive look [that] 'works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously.'"[40] Black women employ this look to force the dominant gaze to recognize the discordance between the actual and indomitably constructed minoritarian subject. Moreover, similar to Muñoz's "disidentification," "excess flesh" is not necessarily a liberatory enactment. Refracting the gaze does not automatically extract it from circulation in dominant culture.

Thus, Fleetwood's description of excess flesh puts forth an important claim for the purposes of my analysis. The deliberate enactment of excess flesh by black women allows for agency, but *not* control of meaning. Thus, Fleetwood's argument that "excess flesh enactments…suggest that the black female body is always troubling to dominant visual culture and that its troubling presence can work productively to *trouble* the field of vision" is tantamount to my study of two specific films as interventions in both black feminist studies and film studies.[41] Fleetwood's treatment leaves the concept of deviant hypersexuality and the black female body fastened together in service of a defiant performative that unsettles the dominant narrative of black women's sexuality and desires. Nowhere is the troubling presence of the black female body more disturbing for the popular imaginary or scholars of black representations than in films with explicit sexual content. Much of the research on black women performing explicit sexual acts focuses on mainstream pornography. However, there are an emerging number of films where these non-simulated sexual performances are disruptive to debates which assume

the majority of these performances are antithetical to positive or productive representations of blackness.

CHAPTER PREVIEW

In the following chapters, I will expand on this line of reasoning with an analysis of each film separately. Chapter two will examine *Afrodite Superstar*, its construction as a parody, and how its setting within hip-hop culture makes it a prime example of the workings of "excess flesh" in performances of black female sexuality. Chapter three will examine *Ashley and Kisha*, the complicated gaze of the documentary and pornography, and how both impacts performances of excess flesh between black women. In my conclusion, chapter 4, I will compare my analyses and the public reception of both films and demonstrate how they speak to more and more African Americans' forceful articulation of the multiple sexualities that are often elided in favor of dominant tropes of hypersexuality. This project is framed by the following questions:

1. In what ways are black women interjecting their voice into dominant constructions of their desires?
2. What pleasurable spaces of sexual agency exist for bodies deemed inherently deviant, and, if any, how are those spaces expanded, pared down, or confounded via the interjection of sexuality and sexual acts?
3. Do these films fracture the boundaries between pornography and commercial/independent cinema? If so, how?

I will conclude that their disruptiveness should be further explored within other emerging mediums as well to make plausible the question of whether or not it's "a good day to be black and sexy."

Debates about positive and negative representations of blackness and the African-American community have focused on various popular mediums including music, photography, television, and film. The latter is often put under much scrutiny because of the wide-reaching potential of film to influence cultural understandings of blackness and black bodies all over the world. Specific film genres, like pornography, or films with explicit sexual content are more likely to be cast as un-redeemable, negative representations because of dominant stereotypes equating black bodies with uncontrollable hypersexual drives. Given the perseverance of this trope from the time of the Enlightenment, these criticisms should not be taken lightly.[42] However, the immutable characterization of any public explicit sexual performance by black bodies as debauched is similarly disconcerting. This project takes up the latter contention through a comparative analysis that complicates questions of agency, pleasure, and desire in explicit sexual performances by black women.

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[1] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69.
[2] For instance, in the spring of 2010 and 2011, a number of anti-abortion groups paid for billboard advertisements featuring a small black boy or girl and the following statements: "The most dangerous place for an African American is the womb" or "Black children are an endangered species." The ads were posted in a number of cities, some in areas with a high African American population, including New York City, Atlanta, Houston, and Austin.
[3] In "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," Evelyn M. Hammonds argues against the restricting heteronormativity of respectability politics and urges both black feminist and

queer scholars to move towards a "'politics of articulation [which] would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act." Hammonds's full essay can be found in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997, 170-182).

[4] For a detailed account of the effects of respectability politics, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Politics of Respectability," in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). For a description of dissemblance, see Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-20. For a few discussions of silences instilled by respectability politics and dissemblance in academic scholarship, see Matt Richardson ""No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 63-76 and Michelle Mitchell, "Silences Broken, Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African-American History," *Gender and History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 433-444.

[5] For definition and explanation of "onscene," see Linda Williams *Porn Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[6] Shayne Lee's *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* (2010) is an example of such a text.

[7] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 122.

[8] Lorde, 122.

[9] One of the major criticisms of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Sartrian existentialism by philosophers and feminists has been its treatment of racial and class differences. For an exploration of this effacement from a black feminist and continental philosophy perspective, see Kathryn T. Gines, "Sartre, Beauvoir, and the Race/Gender Analogy: A Case for Black Feminist Philosophy," in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy* eds. Maria Del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 35-51.

[10] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 69.

[11] Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1949), 14-16. For an extensive study of the many ways the state/nation constitutes women's bodies, see Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

[12] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 72. See Higginbotham *Righteous Discontent*.

[13] Ibid., 282.

[14] Hammonds, 180.

[15] Ibid., 175.

[16] Lorde, 58.

[17] Hammonds, 181-182. Emphasis mine.

[18] There were a number of popular television shows either primarily focused on sexual relationships/sexualities or that had weekly/monthly episodes dedicated to these topics. Though the productivity of these shows' treatment of sexuality were sometimes more derisive than productive, they included shows like MTV's *Loveline* & *Sex in the 90's*, *Jenni Jones*, *The Ricki Lake Show*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, and HBO's *Real Sex* & *Sex and the City*.

[19] The list of films is exhaustive and included commercial successes, independent films, and box office flops: *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Boomerang* (1992), *Booty Call* (1997), *Incedent Proposal* (1993), *Bound* (1996), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Crash* (1996),

[20] For example, the debates surrounding Spike Lee's 1987 film *She's Gotta Have It* and 1996 film *Girl 6*. See bell hooks "Good Girls Look the Other Way" *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 10-19.

[21] Daniel Bernardi, *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed Daniel Bernardi (New York: Routledge, 2008), xvi.

[22] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63.
[23] Omi & Winant, 66.
[24] bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, (New York: Routldge, 1996), 2.
[25] Joane Nagel, "Ethnicities and Sexualities," in *The SAGE Handbook of Race and Ethnic Studies*, eds. Patricia Hill Collins and John Solomos (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010), 188.
[26] For an interesting analysis of the effects of death, gender, sexuality and the racialized body in a culturally laudable film, see Sharon P. Holland, "Death in Black and White: A Reading of Marc Forster's *Monster's Ball*," in *Signs*, 31, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 785-813.
[27] Norma Mantu, *African American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 11.
[28] Though many of the caricaturized names derisively used to characterized black women often subsumed the same properties, the "colored amazon" hints at the more destructive/dangerous qualities attributed to black women more generally. For more about the imagery of the "colored amazon" see Kali N. Gross, "Roughneck women, Pale Representations, and Dark Crimes: Black Female Criminals and Popular Culture," *Colored Amazons: Crime, violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 101-126.
[29] Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 12.
[30] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 189.
[31] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th edition, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 4.
[32] Ibid., 252-253.
[33] Manatu, 50.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).
[36] Ibid., 105.
[37] Ibid., 106.
[38] Ibid., 109.
[39] Ibid., 112, Emphasis Fleetwood.
[40] Ibid., 111. For more about disidentification, see Muñoz *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999).
[41] Fleetwood, 113.
[42] In his analysis of why the Haitian revolution was a non-event, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that "by the middle of the eighteenth century, 'black' was almost universally bad… [and] the rather abstract nomenclature inherited from the Renaissance was altogether reproduced, reinforced, and challenged by colonial practice and philosophical literature….Colonization provided the most potent impetus for the transformation of European ethnocentrism into scientific racism." This consolidation of 'black' as negativity, absence, and sexually loose was not confined to the Western European imaginary however. Many countries that adopted the ideals of Western European, including the U.S., consequently often accepted the prejudices as well. For more on Trouillot's explanation of the Enlightenment and the consolidation of 'blackness,' see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995): 70-107.

Chapter 2: Parodying Blackness in Afrodite Superstar

"How do I keep it real?" asks the titular character of Abiola Abrams' first feature length film, *Afrodite Superstar*. Throughout the short film, numerous moments illustrate this question by emphasizing the collusion of authenticity and blackness in popular culture. The setting of the film within the hyperbolic world crafted within popular hip-hop music along with a cast of African American actors, coalesce in a production that caricatures and troubles concrete ideas and performances of blackness and black sexuality. Moreover, the film pushes the viewer towards reexamining the typical controlling images of black women often seen in various media including film.

Produced by noted feminist pornographer Candida Royalle, *Afrodite Superstar* is a unique text that lends itself to a fruitful exploration of black women's performance of sexually explicit acts for public consumption and questions the room for agency within the mediated space of film. Many themes are explored in the film—including issues of colorism, racial authenticity, and representation within the urban African American populace—and are visually complicated by a number of explicit sex scenes. In this chapter, I briefly describe the plot of the film, illustrate Abrams' direct attempts to disrupt assumptions of exploitation through the use of parody, and argue why it cannot be easily situated within the genre of pornography. Subsequently, I explore how two explicit scenes featuring the character Afrodite embody Nicole Fleetwood's concept of excess flesh and offer tentative conclusions of the ways *Afrodite Superstar* and similar films disrupt typical cinematic narratives about black women's sexuality.

The film revolves around Afrodite's attempt to become a hip-hop star with the help of her more lyrically gifted friend Isis. After being discovered by the hip-hop mogul, C.E.O., Afrodite is primed on authentic black vernacular, posturing, and dress in preparation for her debut. The reasons for this transformation articulate the main tension throughout the film, namely Afrodite's lack of "real" blackness despite her self-identification as a Black American Princess, (BAP). Raised in Beverly Hills, Afrodite is the epitome of respectable black womanhood. Yet, her success in hip-hop is dependent on negating that image by effectively "blackening" her up. The larger class implications of Afrodite's transformation from an affluent lady to "black bitch" highlight which forms of blackness have greater social (and financial) capital within popular culture.[1] Moreover, these efforts contradict Stuart Hall's argument against the notion that a pure form of blackness exists in popular culture.[2] I will return to both of these points in a moment.

As she rises to the top, Afrodite experiences a number of high publicity moments depicted to mock the nonsensical nature of their real life counterparts in mass culture including Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake's performance at the 2004 Superbowl Halftime Show. While Afrodite appears elated by her success, confessional styled interludes throughout the film demonstrate her struggle between her everyday self and M.C. Dyte, her hip-hop persona. The film concludes with Afrodite rejecting the manufactured blackness put upon her as reclamation of herself, her desires, her career, and her own sense of blackness.

FILMING BLACKNESS AND HIP-HOP

Afrodite Superstar is a parody whose primary target is hip-hop music culture and the over-the-top, hypermasculine characteristics which dominate its production, aid its popularity, and propagate its financial longevity domestically and abroad. Director Abiola Abrams reiterates this focus in numerous interviews about the film. She also states that the aim of the film is to showcase positive representations of black female sexuality. Given these dual goals of the film—alongside its deliberate use of feminist texts to disrupt the misogynistic and silencing efforts of the two primary male characters C.E.O. and Criminal—its unapologetic politics provide us with a fruitful commentary on the performance and disruptiveness of sexualized black female bodies in mass culture.

Though Abrams' parody of hip-hop culture is central, the caricatures she devises point towards an additional parodic subtext, that of blackness. This subtext is important to note for several reasons. Despite the existence of hip-hop music created by non-black individuals such as the Beastie Boys, Paul Wall, and Fat Joe, the genre is primarily identified as black because of its origins. This designation also remains because many of the most successful artists within the genre have identified as black, including Run D.M.C., L.L. Cool J, Tupac Shakur, and Jay Z. As such, hip-hop culture appears to personify "real" blackness and vice versa. Patricia Hill Collins highlights the class dimensions of this perception, arguing that circulated images of poor and working-class black masculinity and femininity "construct a 'natural' black [masculinity and] femininity that in turn [are] central to an 'authentic' black culture."[3] In this view, middle or upper-class claims to blackness can never equal the veracity of blackness espoused

within poor and working-class communities. Though Collins's argument is illustrative of many aspects of black culture in the United States, it is most salient within hip-hop culture. A number of popular hip-hop artists from middle-class backgrounds, including Lil' Jon, Ludacris, Kanye West, and Drake, have occasionally inserted poor or working-class experiences in their lyrics and/or appearance as a means of foregrounding their credibility as "real" black men (and subsequently authentic hip-hop artists) in their route to success.

By caricaturing the homogenized forms of black femininity and masculinity within hip-hop culture, *Afrodite* also highlights what Stuart Hall argues is the inherent contrariness of black popular culture. He states:

> …strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms [of black popular culture] at all…Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base…they must always be heard…as what they are—adaptations, molded to the mixed, contradictory, hybrid spaces of popular culture.[4]

In some ways, this hybridity attempts to resist popular culture's penchant to concretize authenticity for commodification. For Hall, the existence of hybridity here cannot always surmount the essentializing forces of popular culture because "'good' black popular culture can pass the test of authenticity—the reference to black experience and to black expressivity [that] serve as the guarantees in the determination of which black popular culture is right on, which is ours, and which is not."[5] Nonetheless, that Hall postures these essentializing mechanisms as weak highlights the important functions of slippage within our absorption of popular culture and hip-hop especially.

In line with Hall's description of black popular culture as hybrid, I would argue that slippages in popular culture constitute those moments when said hybridity disrupts the familiarity of one's engagement with or enjoyment of such phenomenon. Put another way, the hybridity of black popular culture—and by extension blackness as identity—is only recognized as such when one's familiarity with said culture is momentarily challenged (or rather when the present moment *fails* to live up to one's preconceptions). This challenge can emerge in a number of ways, including through visual, oral, or aural cues. Slippages bring to light the failures inherent within a decontextualized homogenous understanding of any individual, group or phenomenon and necessarily function in the deployment of parody.[6] The dual parodic targets of hip-hop culture and blackness within *Afrodite*, then, signal to what I consider a third goal of the film: the disentanglement of authenticity from a singular form of blackness and sexuality. My reading of *Afrodite* is informed by the various slippages that occur within the film's use of two forms of parody to present a different vision of black female sexuality not steeped in pathology. I contend that through these discordant moments, *Afrodite* perceptively crafts a cinematic narrative of black women's sexuality different from those frequently circulated in popular films.

SEX AND THE PARODIES

Afrodite contains not only dual parodic texts, but two distinct deployments of parody within the film. The first form deals with the nature of cinematic parody, as illuminated by Dan Harries in *Film Parody* (1999). He contends that film parody is a discursive process informed by its intertextuality with other cinematic texts, the

production and history of cinema, and its varied reception by past, current, and future audiences. Harries' discussion is useful in charting how the film overtly uses parody in its primary aim of mocking the gluttonous, constructed personalities within popular hip-hop culture. His insistence that parody can simultaneously address socio-cultural problems is where the second form of parody operates. Judith Butler's groundbreaking work on gender performativity and the numerous discussions spawned since its publication has been used to further dismantle the naturalness of gender and compulsory heterosexuality. It has also been used as a departure to explore how those who do not cohesively adhere to the mandates of heteronormativity persist and thrive in a culture that conceives them as unnatural. Butler's work on gender parody can be used to explore how *Afrodite* subtly posits black women's sexuality in hip-hop culture as a parodic performance without an original. For the remainder of this section I will outline how these works collaboratively craft a space wherein the film's disruptive aims take shape.

Cinematic Parody

Dan Harries defines parody as "the process of recontextualizing a target or source text through the transformation of its textual (and contextual) elements, thus creating a *new* text."[7] He argues that parody is best understood as a "discursive *mode*" rather than a genre because its deployment simultaneously involves "a methodic 'approach' to recontextualizing target texts and canons than a particular text type," and "a strategy of spectatorship, much in the same vein as camp or 'counter-readings.'"[8] Thus, the use of parody in film is akin to a process of continuous meaning making via replication and contradiction. Harries asserts "while parody does indeed rely on and cannibalize other

texts, its reworkings affect not only the viewing of previous textual systems but also the construction and viewing of future related canonical texts."[9] The temporality of the changing effects rendered by the use of parody is particularly important in my reading of *Afrodite*. Its attempt to literally flip the script on cinematic portrayals of black women's sexuality is not merely admirable, but a sign that some filmmakers (and media producers at large) are still working towards dismantling the "climate of misrecognition of black women [that has] explicitly, vividly, and repeatedly carr[ied] forward the 'other' ideology of black women's sexuality."[10]

While the subjects of film parodies are typically other films, specific genres, or film cycles, the intertextuality of cinema in general indicates that parodic targets are not limited to the celluloid frame alone. The earliest films often borrowed their plot from popular novels and short stories, periodicals, and acts on the vaudeville circuit. Because the subjects of these productions were often extracted from each other as well as their contemporary culture, socio-cultural norms and popular culture are arguably additional targets of film parodies. Wes D. Gehring argues that parody and satire have separate functions where the former "has affectionate fun at the expense of a given form or structure," and the latter "more aggressively attacks the flaws and follies of mankind."[11] In this vein, parody is only concerned with mocking film genres, a specific auteur, and tropes; it may use satire intermittently to make a point about society, but avoids doing so frequently. I disagree with Gehring's distinction between the functions of parody and satire because such clear-cut distinctions disallow for the multiple ways audiences engage with such films. Harries expresses this sentiment stating that the three dimensions of

parodic discourse—the textual, the pragmatic, and the socio-cultural—"operat[e] simultaneously during any engagement with a parodic film text."[12] Moreover, he maintains that:

> …parody serv[es] an almost emancipatory function by jolting people out of their normatively-constructed compliance with social rules and norms. And of course, the argument for film parody's potentially 'radical' nature is not one centered on any type of direct effect, but rather is based on a form of cognitive 'exercise'—a reminder that no normative system is absolutely stable and immutable.[13]

Thus, parody impacts past, contemporary, and future engagements with texts through its replication or alteration of the form, content, and subjects of its focus, and potentially precipitates transgressive readings within its audience.

Audiences often engage in counter-readings and disidentificatory practices with various cultural texts outside those crafted as parody. These practices are utilized by various minoritarian groups who often engage with a dominant culture that typically views them as abject.[14] The enactment of these subversive techniques can result from the slippage between dominant portrayals of various groups and the day-to-day experience of those group members. Upon recognition of the discord between the popular and everyday life, these mechanisms can act as a means of self-preservation. Similarly, audience engagement with parodic texts have the potential to use these same moments of slippage to re-cognize the problematic nature of their preconceptions about a text, culture, or specific group. Such an act could result in the aforementioned cognitive exercises towards transgression. That these exercises can occur within and outside of the film's context post engagement is the radical potential of parody, according to Harries. He also

carefully notes that the potential for transgression is just that, a probable occurrence, not a logical outcome.

He devises a methodology for analyzing film parody "that productively chart[s] this textual movement between similarity and difference and its systematic repetition of technique."[15] This methodology involves understanding the three main categories of a film's text—lexicon, syntax, and style (as adapted from Altman's methodology for studying film genres)—and analyzing how "parody generates both similarity and difference by faithfully replicating either the syntax or the lexicon of the target text while altering the other dimension."[16] The lexicon constitutes "the elements that populate any film text, such as the setting, the characters, the costumes and the various items comprising the film's iconography [...] syntax is the film's plot," and the film's style includes "sound effects, camera movements and dialogue subtitles."[17] Each of these elements can be altered within a parody by means of reiteration, misdirection, extraneous inclusion, inversion, literalization, or exaggeration. Through his analysis, Harries demonstrates that these parodic codes can be simultaneously implemented within a single film. Together, these codes and their deployment throughout a film's text "provide a standard way to examine how parody constructs its metatext across different modes and genres."[18]

Harries method for analyzing film parody, then, is very useful in surmising Abrams' success in mocking the sexism and false realism often found in popular hip-hop culture. However, the process by which "parody posits potential subversive thought by its extra-textual reference with its satiric impulse to critique the larger social order" is much

more difficult to deconstruct in *Afrodite*.[19] While the majority of the film does a decent job of critiquing the superficial constructions of hip-hop culture and its over-reliance on street credibility, its critique of racialized gender and sexual norms is opaque. Often, the spectacles of racial identity and sexuality are inseparable, allowing the general public to surmise one's sexual abilities (or lack thereof) through popular stereotypes. Through its parody of the construction of blackness in hip-hop culture, *Afrodite* reinforces the argument that film genres "are not simply bodies of work or groups of films…[but equally consist] of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process."[20] The same process that circulates stereotypical images of black sexuality, however, also allows the occasional film to disrupt this process.

Simulacra of Race

The alteration of characters' backgrounds in the film (lexicon) echoes Butler's assertion that contemporary conceptions of gender are constructed chimeras, an argument that has been expanded upon within feminist and queer theory since the first publication of *Gender Trouble*. Through the example of drag performance, Butler demonstrates that gender is revealed as a parody without an original. This revelation is produced through slippages found within drag performance: "If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance."[21] Subsequently, this dissonance resists any form of resolution because the explication of a naturalized gender

is infinitely deferred. Gender, in this sense, is not considered a definitive noun but a verb, a repetitive act that is both conscious and unconscious. Butler further asserts that:

> Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness.[22]

In other words, though no definitive account of the fundamental forms of gender exists, the ubiquitous performance of these "discrete and polar" entities en mass induces a general belief in the primordiality of "man" and "woman." Consequently, gender cannot be understood as true or false but as credible (a performance that sufficiently enacts the most quotidian and unremarkable acts) and incredible (a performance that inaccurately or fastidiously enacts those same quotidian acts).[23]

As Butler's contention unhinges the natural links between gender and sex, it accounts for the shifts in accepted gender norms over time and thus resists being dehistoricized. It also disrupts the presumed causal relationship between gender and sexuality. Specifically, she argues "the 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality;" yet, the existence of "heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories [as] the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original."[24] For instance, the identities butch and femme are derived from characteristically heteronormative masculine and feminine behaviors. The repeated

embodiment of these behaviors by queer identified individuals unsettles the naturalness of both gender and sexuality norms.

Nonetheless, the ontological and socializing power of these "natural" constructs mitigates the presumption that the mere repetition of these acts by *incredible* bodies is necessarily transgressive. This is analogous to Harries' illustration of film parody's potential for transgression. Power in this instance is understood as "creative; it posits and produces reality as much as it sets limits upon it."[25] Moreover, power constitutes and is constituted by bodies, or rather, selves.[26] This conception of power, drawn from Foucault can be productive and delimiting but is always deployed through the body.[27] Furthermore, power is compulsory and this facet accounts for the rigidness of norms and their insidious operation socially. The belief in the naturalness of a certain kind of heterosexuality and a specific form of masculinity and femininity continues not only through the existence of scientific and legal norms but because the diffusive character of power further propels the constructed essentialness of these categories. The repeated failure of compulsory heterosexuality, and by extension heteronormative conventions, then, confesses to be "a constant parody of itself."[28] The example of drag performance seemingly situates Butler's construct of gender parody as a space of play and boundless liberation. However, the power infused throughout these compulsory spaces has real life consequences for those incredible bodies whose performances are not for commercial spectacle and can be even further detrimental for racialized incredible bodies.

Butler posits that race itself "might be construed as performative," in the sense that "institutional exercises repeatedly construct race within a set of differentials that seek

to maintain and control racial separateness."[29] Ladelle McWhorter formulates how race operates within Foucault's power/knowledge matrices by demonstrating how it is analogous to Foucault's own configuration of sex within the complex of power/knowledge. She contends that race and sex:

> …arise concurrently within the same power/knowledge regimes, namely, the normalizing disciplinary power/knowledge networks that arose in the early nineteenth century as means of managing individuals in large groups, and the biopower networks that arose from the nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries as large governmental systems augmented and intensified their control over populations.[30]

The productive and disciplinary mechanisms of power that mask heterosexuality as the unremarkable norm correspondingly mask whiteness as the norm and essentially *un*raced. In other words, contemporary figurations of sexuality and race come into focus as scientific regimes within this power/knowledge structure begin to define and label those incredible—non-heterosexual, non-white, dis-abled—bodies that threaten the productivity of the state. Because this form of power is productive rather than destructive, these regimes expected incredible bodies "could be remedied; individuals who deviated from the norm could be forced back 'on track,' on the [right] developmental trajectory."[31] If this end goal could not be achieved, that is if the incredible could not—or simply refused—to become credible, such bodies had to be constrained from *re*producing their deviancy into the normal population.

The continuity of this logic manifests in Butler's commentary on one of the negative effects of disciplinary power on racial performativity within the U.S.: "there is an epidermal presumption about the human, such that racism gives voice to the ways in

which people whom we know to be people nevertheless do not get seen or recognized within the purview of the culturally elaborated notion of 'the people.'"[32] The effects of this presumption are evident in the history of black women's lives in the U.S. and how they are often excluded from the category of woman. The work of black feminist scholars, as discussed in the introduction, has been useful in detailing the horrors inflicted upon black women's bodies due to dominant cultural conceptions of their bodies and sexuality as excessive. Such connotations meant that whatever traits black women could claim via their womanhood for protection were partially or wholly negated by their blackness. As white womanhood became antithetical to black womanhood and the former became analogous to Victorian womanhood, this negation intensified with the intersection of sexuality; black women were presumed always ready for sex. This line of logic, then, required black women's bodies to be constrained and monitored because an uncontrolled libido was dangerous to the productivity of the state. From forced breeding and sterilization to rhetorical exclamations against welfare queens, the idea of the excessive black women's body has retained its cultural capital through socio-political discourse and popular culture.

Read together, McWhorter and Butler help establish that black womanhood and by extension black women's sexuality are performative and circulate as parody within the popular imagination. McWhorter argues that race, like Foucault's conception of sexuality, is seemingly natural even though "its meaning shifts whenever it is called upon to perform a different one of its many functions in the systems of power and knowledge of which it is a part."[33] Since the definition of race, like sexuality and gender is infinitely

deferred, determining racial authenticity becomes a process of discerning credible and incredible performances. If whiteness, as McWhorter contends, resists classification as a race, then every non-white body is always already somewhat incredible. For instance, the black body is already excessive because it is racially distinct from the temperate white body. The disciplinary function of power operates to perceptively distill these incredible raced bodies into superficial concrete identities which can be used to distinguish them from white bodies and other raced bodies. For example, some stereotypes paint the Asian body as stereotypically considered less excessive than the black body but too measured in comparison to the white body.

Subsequently, the performance of gender and sexuality by these incredible racial bodies is also viewed in relation to credible white heterosexual bodies. In a sense, these incredible bodies could repeatedly enact the performance of credible white heterosexual bodies in an effort to transcend the inherent incredibleness of their race. Per Butler, however, this is a difficult achievement despite current insistence that our contemporary moment is the beginning of a post-racial era.[34] Thus, incredible bodies that consistently replicate their distinguished racial performances, appear more authentic to the greater public. In the case of black women, their racial classification as black already distinguishes them as incredible in comparison to white women. The more excessive their performance of gender and sexuality in comparison to this group of women, the greater the probability that they will be viewed as authentic black women.

The longevity of certain stereotypes of black women, accordingly, function as systematic reminders of this "true" nature of black womanhood as loud (excessively

vocal), emasculating (excessively masculine), lazy (excessively undisciplined), curvaceous (excessively fleshy) and insatiable (excessively carnal). Thus, when these bodies are seen in popular mediums, their authenticity is gauged by how well they adhere to a narrow parameter of essential gestures. Performances of black women's sexuality that do not appear predatory or feverish are, in this view, not credible. Consequently, the instances of black women's sexuality portrayed in *Afrodite* unsettle viewers' preconceived notions of what certain bodies are supposed to do, "challenging dominant ideological discourses" cinematically, and, potentially culturally.[35] In the next section, I explore how the film deploys parody to illuminate the artifice in popular hip-hop culture and its construction of black bodies through the main protagonists, Afrodite and C.E.O., and Criminal, another rapper on C.E.O.'s record label.

STRAIGHT OUTTA B-HILLS

Afrodite Superstar faithfully employs two forms of film syntax: the classic romance narrative and the mock documentary. Its fidelity to the former is evidenced in the unfolding narrative between Afrodite and C.E.O. From the beginning of the film, they are instantly drawn to each other but prevented from consummating their feelings until the end of the film due to a series of obstacles.[36] The film also employs some of the basic syntax found in mock documentaries of the music industry such as *This is Spinal Tap* (1984, dir. Rob Reiner) and *CB4* (1993; dir. Tamra Davis). Its resemblance to the latter film is especially notable because like Afrodite the main characters need to blacken up their middle-class sensibilities to become successful. Interestingly, they decide to steal the identity of an imprisoned local gangsta to glean their credibility as the rap group Cell

Block 4. Although they do this after an indirect suggestion from Trustus—C.E.O.'s mogul counterpart in the film—his eagerness to sign them to the label signifies his belief in the profitability of authentic blackness in hip-hop.[37] *Afrodite Superstar* and *CB4* also share similar climactic arcs wherein the main protagonists publicly shed their gangsta personalities after becoming disillusioned with their facades. These facades, however, are where Harries' parodic codes begin to operate.

The alteration of the lexicon, specifically some of the characters, is the root of the parody. That Afrodite is a woman is significant because out of all the released mock documentaries parodying the music industry, only one other features a woman in the lead role. However, unlike *Afrodite*, *Medusa: Dare to be Truthful* (dir. Julie Brown & John Fortenberry, 1991) directly pans Madonna's documentary, *Truth or Dare* (dir. Alek Keshishian, 1991). As I mentioned earlier, Afrodite's class highlights the significance of socioeconomics for burgeoning and established rappers. Accumulating wealth through hustling, odd jobs, or selling records appears more credible than having a trust fund and a father who "basically invented black music."[38] Such sentiment foreshadows Afrodite's foray into signing with C.E.O. records. The façade she and C.E.O. willingly deploy in order to reach success, however, serves as the primary obstacle to their eventual union. While we are aware of Afrodite's struggle to balance her own sense of self with the "realness" of MC Dyte, we also learn that C.E.O. has been involved in a similar battle.

C.E.O. is not from the mean streets at all. He is a neo soul musician and Yale graduate who only became the (in)famous hip-hop mogul after interning at Afrodite's father's company. Afrodite's father finances and manufactures C.E.O.'s street credentials

to boost the latter's authenticity in the public eye as a ploy to puppeteer his daughter's hip-hop career from afar. It is bizarre and inherently paradoxical from a racialized class standpoint, that a father of his stature would emphatically support and deceptively engineer his daughter's career in an industry where the most popular acts actively denigrate the black female body for financial gain and social capital. Recall Collins' exploration of the class dimensions of black sexuality in U.S. popular culture where poor and working-class blackness are viewed as more authentic than their middle- and upper-class counterparts: Afrodite's transformation into M.C. Dyte reaffirms this dichotomy. Her transformation also highlights the narrow landscape middle- and upper-class black women must navigate in public and popular spaces.

Lisa B. Thompson focuses on the vexing problem of this very public tightrope for contemporary middle-class black women asserting:

> Conservative sexual behavior is the foundation of the performance of middle-class black womanhood. The notion of performing a class position takes on heightened meaning for African American women because class performance is bound up with the performance of racial and gender identity. Fears of being considered racially inauthentic, as well as anxiety about conforming to derogatory racial stereotypes, place middle-class black women in a delicate position. Through behavior, language, and dress they must publicly signal racial loyalty while simultaneously highlighting class status.[39]

While poor and working-class black womanhood is lauded as authentic, middle- and upper-class black womanhood is constructed as its morally superior, yet inauthentic rival.[40] The performance of proper middle- and upper-class blackness has been viewed as politically necessary for African Americans as they worked to concretize their citizenship before the eyes of the country, because the construction of middle- and upper-class black

womanhood has its roots in the racial uplift movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[41] The emergence of respectability politics within these movements was shaped by patriarchal views of gender which persist in our contemporary moment.

As preeminent examples of success and respectability, Afrodite and her father have presumably embodied the comportment necessitated by their higher class status. Afrodite's desire to succeed in mainstream hip-hop and her father's desire to assist her, however, greatly destabilize their allegiance to their class and undermine the stability of authentic blackness. Their actions also suggest that blackness can be embodied by bodies not viewed as phenotypically black. Through the revelation of Afrodite and C.E.O.'s false countenances, the film disrupts popular imagery of hip-hop artists and tangentially the foundations of real blackness to reveal, "the over-determined social codes whose stylized forms cannot help but bespeak the construction of the natural."[42] Thus, class becomes the fulcrum that pushes the audience to discover the secondary critique of authentic blackness expressed in *Afrodite*.

The character shift is evidenced more clearly within a third character, Criminal da Thug. In this instance, Harries' argument about parodic coding becomes central. Criminal's name functions as a form of literalization and exaggeration. Literalization can create parodic difference by "altering names systematically either to change the character's personality profile or merely to draw attention to the specificity of names established in the logonomic systems."[43] By naming the other main rapper at C.E.O. records Criminal, the film plays on the common perception that many black men in hip-hop are felonious. This same perception is turned on its head when it is revealed that

Criminal shares the same Ivy League background as C.E.O. and his reported four year stint in prison was actually the time he spent at Yale completing his degree.

The effect of this twist for the audience is compounded upon recognition of his full hip-hop name: Criminal da Thug. In this vein, his name also serves as an exaggeration, such that the use of "criminal" and "thug" unnecessarily magnifies his realness and gives him the appearance of someone who is overzealously lawless. The use of literalization and exaggeration, then, underlines not only the construction of blackness in hip-hop but the power of racial performativity in distinguishing between credible and incredible performances of blackness. In my view, the effect of these parodic codes is usually successful, especially in light of their use in mainstream comedic programs like the *Chappelle Show* and *Saturday Night Live*. *Afrodite Superstar*'s use of parody to engender a shift towards a fluid understanding of black women's sexuality, however, is not as successful.

"AM I THAT KIND OF SEXY?"

Of the five sex performances within the film, those featuring Afrodite are the most effective. The first scene features Afrodite masturbating while watching the premiere of her first music video with a camera set up next to the television recording her ministrations. The scene culminates with Afrodite smirking and remarking how leaking the tape on the internet will help her "blow up"—a statement which references the popularity of celebrity sex tapes over the past two decades.[44] Despite Afrodite's aim to leak her sex tape as a method of gaining and increasing her fame, this and C.E.O. are not her sole sources of arousal. At the beginning of the scene, Afrodite is seen lying on her

bed watching the video. A basket of various sex toys are also on the bed next to her. The visible display of the basket's contents in this initial shot speaks to Afrodite's foreknowledge of her imminent desires.

While one could argue that this is solely in service of creating the sex tape, I would argue that there must be a focal point precipitating her arousal or else Afrodite's own intentions will go unfulfilled; thus, her choice of stimulation(s) is important. One clear object of desire is herself. As she watches the video, Afrodite expresses facial excitement and enticement towards MC Dyte, who dances seductively on the screen as she raps. The video is still playing as she shifts her position and contemplates which vibrator to use. While the scene is occasionally interspersed with fleeting images of Afrodite's desire for C.E.O., a significant portion of the images that cross-cut the scene are shots of MC Dyte. The use of cross-cutting here implies that these images are additional sources of her arousal. But what does it mean for Afrodite to desire *this* image of herself so explicitly? How is that meaning different or made more complex when this self is a fantastical doppelganger born of damaging stereotypes and false ideals of blackness?

In "The Uses of the Erotic," Audre Lorde asserts that fully loving oneself is key to finding one's inner strength. This strength is emotive and encompasses multiple definitions of eros, including self-love and recognition of bodily desires. For Lorde, ignoring any facet of one's erotic power is detrimental to one's survival and health. Her axiom necessitates the recognition of love beyond the sexual, but does not proscribe its worth because the erotic is most powerful when one recognizes its multifariousness. That

Afrodite's masturbation is the first explicit scene in the film becomes significant in combination with Lorde's contentions. The act of masturbation and the unhurried pace of her masturbation signify Afrodite's comfort with her body and a rudimentary knowledge of her desires. It also implies she owns her desires and finds pleasure in performing this act as a form of self-love. For Afrodite, performing this act, not for the pleasure of a waiting partner but for herself as an act of love represents a partial attempt to restore her own erotic power.[45]

Afrodite's desire for herself is a powerful claim of her body as beautiful, desirable, and not merely an object. Yet, this claim is not without complication. The onscreen self Afrodite desires is fantastical. MC Dyte is straight from the streets, covered in guns and bling, and seductively holds her audience's gaze while dancing in a deliberately provocative manner. She is the quintessential hip-hop "video ho."[46] Her presence onscreen is expectedly obscene while her presence off-screen, coiffed in expensive dresses and pearls, is paradoxically bound in an impossible ideology where "social pressures to act like a true 'lady' often mars sexual experiences."[47] Thus, the self Afrodite seems to desire most is one who is more in line with the image of credible blackness. That Afrodite also desires C.E.O., another credible facsimile, is equally problematic because both desires reinforce the idea that there is a natural form of black sexuality, a form that is faithfully reiterated in mass culture. While the second scene featuring Afrodite with C.E.O. shows they discard their false accoutrements of blackness—making the racial drag of their *on*scene personas all the more prevalent to the audience—one cannot ignore their initial attraction to each other's facades.

Still, their sexual performance is not similar to other infamous cinematic portrayals of black women's sexuality where spectacle is expected and involves moments of "dirty talk," close, cropped shots of "blackened" body parts, especially the buttocks, or bodies slicked in oil.[48] When she enters C.E.O.'s room, her voiceover punctuates her agency in desiring and obtaining sexual satisfaction. The scene plays out as a languid, playful, mutually passionate encounter between lovers and is the longest in the entire film. While it features some of the standard activities in mainstream heterosexual pornography—fellatio and cunnilingus as foreplay for instance—the scene still attempts to resist negative identification with stereotypical racial spectacle. In both scenes, the tempo of the action is a significant marker of their difference from typical non-simulated sex scenes. While this indicator is important for this analysis, I do not wish to imply that frenetic sex is a primarily black phenomenon or that there is anything inherently wrong with frenzied sex in and of itself. However, the most frequent connotation of frenzy in the pornographic context is the same bestial imagery often invoked in the most virulent stereotypes about black sexuality.[49]

Despite its aim to showcase positive forms of black female sexuality, *Afrodite* falls short because it ultimately perpetuates and validates desire for the naturalized hyperbolic images it so successfully mocks. Moreover, the eventual coupling of Afrodite and C.E.O. peculiarly upholds the disciplinary mantra of wanting a demonstrable lady in the streets and a sexual freak in the bed. C.E.O. is well aware of Afrodite's wealthy upbringing and seems to desire her even more as she becomes MC Dyte. The audience's knowledge of this begs the question of whether or not the ending adequately destabilizes

the idea of a singular credible black sexuality. If these specific performances were to be considered separate from the movie, these questions would arguably not exist. Within the context of the film narrative however, C.E.O.'s paternalistic and sexual desires for Afrodite disturbingly intertwine—he reveals that he was not only in on her father's ruse but also charged with keeping a close eye on her at all times. As such, the effectiveness of the secondary parodic subtext is indeterminate. This ambiguity is further amplified with the revelation in the end credits that Candida Royalle, not Abiola Abrams, directed the sexual performances in the film.

WHOSE SEX IS IT ANYWAY?

Though Candida Royalle is listed as the "sex scenes director," Abiola Abrams is credited as the sole director of the film under the pseudonym Venus Hottentot. One strong reason for these separate credits can be attributed to Abrams' inexperience in directing non-simulated sex scenes. Royalle is renowned as one of the first female pornography stars to direct and produce couples and female-focused adult films, and paved the way for the emergence of feminist-conscious pornography. Since Royalle is the executive producer of the film, one could sensibly assume that she and Abrams mutually agreed that Royalle should direct those specific scenes. In interviews about the film, Abrams suggests something akin to this:

> I got in touch with Candida Royalle and I pitched her the idea for the film. I wanted to make a feminist film. I wanted to make a feature film that had sex in the film but had a very strong story line. […] I knew that I had no long term interests in working in this area, my work is about empowering women and specifically in the areas of love, sex, dating and relationships but not necessarily in just in sexual content.[50]

Since the inclusion of non-simulated sex was hers alone, the question of who physically directed the scenes ostensibly should not matter and in the case of *Afrodite Superstar*, I somewhat agree with this contention. If the two scenes featuring Afrodite were viewed in another film with a narrative that did not collapse under the weight of its politics, then this question could be resolved as an instance of different directorial styles disrupting the spectator's reading of the film. However, Abrams' politics so are consciously embedded in the plot of the film that they guide the viewer towards the finale.

One primary example of how this interference unfolds is through the character Buttafly. In order to disabuse spectators that the explicit scenes are pure spectacle, Abrams utilizes the video jockey Buttafly to speak to the audience directly, in the fashion of a Greek chorus. These diegetic asides consist of quotes from famous entertainers or seminal feminist texts such as *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Beauty Myth*, and *Sister Outsider*. Each quote serves as a further referent of Abrams' goal to make a film refuting the idea that black women's pleasure is solely for other's use. By using Buttafly, the only character who does not have sex onscreen, to break the fourth wall and deliver this message, Abrams astutely implicates the spectator's culpability within larger discourses about credible black sexuality as abject in mass culture. Yet, the second and third non-simulated sex scenes dismantle these efforts.

The scenes are juxtaposed with excerpts from each being cross cut over the other as they both unfold. The second scene features Isis, Afrodite's best friend, and Kali, the creative/fashion director of CEO records who is identified as Puerto Rican. The third scene features Criminal and Ishtar, though we do not learn her name until the end credits.

In the scene between Isis and Kali, the two engage in a string of conversations which culminate in them sensually dancing together around Kali's apartment. As they continue to dance, the film cuts to Ishtar sitting on the bed watching a frustrated Criminal practice his music (racial) performance. He ends his practice and quickly approaches Ishtar. The conversation between the two of them is much shorter than the one between Isis and Kali, consisting of an overly simplistic two-line exchange:

> Criminal: So, yo girl what's up?
> Ishtar: So what's up?

The film cuts back to Isis and Kali dancing with the latter directing Isis throughout the exchange. The film continues to cut between both escalating scenes. While Criminal and Ishtar launch into what appears to be a customary exchange in mainstream heterosexual porn—an exchange of oral sex, spanking, and ripping of underwear from Ishtar's body—the scene between Isis and Kali unfolds differently but in a manner problematically reminiscent of mainstream lesbian pornography.

Isis and Kali continue to tease each other throughout the scene whether by hand or with other objects on hand. The majority of the images in their scene appear as extensive foreplay in comparison to the feverish copulation between Criminal and Ishtar. As both scenes reach their respective climaxes, Criminal, Ishtar, and Kali each vocally express, what the view assumes, their orgasm. However, the spectator never receives a similar confirmation from Isis. One could argue that Abrams is playing on Linda William's assertion that similar to Foucault's treatment of the act of confession as central to the materialization of *scientia sexualis* and the institutions designed to manage its

deployment, the camera's gaze also constructs the truths of sex. In other words, the lack of confirmation that Isis experiences an orgasm could be Abrams' way of denying the audience that truth which they presumably need to know. Ideally, because the general spectator has been disciplined to expect an orgasm from everyone who engages in sex acts, the logic of such a tactic would challenge them to recognize their expectations of the incredible black body as problematic.

Conversely, Abrams' reliance on a mixture of feminisms, whose collection arguably resembles an odd greatest hits compilation within the film, cannot reliably lead to the spectator to this conclusion. By coupling these disjointed scenes together, the film contradicts its own vision of positive black sexuality, especially black female sexuality, rooted in self-love. That Isis is the only person within a sex scene who both relinquishes her orgasm and merely seems to exist to serve others partially undoes the work of the film's message.[51] This contradiction is further solidified when one looks at the conclusion of each encounter. Isis and Kali cuddle together in seeming post-coital bliss, while Criminal congratulates Ishtar on her "good pussy" then promptly tells her to leave. Isis's subservience coupled with Criminal's continuance of his rap persona in the bedroom read as antithetical to the project of *Afrodite Superstar*.

Notwithstanding my criticisms, these breakdowns in the film's structure are useful in that they convey the complications involved in crafting explicit performances designed to disrupt spectator preconceptions. The subtext of *Afrodite Superstar* is rarely found in mainstream films regardless of whether they feature simulated or non-simulated sex because the consumption of the black body as fetish in film merely reflects the

commodification of the black body in mass culture. Subsequently, the film's yoking of two mediums notorious for their circulation of the black body for commodification may move them to view as just another mainstream pornographic feature. This deduction, however, fails to recognize the many implications of the film's existence. Aside from adding to the number of filmmakers crafting films that articulate a heterogeneous vision of black female sexuality, the film adds weight to the idea cultural paradigms about black sexuality need to be reconfigured. Specifically, merited critiques against hip-hop and pornography's proliferation of commodified black bodies, cannot account for the continued presence of black individuals continued performance in such mediums.[52] The acknowledgment and shift towards understanding this would precipitate the transformative re-cognition of the public performance of sex by black bodies not as irredeemable, but necessarily complicated.

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[1] For example, see Stuart Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 123-134., Lisa B. Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), and Patricia Hill Collins *Black Sexual Politics*.
[2] Hall, "Black Popular Culture."
[3] Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 137.
[4] Hall, 129.
[5] Hall, 129-130.
[6] This same act of decontextualization is what makes essentialist mechanism so weak according to Hall, 130.
[7] Dan Harries, *Film Parodies* (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 2000), 6.
[8] Ibid., 7.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Manatu, 23.
[11] Wes D. Gehring, *Parody as Film Genre: "Never Give a Saga an Even Break"* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 5.
[12] Ibid., 4.
[13] Harries, 127.
[14] José Esteban Muñoz *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999).
[15] Harries, 8.
[16] Ibid., 9.

[17] Ibid., 8.
[18] Ibid., 39.
[19] Ibid., 129.
[20] Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 158.
[21] Butler, 137.
[22] Ibid., 140.
[23] Ibid., 141.
[24] Ibid., 31.
[25] Ladelle McWhorter, "Sex, Race, and Biopower: A Foucauldian Genealogy," *Hypatia* 19, no. 3: 42.
[26] Ibid., 42-43.
[27] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality - Volume 1: An Introduction* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
[28] Butler, 122.
[29] Blumenfeld et. al., "'There is a Person Here': An Interview with Judith Butler," *Butler Matters: Judith Butler's Impact on Feminist and Queer Studies*, eds. Margaret Sönser Breen and Warren J. Blumenfeld (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 11.
[30] McWhorter, 54.
[31] McWhorter, 53.
[32] Blumenfeld et. al., 20. This also buttresses Fleetwood's assertion that the black body is always already disruptive visually.
[33] Ibid., 52.
[34] This distinction is also further complicated when one considers that many applications and the 2010 U.S. Census ask if one is of Hispanic or Latino origin separately from what is your race. A copy of the 2010 U.S. Census form is available online (http://2010.census.gov/2010census/about/interactive-form.php).
[35] Susan Hayward, "Genre," *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 187.
[36] Thanks to Janet Staiger for pointing this parallel out in an earlier draft of this chapter. Stacey and Pearce describe the classic romance fantasy in stages: first, there is instant chemistry between the fated couple but they cannot pursue or consummate it immediately because it their restraint impresses upon the audience the purity of their relationship (i.e., that it's more than just sex); second, this impression is carried throughout the film because the couple is continuously kept a part by various obstacles and conflicts (i.e., class, race, current relationships, location, facades); third, the obstacles or conflicts are eventually surmounted allowing the couple to finally be together in death (i.e. *Romeo and Juliet*) or happily ever after (i.e.). For more about the classic romance fantasy and its deviations, see the introduction of *Romance Revisited* (1995) by Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce.
[37] Moreover, the evidence of this attitude in a film over a decade before *Afrodite* indicates the continued prevalence of this attitude in hip-hop culture.
[38] Afrodite refers to her father in this way in a brief vignette that starts the film before the opening credits.
[39] Thompson, 2-3.
[40] She goes on to state that these performances "also originated in opposition to various longstanding black female caricatures in American popular culture such as the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel figures" (Thompson, 3).
[41] In a way, middle- and upper-class black womanhood has functioned in a manner similar to that of Southern white womanhood in comparison to black womanhood in general. The salacious tropes of black women as Mammies, Jezebels, and Sapphires is rooted in a distinct history of distinguishing white womanhood as the antithesis of black womanhood where the former is the epitome of Victorian womanhood.
[42] Joy Viveros, "Black Authenticity, *Racial Drag*, and the Case of Dave Chappelle," *Authentic Blackness, "Real" Blackness: Essays on the Meaning of Blackness in Literature and Culture*, eds. Martin Japtok and

Jerry Rafiki Jenkins (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 143. This also demonstrates why non-Black artists like Eminem, Paul Wall, and Fat Joe are imbued with the same credibility

[43] Harries, 70.

[44] Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee and Kim Kardashian and Ray J, are just a few of the most notorious tapes.

[45] It can also be seen as a way of stealing her body and her own pleasures away from an invasive culture that still seems to view black women's bodies as predatory and in need of regulation.

[46] For more about the typical imagery of the video ho see, "'I See the Same Ho,' Video Vixens, Beauty Culture, and Diasporic, Sex Tourism," in *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 23-52.

[47] Thompson, 67.

[48] See the infamous scene between Leticia and Hank in *Monster's Ball* (dir. Mark Forster, 2001) where Leticia grotesquely begs Hank to "make her feel good." These devices of spectacle are typical in mainstream pornography featuring black actors that seemingly echoes the profitability of black flesh on the antebellum slave market.

[49] Joanne Nagel provides further insight into the implicit links between the frenzy, sex, and blackness asserting that "sexual performatives are imbedded in ethnic, racial and national imaginings" (201) Thus, analyses of the frenzy of the visible (see Linda Williams, *Hard Core*) cannot be divorced from their cultural context. Sex is never considered in and of itself, especially on the public stage where the sexual activities of black women are often subjected to a critical lens by policy makers, news reporters, and social scientists. This view of sex and black women falls under further scrutiny when examined within both hip-hop culture and pornography. For more on the context and differential effects of racialization on the frenzy of the visible in these two areas, see Mireille Miller-Young, "Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography," in *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 8, no. 1: 261-292.

[50] Mireille Miller-Young, "Interview with Abiola Abrams – Director of *Afrodite Superstar*," *$pread* , 2009, https://docs.google.com/View?id=dzzt6rc_37sbnmbbc5.

[51] Isis reveals that she knows Afrodite because her mother served as Afrodite's nanny from birth. Though they grow up together, the power differential in their relationship cannot be ignored. Moreover, Isis is the main person performing when C.E.O. discovers Afrodite. He passes her over for narrative reasons but he only sidelines her from the public eye. She's immediately hired to be the lyricist and voice of MC Dyte, By the conclusion, the audience discovers that Isis was in on the ruse as well, a point that seems to solidify her worth via her use by others.

[52] Miller-Young's article does a great job at exploring why this gap remains and proffers how scholars can work to repair it.

Chapter 3: Finding the Right Fit

> *Real people, meaning folks who seem whole and authentic; real life, meaning a point of view about sex that sees it as a part of the greater human experience, and one of its great joys; and real sex, meaning depicting sex in a way that is at least about the mutual pleasure of the subjects as it is about indulging the voyeuristic fancies of the audience (and the filmmaker!). It's a tagline that would suppose to differentiate what we do from what is more commonly available to people who go looking for a film about sex with the very specific intent of watching it and getting turned on.*
>
> -Tony Comstock on his film company's tag line, "Comstock Films: Real People, Real Life, Real Sex"[1]

Hardcore. Softcore. Amateur. These are only a few descriptors used to market various sex focused films to their audience. However, two (hardcore and amateur) are often used to connote the authenticity of the sexual acts performed within pornographic films, while the other (softcore) is often attributed to the "inauthentic" late night presentations on premium cable channels. This distinction between authentic and inauthentic images is not restricted to forthright presentations of sex. One could argue that all images, especially filmic ones, are constructed and thus undermine the veritable authenticity of any image. This challenge would seem increasingly problematic for images crafted primarily for profit. Yet, for two film genres, the questionability of an image's authenticity is not often raised by general audiences unless something within the film disrupts the narrative logic of their viewing. These two genres, by nature of their purported form, are characteristically invested in showing reality itself. The specific genres I speak of are pornography and documentary film.

Tony Comstock is a filmmaker who combines both of these genres within short films produced under the "Real People, Real Life, Real Sex" series.[2] Since his first

feature, *Marie and Jack: A Hardcore Love Story* (2004), Comstock has released seven erotic documentary films that showcase a sexual encounter between romantic partners. As a filmmaker who creates documentary films with non-simulated content, Comstock deliberately takes on the division between art and pornography and his films provide a bountiful example to explore the construction of this division. This chapter will explore how the interconnectedness of these film genres fractures the established boundaries between pornography and legitimized forms of film featuring sex. Because both traditional documentary and pornographic films are invested in providing their audiences with cathartic pleasure through having a greater knowledge of the Other, I posit that both genres are implicated in the continual othering of black women's sexuality within visual media. These intertwined goals exemplify how the imago of black sexuality acts as a constant visual disruption within film. Through examining two Comstock films featuring self-identified lesbian couples—of which one is black—I elucidate the complications involved in crafting a livable space for explicit performances of black women's sexuality in productions that center sex as their narrative driving force.

INTENTIONALITY AND THE MEDIATION OF AUTHENTICITY

"To dismiss these 'dirty parts' as gratuitous—as not part of the cultural story of the history of movies—is to fail to write the formal and cultural history of those moving pictures which have sometimes been the most moving."[3]

At first glance, the alignment of documentary and pornographic film would seem impetuous. After all, documentary films are held in high regard as "'discourses of sobriety' that include science, economics, politics, and history—discourses that claim to

describe the 'real,' to tell the truth."[4] Pornographic films, on the other hand, are frequently referred to as meaningless smut featuring stereotypically beautiful bodies performing degrading sexual acts (almost always to women) for pay. Both genres, however, claim to offer an objective truth to their viewers. Documentaries, whether released in the cinema or on television, often resist the criticism lauded at reality television and the fiction of other productions because their structure professes to giving viewers *nothing but the truth*. Pornography shares this objective by the use of advertisements that brand it "as the cinema which reveals all that is normally hidden…claiming to screen the bare truth of its chosen subject—the physical career of desire."[5] In service of showcasing this uncensored picture of reality, pornography and documentary films are invested in reasserting the primacy of uneasy social truths customarily proscribed from the public arena. This mindset also imbibes directors with a sense that their work is necessarily educational or therapeutic for viewers and implies a belief that their work must be "raise[d] up…to a more sophisticated or refined notion of what *is*."[6]

Consequently, these films mask their aim to arouse or persuade viewers toward a specific action or point-of-view through a dependence on realism "framed by an idealistic impetus" of exposing the truth.[7] The intended response to such films can range from inspiring the audience to replicate scenes for ultimate sexual satisfaction (*Deep Throat*, dir. Gerard Damiano, 1972) or to call their political representatives in outrage of an unresolved national controversy (i.e., *Inside Job*, dir. Charles H. Ferguson, 2010).

Spurring such reactions within viewers requires both films genres to establish and maintain belief in the authenticity of their subject matter. In pornography, such authenticity relies on whether or not the actors (specifically cis-gendered women) are faking it.[8] In documentary, such authenticity relies on whether or not the filmmaker can convince viewers "that there's unmediated truth here [that] was not scripted because the materials are 'found in nature.'"[9] Thus, documentary and pornographic films employ a form of realism that "make[s] claims about verisimilitude, the putative adequation of a fiction to the brute facticity of the world, [and] assume[s] that realism is not only possible (and empirically verifiable) but also desirable."[10] The dysfunctions of realism within pornography has troubled this presumption often enough that one could argue realism is no longer an objective of pornography. The mainstreaming of amateur pornography as an apparent solution to this loss of realism stymies this assumption, however.

The similarities between both genres' objective of showcasing the real are further cemented upon recognition that the technology and techniques utilized in their production are nearly identical. In her explanation of how films can be used as political tools and entertainment, Claire Johnston asserts:

> The tools and techniques of cinema themselves, as part of reality, are an expression of the prevailing ideology: they are not neutral, as many 'revolutionary' film-makers appear to believe. It is idealist mystification to believe that 'truth' can be captured by the camera or that the conditions of a film's production (e.g. a film made collectively by women) can *of itself* reflect the conditions of its production. This is mere utopianism: new meaning has to *be manufactured* within the text of the film. The camera was developed in order to accurately reproduce reality and safeguard the bourgeois notion of realism which was being replaced in painting.[11]

Johnston's criticism exposes fallacy of positivistic knowledge production within both documentary and pornographic film. In other words, images do not exist in a vacuum but are imbued with layers of meaning—conscious and unconscious—from the moment we first observe them. Unlike the concept of Platonic Forms, there is no ideal, isolated object upon which these images are derivatively based.[12] Images, especially moving images, then, have historical baggage and are "screened not only by the [manufacturer] but also by the selecting, distorting [individual]."[13]

Her argument is also similar to Linda Williams' contention that cinema's origins emerge in a moment when "social, psychic, and technological [regimes of power] are working together to channel the scientific discovery of bodily motion into new forms of knowledge and pleasure."[14] In this sense, the images crafted within pornography and documentary can never be neutral as they are informed by each film's primary producers (specifically the director and editor), the persons within the film, its audience, and the cultural histories of cinema and the film's subject matter. Toby Miller keenly observes that "documentaries marshal systems of representation to encourage a point of view about something."[15] The implications of this are considerable when it comes to films that pronounce themselves as the definitive rendering on a subject. The viewpoint presented is necessarily limited by what is often the culturally dominant perspective on a subject. With this perspective, associated cultural biases additionally shape the construction and reading of the text. That some filmmakers in both genres deliberately exploit this results in them (as opposed to the genre itself) being designated as biased (i.e. Michael Moore and Rocco Siffredi).

Nonetheless, Miller's further comments on the mediated gaze of documentary also inform my understanding of the gaze of pornography and supplement my view of both genres as interconnected:

> But any text that relates an event is narrated. It is told from somewhere, by someone. And it is inherently representational. The documentary transforms its object into a spectacle of sound and image that draws on signs from the fictive and social worlds. Just as advertisements engage the view in a socioeconomic match between stories and human action, the documentary more generally is a personal and public artifact. Fictional and factual protocols become tropes of production and reception, as filmmakers and viewers draw on intersecting textual norms to make and decipher meaning."[16]

Miller posits that the boundary between fiction and non-fiction texts is not stringent. By asserting that documentaries transform an object instead of merely displaying it, Miller reminds us that the reliance on vision as an unbiased guide is a misconception—one which also fails to account for differential views within a film's audience. Reliance on the visual is what also allows these films to mask their tropic nature and their intentionality to arouse specific emotions within audiences. The excessiveness of this arousal further cements documentary's closeness to pornography.[17]

Arousing the audience through displays of the real, then, is the concrete goal of both documentary and pornographic films. While the latter readily acknowledges this as a generic feature, documentary films masquerade this target under the guise of education. This guise also hides a more insidious feature of documentary films according to Jill Godmillow:

> …the traditional documentary enables viewers to have the coherence, manageability, and often the moral order of their lives reaffirmed, while simultaneously allowing them to feel that they're interested in other classes, other peoples' tragedies, other countries' crises. By producing their subjects as heroic

> and allowing us to be glad for their victories, or by producing them as tragic and allowing us to weep, the audience experiences itself as not implicated, exempt from the responsibility either to act or even to consider the structures of their own situation.[18]

Thus, traditional documentaries are crafted to present a subject, a conflict or hardship that affects the subject in some critical manner, and offer a resolution or sense that the subject has or will overcome those difficulties to better themselves. Through this narrative structure, audiences are seemingly never challenge to understand how larger ideological forces (outside of the immediate systems film subjects may face) contribute to the dialogic problem or the subject and filmmaker's view of the subject. Likewise, mainstream pornography is structured to keep viewers in the sensational moment on screen, not compel them to think about why the presence of explicit sex in film negates its cultural merit. Consequently, the audience's feeling of conclusion (and eventual absolution) is shaped to emerge as a pleasurable experience akin to the sexual pleasure pornography presumes its viewers will experience upon conclusion of the film. Those pleasures emerge in deviating ways however.

In pornography, pleasure emerges from a desire to emulate the bodies and/or actions on screen because they reflect dominant views of proper and taboo forms of sexual intercourse and the viewer's own sexual desires. Documentaries instill pleasure differently, relying on viewers to approach the work from an ethnocentric perspective. Godmillow emphasizes that:

> the audience is invited to believe: "I learn from this film because I care about the issues and people involved and want to understand them better; therefore, I am a compassionate member of society, not part of the problem described, but part of the solution." […] The real contract [of traditional documentaries] enables the

> viewer to feel: "thank God that's not me." Thank God that's not me, saddled with two Downs syndrome children and on welfare, or dying of AIDS, or downsized out of a job, and, in the historical film, thank God that's not me who had to send all three sons from our struggling Illinois family farm to fight to their death on the battlefield of Gettysburg.[19]

Thus, the audience's pleasure in watching the documentary is wholly cathartic and disavows the filmmaker or audience's voyeuristic ethnocentricity in wanting to know more about the Other. The masking of this latter point would seem to contradict the aforementioned educational function of documentaries. Yet, I contend that these functions are complementary in service of documentary's larger goal of detailing the truth.

In short, documentary and pornographic film share the following traits:

1. An investment asserting their construction of reality as authentic through masking the filmmaker's gaze as unmediated truth.
2. Utilization of the positivistic power structuring camera's gaze (and the power of the visual) to buttress the facticity of their production.
3. A reliance on the audience to share the filmmaker's voyeuristic impulse to comprehensively know the Other and the pleasure in temporarily slumming in the latter's space.

The confluence of these traits becomes prominent when the subjects in both genres are queer. In the introduction to their anthology on queer, gay, and lesbian documentaries, Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs describe what is at stake in filmic portrayals of queer individuals:

> That so many spectators, when (if) they see these films, find them "queer" in the sense of weird, odd, or perverse necessarily speaks to the representational regime that queer/lesbian/gay documentaries must negotiate, where reality, truth, and valued representations are always a priori, and usually implicitly, heterosexual.[20]

By acknowledging the fundamental appeal to truth and reality in documentaries, Holdmund and Fuchs are attentive to the hyper-representational scrutiny individuals of non-dominant groups are subjected to on a daily basis. When individuals in such groups are centered within popular texts, they risk becoming the prevailing construction of what it means to be *that group* or to have *that ability* or to be *afflicted in that way*. This tendency can be magnified when those individuals embody multiple non-dominant attributes and are located in a region culturally mitigated as subordinate.

Such complexities are what make Comstock's choice of filming two very different lesbian couples so compelling. One is black, fairly young, and from the southern United States, the other is presumably white, significantly older than the former, and located in the northern United States. In light of these ruminations, I now turn to Comstock's two releases to explore how his film structure attempts to rearticulate the spectrum of black women's sexual desires and similarly reinscribes the primitiveness of black sexuality in the absence of black bodies.

PEOPLING LIVES WITH REAL SEX

There is a standard format for films produced under the "Real People, Real Life, Real Sex" line. Each film includes an interview with the couple that precedes their full length sex scene. Though the interview segment comprises half of each film's average screen time of nearly fifty minutes, the amount of actual interview footage can be eight

times greater than what ends up on screen.[21] Instead of claiming to offer a typical unadulterated view of sex, Comstock "put[s] [his] materials and techniques in service of ideas."[22] He aims to show "how much fun it is to have sex with someone when you're in love [in] hopes that [his] films might help start an evening off in the right direction, might help set the tone for a night of lusty, lovingly carnal revelry."[23] Summarily, Comstock's films situate sex between committed partners as the highest form sexual intimacy—a conjecture which implicates sexual encounters between such couples as ideally representative of the reality of sex that most depictions thoughtlessly miss.

Though this is not the same as stating real sex is a pure product of monogamy, Comstock's objectives still rely on the classic romance narrative mentioned in the previous chapter.[24] His assertion advances the idea that chemistry between real couples cannot be reduced to mere sexual attraction and necessarily has to involve other wholesome interests (or a fuller sense of love). Thus, casual sexual encounters, even those between established friends, are never tantamount to those between committed couples. Within this ideal, however, the temporality of a relationship would seem to have a comparable effect on the level of intimacy between partners (a point I will further elaborate below). Nonetheless, Comstock's appeal to love as the generator of real intimacy is explicit in each film—an overt reflection that goes against the traditional functions of both documentary and pornographic film.

This is the only supposition of the three listed above that Comstock somewhat successfully subverts. His reliance on love as the determinate factor of real sex, however, limits the nature of his constructed truth despite Comstock's divulgence of his intent for

viewers. Consequently, his intentionality is what also stymies his ability to move beyond the remaining two functions of documentary and pornographic film. By filming committed couples, Comstock appears to repudiate the neutrality of the moving image stating, "I'm not a good enough filmmaker to create the illusion of people enjoying themselves, I can only hope to capture it when it happens."[25] Referencing the illusionary aspects of filmmaking, Comstock situates himself against mainstream documentary and pornography. Yet, his desire to "capture [real sex] when it happens" belies his lingering belief in the visual as somewhat objective and seemingly absolves him of the reasons one might be drawn to his films.

Equally, Comstock's desire that those who view his films are people who are looking for titillation oddly subverts and reinforces the knowledge of the other. In other words, he centers the voyeurism involved in creating and releasing such films at the same time as he films the other side so to speak.[26] That he does so also seems to work towards absolving him from contextualizing prevalent cultural prescriptions of his film subjects; this effect brings about the question of whether the audience should expect such efforts from a film whose only stated aim is to insight sexual activity in the viewer. While I understand how trivial this concern may seem for "purely erotic content," I believe Comstock's own goal of making documentaries featuring actual sex as a way of disrupting the art/pornography obligates his work to contextualize the complex negotiations of how he produces each project—even more so when his commonality with the subjects is very limited. That he chooses not to is ultimately why *Ashley and Kisha*

(2007) reads as a stagnant, immature portrait of a lesbian couple in comparison to *Brett and Melanie* (2011).

A TALE OF TWO RELATIONSHIPS

In a number of reviews, *Ashley and Kisha: Finding the Right Fit* (2007) is hailed as a refreshing treatment of a contemporary African-American relationship and has been screened at a number of international LGBTQ film festivals including Out on Film Atlanta and the Israel International LGBT Film Festival. The documentary film follows the budding relationship between Ashley, who is open about her sexuality and sexual prowess, and Kisha, who is sexually modest and comes to realize she is a lesbian through her attraction to Ashley. *Brett and Melanie* (2011) features a butch/femme couple who have been in a relationship for a while. Throughout the interview, they discuss their view on butch/femme and top/bottom dynamics, feelings on coming out and familial support, and the beginnings of their relationship.

Upon my initial viewing, I was surprised at how *Ashley and Kisha*'s narrative pales in comparison to *Brett and Melanie*'s. Though this could due to how much both couples were willing to share with Comstock, his crafting of the narrative exemplifies my earlier claim that his appeal to love between committed couples as the indicator of real sex is necessarily limited by time. For instance, the main narrative of Ashley and Kisha's interview is more focused on the latter's coming out story and how the couple met. Brett and Melanie's discussion of coming out takes up significantly less time and the majority of the interview consists of them discussing the progression of their relationship and the complexities of the butch/femme and top/bottom dynamics. If Ashley and Kisha shared

similar discussions, the viewer is never made aware of this. Instead their arrangement as butch (Ashley) and femme (Kisha), though never explicitly stated, is fixed through the narrative structure and the framing of their sex scene. This arrangement also reliably prefigures them as mere replicators of heteronormative constructions of lesbian couples. Similarly, their geographic location in the southern United States in perspective with Brett and Melanie's location in the northern United States cements this cinematic construction. The importance of this additional framing is highlighted by Chris Cagle's description of dominate constructions of the queer South in the U.S.:

> I have chosen an equally perilous phrase—"imaging the queer South"—for the first half of the title not out of a faith in the existence, much less the knowability, of a single queer South. Rather, I wish to emphasize the primary means through which Southern and lesbian and gay filmic representations continue to be understood both popularly and academically: the good (true) image versus the bad (false) image.[27]

Though Comstock endeavors to show real sex unfiltered, his construction of *Ashley and Kisha* plays into these constructions—one that is further exacerbated by their locality. Conversely, Brett and Melanie's location in the northern United States, San Francisco to be specific, exemplifies them as a more productive lesbian couple because "mainstream national gay culture frequently associates urbanity with the North and backwardness with the South."[28]

On a related note, Brett and Melanie's explicit declaration of their relationship as embodying the butch (Brett)/femme (Melanie) construct does not limit the dynamics of their relationship and in fact expands its typical definition as hyper-replication of traditional heterosexual relationships. When they first met Melanie was looking for a

bottom and Brett was looking for a top. Through the course of the interview they explain how both of these dynamics have shaped their relationship over time. In another instance, Brett and Melanie often discuss their relationship as more than sex, remarking on the common spirituality between them and how that helps them find balance and deal with the other's annoying habits. This type of discussion never arises within Ashley and Kisha. In fact, no lengthy discussion aside from the different sex acts they have tried and how Ashley continually pursued Kisha until she finally said yes to sex ever occurs throughout the interview. There are brief moments when Ashley speaks about having to keep previous relationships in the dark because her partners did not want to be out and why she is refuses to "hide" her sexuality. As interesting and as problematic as these assertions were, it appears Comstock never follows up on them in the interview. Thus, these compelling insights into their relationship are reduced to mere sound bites.

Consequently, *Ashley and Kisha* comes across as a necessary spectacle where their multiple identifications with otherness (blackness and queerness) frames the voyeuristic gaze of the couple and the audience's pleasure more so than in *Brett and Melanie*. Blackness, then, becomes the signifier of real sexuality between the films. This link is reinforced through the differing film synopsis on the video package and the website. On the former, Comstock deploys blackness as a marker of real sex in the film's description on his website: "A classic story of: boi meets high femme girl; boi wears big, black, strap-on; boi and girl share a spirited romp within toys and each other."[29] On the actual packaging this statement is nowhere to be found. Though the reason for the difference is not known, its appearance is problematic because it reinscribes the

stereotype of blackness as inherently sexual and inserts the sexual prowess of the black phallus in absence of an actual phallus or black body.

Despite Comstock's call on Shine Louise Houston, renowned director of the Crash Pad Series and Jessica Holter of the Punany Poets, for help in making sure *Ashley and Kisha* found its audience, his view of black women's sexuality not only constrains the construction of black lesbian sexuality, but frames such relationships as infantile in comparison to white lesbian sexuality.[30] Though Ashley and Kisha do equally display desire for each other during the actual sex scene, the conversational lead up to it force the viewer to perceive their encounter as just another notch in their sexual escapade belt. The struggle with such a presumption is that while such an admission of sexual desire would showcase Ashley and Kisha as thoughtful agents of their desire, it comes off as impetuous through the Comstock's framing.

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[1] Tony Comstock, "Real Sex," *The Art and Business of Making Erotic Films* (blog), October 12, 2006 (7:39 a.m.), http://www.comstockfilms.com/blog/tony/2006/10/12/real-sex-2/.

[2] Comstock is a tongue-in-cheek pseudonym eponymously crafted in recognition of the main proponent of the Comstock Act, Anthony Comstock (U.S. Statute 598; http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=017/llsl017.db&recNum=0639).

[3] Linda Williams, "Introduction," *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 7.

[4] Jill Godmillow and Ann-Louise Shapiro, "How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?" *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (1997): 80.

[5] Dennis Giles, "Pornographic Space: The Other Place," *Film: Historical-Theoretical Speculations: The 1977 Film Studies Annual, Part Two* (Pleasantville: Redgrave, 1977), 53.

[6] Godmillow and Shapiro, 81.

[7] Tanya Krzywinska, "Formal Conventions of Cinematic Sex," *Sex and the Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 48.

[8] In *Hard Core*, Linda Williams argues that pornography is invested in unmasking the truth of women's pleasure through capturing visual proof of their orgasm because women cannot produce the truth of their pleasure like men, who ejaculate semen when they orgasm. Such an argument has been efficient until the advent of specialized pornography focusing on women's ejaculations. Moreover, her argument is further complicated by alternative/feminist pornography where couplings are not always distinguishably "male-on-female."

[9] Godmillow and Shapiro, 83.

[10] Robert Stam, "The Question of Realism: Introduction," *Film and Theory: An Anthology* eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 224.
[11] Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 36.
[12] C. D. C. Reeve, "Introduction," *Plato on Love* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006).
[13] Dennis Giles, "Pornographic Space: The Other Place," *Film: Historical-Theoretical Speculations: The 1977 Film Studies Annual, Part Two* (Pleasantville: Redgrave, 1977), 54.
[14] Linda Williams, "Prehistory: The *Frenzy of the Visible*," *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 45.
[15] Toby Miller, "The Truth is a Murky Path, Technologies of Citizenship and the Visible," *Technologies of the Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular* Media (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1998), 183.
[16] Ibid., 184.
[17] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 267-281.
[18] Godmillow and Shapiro, 87.
[19] Ibid., 83.
[20] Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, "Introduction," *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), 4.
[21] For more on Comstock's filmmaking process, see the commentary on *Damon and Hunter: Doing it Together* (2006) or Comstock's blog *The Art and Business of Making Erotic Films*,http://www.comstockfilms.com/blog/tony.
[22] Godmillow and Shapiro, 83.
[23] Comstock, "Tell us Your Own Love Story," *The Art and Business of Making Erotic Films* (blog), February 26, 2005 (11:34 a.m.), http://www.comstockfilms.com/blog/tony/2005/02/26/tell-us-your-own-love-story/.
[24] Comstock, "Closing the Circle," *The Art and Business of Making Erotic Films* (blog), February 28, 2005 (2:47 p.m.), http://www.comstockfilms.com/blog/tony/2005/02/28/closing-the-circle/.
[25] Comstock, "The First Post," *The Art and Business of Making Erotic Films* (blog), January 27, 2005 (10:56 a.m.), http://www.comstockfilms.com/blog/tony/2005/01/27/the-first-post/.
[26] He further inscribes this contradiction within the very format of the films. To disabuse from presuming the separation of interview and sex indicates a distinct separation between intimacy and sex, Comstock weaves clips of actual sex throughout the interview. Such methods serve two purposes: to act as a visual form of foreplay before the full scene commences, and correspondingly, to remind the audience of their complicity in and submission to his (and their own) voyeuristic gaze.
[27] Chris Cagle, "Imaging the Queer South: Southern Lesbian and Gay Documentary," *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), 30.
[28] Ibid., 33-34.
[29] "Brett and Melanie: Boi Meets Girl," accessed, January 29, 2012, http://shop.comstockfilms.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&cpath=12&products_id=15.
[30] Comstock, "Am I a Punany Poet?" *The Art and Business of Making Erotic Films* (blog), April 23, 2005 (4:37 p.m.), http://www.comstockfilms.com/blog/tony/2005/04/23/am-i-a-punany-poet/.

Chapter 4: Conclusion – Refract, Refuse, Recycle?

> *The production of sexually explicit images of and by women of color can generate race panic, in the sense of the sex panics of the 1980s when anticensorship and antiporn platforms collided and challenged feminist community and discourse. That is, within a racial critique, sexual representations of racial subjects supposedly dangerously reify fantasies of Asian women as always sexually available. Thus, within this framework, Asian American feminist filmmakers representing sex as both painful and pleasurable can be seen as self-indulgent, as engaging in a form of selfexoticization. And for pro-sex feminists, the discussion of racial subjugation in sex can be seen as regressive and part of a problematic moralistic, puritan crusade.*
> - Celine Parreñas Shimizu, "Sex Acts: Two Meditations on Race and Sexuality"[1]

This excerpt from a dialog between Shimizu and Helen Lee highlights the impasse where *Chasing Afrodite* found its genesis. Rather than rehash the contentious arguments within this debate, this project looked towards black women's continued presence in visual performances of non-simulated sex as significant in reformulating contemporary understandings of black women's enactment and perception of their sexuality. Throughout this examination, I have deliberately used pornography and erotic interchangeably because the use of binary distinctions surrounding non-simulated sexual images is ineffectual. In wake of the significant popularity of autobiographies by sex workers (i.e. *Confessions of a Video Vixen* by Karrine Steffans and *How to Make Love to a Porn Star* by Jenna Jameson), books like the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012) series, and sex advice columns in mass publications, this distinction becomes even further inattentive to our contemporary moment. I find Linda Williams' comments in her introduction to *Porn Studies* (2004) very instructive in this regard: "feminist debates about whether pornography should exist at all have paled before the simple fact that still and moving-image pornographies have become fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture."[2]

Shimizu and Lee's dialog is instructive in reminding scholars in feminist, black, performance, and film studies that women of color's sexuality is too often rendered in terms of productivity, frivolity, spectacularity, and danger only—a rendering which stifles discourse and marks women's continued performance in sex work or sexually explicit performances unintelligible. Because very few scholars outside of those mentioned in this project consider explicit sex as worthy of serious, conscious inquiry, I explored films featuring these performances by black women as a step towards dismantling the limited scope of black women's agency in such enactments. I similarly demonstrated that though these performances were dynamic and resourceful in understanding how dominant constructions of black women's sexuality has been refracted, refused, and recycled in film, these iterations are not without their own complications and limitations. Thus, I present this examination not as a prescriptive but as an intervention to be expanded by further examples and articulations of the dismantling effects of black women's public performance of sex.

Both *Afrodite Superstar* and *Ashley and Kisha* offer a distinct re-imagining of black women's view of their sexuality as a refusal of the stereotypical conceptions proffered in mass media. Yet, negligible responses to *Ashley and Kisha* and *Afrodite Superstar* in academic and popular commentaries are noteworthy. Possible reasons for this silence are numerous including the lack of wider publicity for them in comparison to Dennis Dortch's *It's a Good Day to be Black and Sexy* (2008); Dortch's film was screened at the Sundance Film Festival and given a limited theatrical release nationwide. Neither *Ashley and Kisha* nor *Afrodite* received the level of publicity or exposure of

Black and Sexy, which most likely bolstered the film's noteworthiness by popular and scholastic critics. A third reason for this silence, and one I believe to be fairly significant is that both *Ashley and Kisha* and *Afrodite Superstar* deliberately showcase non-simulated sex to arouse their audiences. The discomfort in looking at such frank representations of sexual activity by black bodies seems obvious, but designating the discomfort as a mere form of sexual conservativism would be too simplistic. This is not to say that black audiences, or rather audiences of black performances are naturally prudish, but to acknowledge that preferences for conservative sexual practices are not limited by race. One key factor in this discomfort distills from the cycle of respectability politics which still informs the general sensibility of most African Americans: violence.

Despite the homogenized aesthetic of respectability politics, part of the reason for its implementation and continuance is due to its use as a protectionist strategy. The visceral reality for many African Americans post-Civil War and well into the twentieth century was one of terror, violence, rape, and death. Thus, the logic behind presenting oneself as a moral, proper, de-sexualized person was one way to ward off potential confrontations ignited by the performance of an improper public demeanor. The prolongation of this logic has been necessary because of the multiple acts of violence inflicted upon women by individuals within, outside, adjacent, and straddling the classification of the African American community. Yet, knowledge of this violence should not preclude black bodies', in this case black women, attempts to refute, refract, and rephrase public and cultural conceptions of their subjectivity from scholarly attention.

[1] Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Helen Lee, "Sex Acts: Two Meditations on Race and Sexuality," *Signs* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1391.
[2] Linda Williams, "Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction," *Porn Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1.

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