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**Black Princess Housewives and Single Ladies:
Reneé Cox's Housewife Enactments and
The Politics of Twenty-First Century Wealthy Black Womanhood**

Committee:

Shirley Thompson, Supervisor

Elizabeth Engelhardt

Deborah Paredez

Matt Richardson

Cherise Smith

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The Politics of Twenty-First Century Wealthy Black Womanhood**

by

Jacqueline Monique Smith, B.A. M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

**The University of Texas at Austin
May 2016**

Dedication

This dissertation, and more importantly, the spirit, struggle, and perseverance required to complete it, are dedicated to three important families: Patrick Smith, Patricia and Freddie Smith, and Theodore Francis, God-sent individuals who carried me through this process called graduate school. Thank you for giving me the *WILL* to finish the journey I started. And, in loving memory to Mellie Smith, Overdia Shelton, Isaac Shelton, Sr., Jessie Smith, and the many other elders and ancestors who nurtured and supported me while I journey in Austin. And lastly, to my other family, the saints in the Church of Christ, the great cloud of witnesses who helped me “run with endurance the race that was set before me.” Thank you for helping me press toward the goal.

Acknowledgements

Giving all honor, praise, and glory to God, the completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support of key individuals. I would like to first thank my dissertation supervisor, Shirley Thompson, and my dissertation committee, Elizabeth Engelhardt, Matt Richardson, Deborah Paredez and Cherise Smith. Thank you for sticking with me during this process and giving me the feedback I needed to finish this project. I would also like to thank the faculty in The Department of American Studies at UT Austin, especially Janet Davis, Cary Cordova, and Steven Hoelscher. Additionally, this project has been generously supported and nurtured by the following individuals: Omi Osun Joni Jones, and the women of The Austin Project, Edmund T. Gordon, Stephanie Lange, Sara Weber, Nhi Lieu, Omise' eke Tinsley, Lilly Laux, Elissa Underwood Marek, Tara Kohn, Irene Garza, Amanda E. Gray, Courtney Morris, Peggy Brunache, the original crew at the Warfield Center, and all of the members at the East Side Church of Christ in Austin, Texas.

Special thanks and love goes to Samina Byrd, my bestie, Rose Salseda, my writing partner and confidant, and Cristina Garcia-Lopez, my buddy in the American Studies Department, for your countless hugs, words of affirmation, continued prayers, and love. Thank you also to Yvonne Smith, Allyson and Kelvin Weathers, Mama Shelton, Papa, Uncle Chuck and Aunt Lois, my second set of parents, Uncle Charlie, Aunt Yvette, and all of my other uncles, aunts, and cousins.

To Patrick, Mom, and Dad, thank you for your unconditional love and support during this process and for always reassuring me that with God's help and the assistance of family and regular trips to the Bay Area, all things are possible. Finally, thank you to Theodore Francis for being an exemplary model of Christ's love. Your ability to love, care

for, sacrifice, and nurture has saved me more times than you will ever know. Thank you for being my other half; I love you for life.

**Black Princess Housewives and Single Ladies:
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Jacqueline Monique Smith, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Shirley Thompson

This dissertation explores representations of upper-class black womanhood in Reneé Cox's *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* photography series. It theorizes the significance of Cox's artwork to contemporary discussions and representations of black womanhood in the dominant visual field by examining the ways that such images are informed by, and in conversation with, historical representations of the black female body. I argue that the photographs serve as visual remnants that document and preserve Cox's performative enactments as various upper-class black women personae. Cox employs the genre of performance, the medium of her own body, and photographic technology, to interrogate the cultural and discursive imaging of the aestheticized black female body in twenty-first century popular culture. The artist's performative enactments engage with historic and contemporary conceptualizations of black womanhood in the dominant visual field by exploring the marketability and desirability of the black female body in U.S. society alongside images and discourses in which black female subjects are rendered aberrant and dangerous. The project, then, situates Reneé Cox as an important black woman artist and cultural producer whose persona-performances highlight black women artists' engagement with, and ongoing contributions to, discussions about black

womanhood. Shaped foundationally by black feminist ideology and scholarship about postfeminism, *Black Princess Housewives and Single Ladies: Renée Cox's Housewife Enactments and the Politics of Twenty-First Century Black Womanhood* situates *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* photographs as important cultural texts that register black women's resourceful ways of naming and theorizing their own and other black women's experiences. This dissertation aims to contribute to, in some small part, black women's ongoing intellectual, activist, and artistic efforts to prioritize, celebrate, and honor black women's life experiences and the extraordinary strategies they use to speak their truths.

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INTRODUCTION

I think one of the things that's important about my work is that it's direct but it's also multilayered.¹

-Renée Cox

[Black women] photographers...have expanded the historical meaning of portraiture by turning the camera on their own bodies, as well as by turning the page of the family photo album, thus creating a document about themselves and society. In effect, they become storytellers whose medium is photobiography.²

-Deborah Willis

Black Princess Housewives and Single Ladies: Renée Cox's Housewife

Enactments and The Politics of Twenty-First Century Wealthy Black Womanhood takes as its objective to understand the socio-cultural significance of Renée Cox's *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* photographic series. In particular, it examines Cox's strategies of performance via her adoption of several different affluent black woman personae. I maintain that Cox adopts various personae to represent and explore her experiences as a wealthy black woman artist and to interrogate the cultural saliency of visual images depicting upper class black womanhood. Cox is a well-known visual artist whose work has appeared in such galleries as The Studio Museum of Harlem, Robert Miller Gallery, and the Whitney Museum of Art. To date, however, Cox's *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* photography series, one of few contemporary photography series to address upper-class black womanhood by a black-woman artist, has received minimal attention in

¹ Artress White, "Fragmented Souls: Call and Response with Renée Cox," in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 46.

² Deborah Willis, "Women's Stories/Women's Photobiographies" In *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies*, edited by Diane Neumaier. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 84.

academic and artistic communities.³ The dissertation responds to and addresses these absences by arguing that the photographs document Cox's strategies as photographer-artist and photographed subject, to restage, revise, and at times challenge, popular perceptions and stereotypes associated with upper-class black womanhood. Shaped foundationally by Black Feminist ideology, *Black Princess Housewives and Single Ladies* draws from multiple scholarly disciplines to examine Cox's wealthy black women personae. To interpret Cox's performative and visual engagement with current and past discourses about the in/visibility of wealthy black womanhood in the dominant visual field, I employ and rely on interdisciplinary methods of analysis available within the discipline of American Studies, including visual theory, feminist studies, specifically black feminist theory and theories of postfeminism, performance studies, and critical race theory.⁴ Drawing from and engaging with these critical methods, I suggest that the photographs in *Bougies* offer diverse and, at times, conflicting narratives about the

³ In addition to Cox's work, see Elnora W. Frazier's photography collection at the Library of Congress, Lorraine O'Grady's *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* performances, (1980-1983); Sheila Pree Bright's *Suburbia* (2006); Carrie Mae Weems, *Not Manet's Type* (1997) and Deborah Willis' *Michelle Obama: The First Lady in Photographs* (2009) as examples of Black women artists who have explored the complexities of black womanhood and middle or upper-class socio-economic status.

⁴ Feminist media studies scholars such as Angela McRobbie, Diana Negra, and Kimberly Springer identify postfeminism as a socio-cultural climate in which activism and the critique of patriarchy and structural inequality, central tenets in the feminist social movements of the twentieth century, are portrayed as passé and unnecessary in the United States and Europe. McRobbie, Negra and Springer, among others, argue that contemporary depictions of womanhood in dominant popular culture appropriate and distort the feminist meaning of "choice" as it historically referenced women's abilities to choose and attain political, economic, social, and physical independence to a language of "choice" that specifically entails "the formulation of an expressive personal lifestyle and the ability for women to [choose] the right commodities" associated with taste and glamour. See Diana Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4. See Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: Sage Publications, 2009); Kimberly Springer, "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Women: African American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil-Rights Popular Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 249-276.

aestheticized and affluent black female body, as represented in dominant popular culture. Such analyses attend to the ways that Cox's photographs acknowledge and resist controlling images of black womanhood, while also, in other instances, affirm and seemingly reinforce denigrating and stereotypical perceptions about black womanhood. As Daphne Brooks aptly described in her signal work, *Bodies in Dissent*, my study is also "inspired by the advances of black feminist theorists who have opened up new ways of considering the representational politics of the black [female] body in the cultural imaginary."⁵ To this end, *Black Princess Housewives and Single Ladies: Renée Cox's Housewife Enactments and The Politics of Twenty-First Century Wealthy Black Womanhood* endeavors to keep alive and contribute to black feminist ideology, scholarship, and activism.

With this goal in mind, the purpose of this dissertation is three-fold. The first purpose of this project is to situate Cox as a valuable cultural producer whose photographic corpus importantly contributes to discussions about the representations and lived realities of black women in general and black upper-class womanhood in particular. This project also endeavors to document and problematize the influence of postfeminist discourses on images of black womanhood. To this end, I argue that Cox's personae enactments simultaneously *reify* and *challenge* postfeminism's celebration and marketing of affluent black women subjects. Examining the ambiguities and inconsistencies that emerge in Cox's performances allows for analyses about the socio-cultural currency of

⁵ Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. (Durham: Duke University Press): 2006, 7.

popular representations of wealthy black womanhood and provides a context to survey the ways that such images have been used to discount economic, social, and political inequality in the United States. Such an analysis privileges and celebrates black women's artistic interventions in the dominant field of vision and highlights black women cultural producers like Cox, contributions to the foregrounding and celebration of their own and other black women's experiences. The project seeks most broadly to highlight Cox's employment of the photographic medium and use of embodied performance to name and validate her own and other black women's experiential lives, particularly the experiences and unique positionalities of women of color living in the United States. It suggests that Cox's performative enactments as the upper-class black housewife identify the political and socio-cultural saliency of visual representations depicting wealthy or upper class black women and the limitations of wealth for securing political, psychic, and economic freedom for all black women.⁶

Each chapter centers on Cox's strategies of performance, that is, the use of her body, altering of environments, and staging of various props to performatively embody a range of stereotypes, experiences, and representations associated with wealthy black womanhood in the United States. While my dissertation addresses broad assertions and inquiries about Cox's character performances as an affluent black woman, and the ways

⁶ I rely on the terminology of enacting and enactments to highlight Cox's use of her own body to perform varying black woman personae. The language of enacting is derived from Cherise Smith's scholarship about Adrian Piper and Anna Deavere Smith, among others, who employ the genre of performance, photography, and their physical bodies to explore multiple positionalities related to black womanhood. See Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 17-19.

that such performances engage with images of wealthy black womanhood in dominant popular culture, I seek to specifically answer several key questions in the dissertation: 1) In what ways are Cox's fictional enactments of upper-class black womanhood related to current and past representations of black womanhood in dominant popular culture?; 2) How does Cox use the figure of the upper-class black housewife to explore black women's experiences of "social, political, and cultural alterity?"⁷ And, in what ways do the social conditions of marginality create opportunities for transgressive practices that explore, and at times, challenge, hegemonic conceptualizations of idealized black womanhood?; 3) In what ways does Cox use her body, both the corporeal body and her photographic oeuvre, to make visible what is often invisible in discussions and representations of black womanhood?; and 4) How does Cox, using each photograph, and in each grouping of photographs, create visual narratives in which the black female body has voice and movement in the field of signification?

To understand the saliency of Cox's *Bougies* series, I analyze her strategies as both the photographer-artist composing the photographs and as the artist assuming various character-personae. I rely significantly on Performance Studies scholar, Diana Taylor's concept of scenario. According to Taylor, scenarios are portable frameworks for understanding the transmission of cultural knowledge. Scenarios, as "meaning-making paradigms [that] structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes," include features familiar in literary analysis such as narrative, plot, and scene, while also

⁷ Daphne Brooks uses the language of "alterity" to describe black women's presences within the field of signification and the ways that their "movements" critique and disassemble the condition(s) of oppression." See Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 5-7.

taking into account “corporeal behaviors, such as gestures and attitudes,” aspects of embodied experience commonly excluded as culturally valued ways of knowing.⁸ The concept of scenario allows for an inclusion of and attention to the realm of embodied practices (verbal performances, nonverbal practices, gestures) and performances, usually thought of as “ephemeral [or] non-reproducible knowledges,” what Taylor defines as the “repertoire,” as well as an attention to those “enduring materials” capable of physical preservation (photographs, video, written texts, buildings), what she defines as the “archive.”⁹ Taylor argues that the paradigmatic system of the scenario illuminates the transference of knowledges that take place between “the archive” and “the repertoire.” The photographs in *Bougies*, as archival matter, are in fact the traces of Cox’s “repertoire practices” that is, the various performative tactics she uses to create her housewife and upper-class black woman enactments. The framework of the scenario, in addition to accounting for the transmission of knowledge via embodied practice and texts capable of physical preservation, importantly “conjures up past situations” and the many other versions of scenarios related to black womanhood, domesticity, and socioeconomic status.¹⁰ The scenario makes visible “the ghosts, the images, and the stereotypes” in other words, the many previous versions or iterations of the scenarios related to black womanhood, domesticity, un/forced migration, and photography.¹¹ I maintain that Cox’s photographs in *Bougies* are examples of this transference or relationship between the

⁸ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

⁹ Ibid, 19-20.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 28.

archive, her creation of the physical photographs, and her repertoire of practices, the once embodied and live performances where she staged her wealthy black woman characters.¹²

I have used select photographs, representative of the thematic content in the *Bougies* series and have grouped each photograph into one of three scenarios: a scenario of domesticity, a failed housewife scenario, and the single black woman traveling scenario. I suggest that each photograph is a “scene” in which Cox constructs as artist-photographer, a specific plot, theme, and upper-class black woman character persona. I view each individual photograph as a scene with its own storyline or script that helps make up the larger scenario or narrative framework for understanding Cox’s performances of upper-class black womanhood. Each image, then, is identified as a particular scene within the entire scenario that transmits multiple, and at times, competing narratives about upper-class black womanhood. I offer multiple readings and ways of *seeing* Cox’s personae performances using the “close-read method” to analyze each of the photographs.¹³ Reading the performances closely, I argue that the selected images offer multiple ways of knowing, interpreting, and thinking about upper-class black women’s lived experiences in the United States as well as the ways in which their experiences are visualized and represented in dominant popular culture. I approach each image with a similar set of questions. How do the images and personae-play performances convey and possibly reflect Cox’s personal experiences as a wealthy black

¹² Ibid, 19-21.

¹³ I rely on the “close-read method” adopted by Cherise Smith in *Enacting Others* to analyze Cox’s photographs in the *Bougies* series. The close-read method allows me to as Smith puts it, “analyze [Cox’s] performances and their remains (the photographs)” while attending to and examining the “social and political ramifications” of her persona-play performances. Smith, *Enacting Others*, 23.

woman? In what ways are Cox's personae enactments representative of her engagement with dominant culture's popular representation of affluent black womanhood? What is the relationship between domesticity, wealth and black womanhood, and how does Cox see these positionalities as interrelated and conflicting? How and why does Cox situate her character enactments within the home and construct a domestic sphere?¹⁴ And in what ways is her contemporary rendering of affluent black womanhood and domesticity related to the history of black women's willful and forced labor in domestic settings? This method of arranging the photographs allows me to attend to Cox's "conscious strategies of display" as performer and artist-photographer and to unsettle the many scripts at work in each of her images.¹⁵ Moreover, it takes into account Cox's adopting of *different* personae of upper-class black womanhood. For example, even when Cox adopts the persona of the housewife, as discussed in Chapter Two, she presents a different version of her housewife persona in the images analyzed in Chapter Three. In the photographs examined in the third chapter, Cox adopts the personae of a "failed" housewife who is unsuccessfully managing her physical appearance, home environments, and "domestic" duties. This method of analysis allows me to trace the thematic similarities between each individual photograph and to analyze the ways Cox's personae

¹⁴ My use of the term "domestic" is informed by Visual Studies scholar Laura Wexler's definition of domestic images as "images that may be—but need not be—representations of and for a so-called sphere of family life. Domestic images may also be configurations of familiar and intimate arrangements intended for the eyes of outsiders, the *heimlich* (private) as a kind of propaganda; or they may be metonymical references to unfamiliar arrangements, the *unheimlich* intended for domestic consumption. What matters is the use of the image to signify the domestic realm." See Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 21.

¹⁵ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 29.

performances engage with black women's past and contemporary experiences of domesticity.

Viewing each of the photographs as scenes within a larger scenario, the photographic grouping, I examine how Cox comports her body, styles her clothing, and positions her facial expression, all gestures frozen and preserved within the photograph. I also examine her strategies or artistic composition, that is, the ways she composes the photographs to reference and subvert the privileging of the white female body as a standard of idealized feminine beauty in dominant popular culture and Western Art. In addition, I attend to the ways that her performances as the upper-class black housewife might be understood in conversation with the discourses of postfeminism that allege that all women, regardless of race, class, sexuality, or ethnicity, have equal access to higher education, material wealth, and freedom from violence and patriarchy. This dissertation project importantly situates Cox's photographs from *Bougies* as texts that explore and celebrate black women's ways of knowing and suggests that black-woman authored epistemologies, in this case, Cox's unique personae-enactments, engage in and contribute to black women's practices of truth telling.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid, 20. Black feminism is the politics of celebrating and ensuring black women's physical, emotional, mental, psychic, and spiritual safety and well-being. It is foremost about relishing and acknowledging black women's significant contributions to the world, and ensuring and working towards black women and girls' safety and wellbeing in their environments and the valorization and acknowledgement of black women's intrinsic value. This politics is a commitment and lived engagement that celebrates black women's experiential lives by bringing attention to, looking for, and engaging in black women's stories about themselves and other black women. The objective of black feminist scholarship and those who identify as black feminists is the speaking about, witnessing to, and preserving of black women's life experiences. Even though this project does not name or seek to categorize Reneé Cox as a black feminist, or a feminist in general, it does situate Cox's photography and engagement with her own and other black women's lived experiences as examples that can be read as supporting the goals and values of black feminist scholarship and activism.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The first chapter entails a biographical study of Cox's career to situate her place with American Art, but perhaps more important to this project, her contributions as a black woman photographer to discussions about the representations of black women in the dominant vision field. This introductory chapter situates Cox within an artistic tradition of the 1990s, a historical moment in which the discourses of multiculturalism and identity politics fueled debates and intellectual exchange about African American artists' artistic production and the "politics" of making art as artists of African descent.¹⁷

The 1990s is also an important period of artistic production for black women artists. I situate Cox within a thriving black women's art tradition that emerged in the nineties concurrently with the publication and discussion about black feminist scholarship and activism in university settings and intellectual circles.¹⁸ Cox is part of a cadre of black women photographer-artists such as Carla Williams, Carrie Weems, Deborah Willis, and Lorna Simpson who use self-portraits to examine the historical representation of black women in Western Art and U.S. society and as a medium to explore their personal experiences as black women artists. In this section, I discuss some of Cox's photographs created during the early phases of her career and the ways in which these

¹⁷ Ameila Jones, *Body Art.*; Lisa Farrington, *Creating their Own Image*; Thelma Golden, *Freestyle*. Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*; Michele Wallace, "Why are there No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture."

¹⁸ By "intellectual," I mean those individuals who as Patricia Hill-Collins identifies, are "Black women who somehow contribute to Black feminist thought as critical social theory...Black women intellectuals are neither all academics nor found primarily in the Black middle class." See Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 17.

artworks relate to other black women's artists examination of themes related to black women's exploitation in dominant culture, and recovery of and engagement with the nude black female body, and of black women's subject formation. Additionally, I use this chapter to foreground the historical context in which Cox's *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* is created.

Cox's debut of *Bougies* in 2008, coincides with a heightened visibility of prominent women of African descent in dominant culture. When historicizing the context in which *Bougies* is produced, I examine some of Cox's photographs made shortly before *Bougies* and her interest and investment in creating work that she interprets as visually affirming and empowering for black women and girls. As part of situating *Bougies*, I discuss this period of production within the context of postfeminism. I conclude chapter one with an analysis of Cox's contributions as a photographer-artist and performer and the ways that her enactments as various wealthy black women's identities contributes to important discussions about black women's identity formation.

I argue that Cox's privileging and, at times, reveling in her own wealthy social status is a viable and important means by which she examines the socio-cultural saliency of representations of wealthy black womanhood in dominant popular culture. I maintain that Cox's meditation on the privileges and limitations of upper-class life is a means of documenting her personal experience as well as a strategy to place her personal experience in conversation with a historical context in which images of wealthy black

women have become commonplace, even though the experience of affluent domesticity and womanhood, remains a distant fantasy for the majority of black women.¹⁹

In my analysis of Cox's *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* photographs, the focal points of Chapter two, I examine Cox's strategies as the artistic visionary behind the composition of the photographs while also examining the details of her performative enactments as she assumes various upper-class black housewife personae. This chapter situates Cox's housewife character within a postfeminist context that takes into account the resurgence of the housewife icon as an image of modern and desirable femininity. I devote considerable attention to Cox's "persona-play performances" as the black "princess housewife" giving careful attention to the ways she relies on a politics of respectability and "excess flesh" enactments to reference popular images of upper-class black womanhood as seen on the popular television series *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.²⁰ In addition to situating Cox's housewife enactments in conversation with contemporary images of wealthy domesticity, I argue that her performances engage and are informed by black women's historical relationships to domestic labor. I suggest that Cox's inclusion of self-portraits from her previous photographic series creates a temporal

¹⁹ Cherise Smith, "Why I am Not Buying Beyonce's Brand of Feminism" *Women's E News*, 17 October 2014, <http://womensenews.org/story/cultural-trendspopular-culture/141016/why-im-not-buying-beyonc%C3%A9s-brand-feminism>.

²⁰ I borrow the term "persona-play performances" from Cherise Smith. See Smith, *Enacting Others*, 12. Additionally, I rely on Nicole Fleetwood's theory of "excess flesh" to analyze Cox's persona performances in the *Bougies* series. Fleetwood defines excess flesh as a "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. The use of excess flesh develops out of the distinction that Hortense Spillers makes between the body and flesh in her class essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." See Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 112, and pages 111-118.

dynamic that allows for the ghosts of black women's domestic labor to surface and make meaning in the present context.²¹

In the case of Chapter three, I focus on Cox's black housewife performances as it relates to black women's in/visibility in dominant culture. I propose that Cox as artist-photographer assumes the position of the unseen voyeur to mock the glamorization of upper-class domesticity in dominant popular culture and to bring critical attention to the ways that the "good life"—that is a lifestyle of material wealth, infinite leisure time, and rigorous maintenance of the body—has detrimental effects on black women's wellbeing. In these photos, I argue that Cox constructs "failed housewife" personae by exaggerating the housewife's dependence on alcohol and drugs and exploring the themes of isolation and dissatisfaction in the midst of great material wealth. The photographs in this chapter chronicle the troubles or imagined hardships of bouginess and in doing so, I argue that Cox explores the vulnerabilities experienced by black women with economic means and in doing so, challenges postfeminist constructions that glamorize wealthy black femininities.

Chapter four explores Cox's shift from enacting a black upper-class housewife to the adoption of a wealthy woman traveler persona. This chapter attends to Cox's performative strategies and composition techniques as an artist-photographer to explore themes related to black women's in/mobility. I maintain that in this grouping of photographs Cox assumes the character persona of a black-woman traveler to explore

²¹ My focus on Cox's engagement with her own identity as a black woman artist, oftentimes photographed nude or partially nude, also, I maintain facilitates an engagement with past and current discourses about the black female body.

themes related to black women's experiences of alienation and isolation in the United States as socio-cultural "others." This chapter situates Cox in a black feminist cultural context by reading her photographic texts as "travel scenarios" or narratives that explore the politics of black female belonging through images of black female flight and movement. I contend that Cox's single black woman traveler photographs provide an important context to consider the significance of themes of mobility and movement to black women's histories.

I conclude the dissertation project by reflecting on the significance of Cox's *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* photographs and highlighting the ways her character enactments as various wealthy black women enrich discussions about the black female body in the dominant visual field and underscore black women artists' use of their own bodies and employment of photographic technology to document and reclaim and situate as Daphne Brooks has aptly put it, "black female bodies as sites of intellectual knowledge, philosophical vision, and aesthetic worth."²²

²² Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 8.

CHAPTER 1:

WHO IS RENÉE COX?

The way my work has gone has been very autobiographical. For me, it's almost like a call and response.²³

-Renée Cox

I'm saying to myself: 'You're Renée Cox. What do you mean you're just going to go there and just do portraits? That's crazy! Wait, no, you have to be in the work – that's your M.O. You cannot let them mess with you like that. They don't bother Cindy Sherman about that, so why am I going to acquiesce?' And the answer is, 'No way!' So then I decided to take on the role of Queen Nanny. So that was the first little intervention.

²⁴

-Renée Cox

What I do, I like to use what's around me.²⁵

-Renée Cox

INTRODUCING *BOUGIES*

In 2008 Renée Cox debuted a new photographic series entitled *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* at the Galerie Nordine Zidoun in Paris, France. Cox was one of several artists, including Monica Hernandez and Michael Ray Charles, whose work was featured during the gallery's inaugural exhibition for its opening in 2008.²⁶ Cox's photographs, many of them large-scale digital prints measuring 30" x 40", depict the artist as she adopts various black woman personae.²⁷ In a handful of the photographs,

²³ Renée Cox, interview by Nicole Plett. Rutgers University, 21 October 2008.

http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/dwas/pdfs/Cox_interview_by_Plett_Oct_2008.pdf

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ <http://www.zidoun-bossuyt.com/exhibitions-past.htm>

²⁷ Cox exhibited ten photographs at the Galerie Nordine Zidoun.

Cox adopts the persona of an upper-class black housewife. In *Housewife* (Figure 1), for example, the first photograph appearing in Cox's online arrangement of *Bougies* on her website, she wears a black two-piece suit, sheer black nylons, closed-toe shoes, and modest jewelry. Seated upright with her legs crossed, the woman in the photograph assertively addresses the camera as she waits to be served an alcoholic beverage by a white woman dressed in a wait-staff uniform.²⁸ Cox uses the context of the domestic sphere, namely the home and neighborhood settings, in addition to travel photographs, to interrogate the stereotypes associated with postfeminist models of affluent black womanhood.

COX'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in Colgate, Jamaica, Cox spent the majority of her youth and adult life living in Scarsdale, New York. Intending to become a filmmaker, Cox attended Syracuse University and majored in film studies. Frustrated with the labor involved in filmmaking and the slow process before having a finished product, Cox shifted her focus from film to photography studies. Cox's interest "in the visual," as she puts it, prompted her to pursue fashion photography after completing her undergraduate degree. Enjoying the "immediate gratification" of photography, Cox worked as a photographer for magazines such as *Vogue*, *Homme*, and *Seventeen*.²⁹ While working in the fashion industry, she

²⁸ I focus on the arrangement of photographs in *Bougies*, as they appear on Cox's personal website because to date, the series does not have an exhibition catalogue.

²⁹ "Biography" ReneeCox.org

returned to the film industry. In the late eighties, she organized and photographed some of the visual material for African American filmmaker Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1988), a comedic satire about students of African descent attending historically black colleges.³⁰ After lending her visual acumen to the entertainment industries, Cox pursued her interests in photography as a fine art. She enrolled in the photography program at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and in 1992, she graduated with her Master of Fine Arts degree. Following the completion of her M.F.A., Cox participated in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study program.

Cox credits her interest and investment with using her own body as the photographed subject in her artworks, in part, because of the criticism she received for being pregnant, married, and a black woman art student in the Whitney's art program.³¹ Cox's maintains that she created and developed the theme for her infamous *Yo Mama* series (beginning in 1992) after being challenged by colleagues in the program about her level of artistic commitment because she was married and pregnant. "*Yo Mama* is a reactionary piece... I was the first woman in twenty-five years to be visibly pregnant in the program. When I told people they looked at me like I was crazy...I had made this major career change and educational commitment only to find out that I may be rejected because I'm married and have children. So once I figured that out, I realized I'd have to do whatever I had to do, which meant I have to be in your face and be as clear as

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Artress White, "Fragmented Souls," 52.

possible. Direct.”³² Fueled by her desire to prove to art critics, fellow colleagues, and casual observers that she could make valuable artistic contributions even while working as a mother and wife, Cox made a series of portraits with the “yo mama” moniker. Cox’s *Yo Mama* series is equal parts self-portraits in which Cox is either photographed visibly pregnant or during postpartum phases in which she appears with one or both of her sons. *Yo Mama at Home*, a large scale gelatin black and white photograph depicts a nude and pregnant Cox casually reclining on a bench. Perfectly confident, Cox casually engages in a moment of relaxation. She gazes directly at the camera’s viewfinder. Cox describes *Yo Mama at Home* as an image that was intended to convey to her Whitney colleagues the attitude of, “I own the place honey and I am still having my baby.”³³ Cox maintains that she used her body as a “conduit” for her photographs because she believed “that working with the self [was and] is the most honest representation of being.”³⁴ Literally working with a version of herself, Cox included a seven-foot tall statue in the gallery exhibition of the *Yo Mama* series. The statue was a major focal point in the exhibition and speaks to Cox’s routine photographing of her body to make political and social statements about the integrity of black female bodies and to validate black women’s epistemologies, beauty, and ways of knowing.³⁵

³²Ibid,” 52.

³³ Ibid, 52.

³⁴ Renée Cox, “Feminist Art Statement” https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/renee-cox

³⁵ Several years earlier, in 1988, African American woman artist Renee Stout created *Fetish No. 2*, a life-size plaster cast of her body. Stout maintains that she developed her mixed media sculpture as a source of empowerment and a way of protecting the black female body. She argues that the imaging of a black woman nude in *Fetish No. 2* is about visual affirmation and associating the black female body with strength. See Farrington, “Reinventing Herself,” 22.

THE 1990s

The nineties, the period in which Cox started creating self-portraits and investing serious energy in her career as a fine art photographer, coincided with the rise of multiculturalism and “politics of identity” discourses in the art world.³⁶ This period in art history was particularly significant because it spurred theory and artistic contributions that applied intersectional approaches to discussions of identity and allowed for the consideration of “multiple identifications” to interpret an artworks meanings.³⁷ At the very moment in which Cox was asserting her right to create artwork informed by her own identity as a black woman artist, the art world struggled over the extent to which individual artists’ identities “mattered.”³⁸ The discourse of multiculturalism in academic and artistic circles was a subject of contentious debate as those from historically marginalized communities and activist intellectuals groomed in various identity movements argued for the prioritization of identity while other parties advocated universalist humanism approaches.³⁹ The debates around the value of multiculturalism and the politics of identity took shape in and around various cultural channels. In 1992, *October* the highly respected art journal based in New York, published, “The Identity in Question: A Special Issue.” Prior to this issue, the journal had sidelined discussions and scholarship foregrounding the political and economic stakes of multiculturalism. Thus,

³⁶ I use Cherise Smith’s term “politics of identity” because the phrase, as Smith argues, captures the discursive moment in which personal identity, however defined, was viewed as a legitimate position from which to incite political action. See Smith, *Enacting Others*, 5-6.

³⁷ Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently*; Kobena Mercer, “Iconography after Identity, 52.”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 122-125; Smith, *Enacting Others*.

the journal's direct engagement with the politics of identity points to the centrality of debates about multiculturalism.⁴⁰ Similar questions about identity, in/exclusion of certain groups and the prioritization of one identity over another loomed large at the 1993 Whitney Biennial in New York.⁴¹ While the Biennial featured the works of more than eighty artists, many of whom were identified as individuals from historically marginalized groups, the exhibition was widely criticized for its intersectional approach and for being "too politically correct."⁴² The heightened awareness toward identity-centric approaches to art, culture and education spurred disdain and criticism against the discourses of multiculturalism in general but also with the entire concept of identity. Cultural and political debates about the deleterious effects of multiculturalism created a context for discussions about postidentity.⁴³ A term that "encompasses a variety of identifications" as Cherise Smith argues, postidentity refers to both the historical period following the civil rights and liberation movements of the sixties and seventies while also referencing the discursive ideology and rhetoric of which colorblind discourses are part, that maintain that identity positionalities such as race, gender, sexuality and class are not determinants or factors in an individual's economic, interpersonal, or political success, but rather the influences of individual ingenuity, resilience and self-determination.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 120; Smith, *Enacting Others*, 144-150.

⁴¹ The 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition became known popularly as the "identity politics" or "multicultural"

⁴² See the following sources for information about The 1993 Whitney Biennial, and its reception and reviews in art circles: Thelma Golden, *Freestyle*, Smith, *Enacting Others*, 144-148.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ My definition of postidentity is informed by Cherise Smith's definition and historical contextualization of the term. See Smith, *Enacting Others*, 199-206.

Concomitant with the emergence of postidentity was a handful of other posts including “postethnic,” “postrace,” and “postfeminism.” Cox is an interesting figure given the aforementioned historical context in which she develops her early works. On the one hand, Cox much like many of the artists who espouse a postidentity philosophy is part of a class of artists whose artistic production has been informed by professional training and studies. Remarking that when she participated in the Whitney’s program it “was what Yale is today,” Cox attaches a lot of value to her formal education and rhetoric of individual agency often articulated in a “nothing can stop me attitude.”⁴⁵ Moreover, on several occasions, Cox has remarked that she grew up believing that her positionality as a black woman did not help or hinder her educational or professional achievements. However, as she has de-emphasized her race and gender identifications to play up others such as education and individual and familial resilience, characteristics often cited by other artists espousing a postidentity philosophy, Cox also acknowledges the privileges of her socioeconomically affluent background as well as the ways her race and class identity inform her work and life experiences as a black woman artist.⁴⁶ When questioned about what inspires her artistic practice, Cox often cites the influences of real or mythologized black political activists such as Nelson Mandela and mythic Jamaican figure, *Queen Nanny of the Maroons*, and significant events such as the Central Park rapes and her engagement with black history at a New York research center as pivotal moments of

⁴⁵ Renée Cox, interview by Adelaide Damoah, www.adelaidedamoah.com 13 February 2013.

⁴⁶ Ibid; Renée Cox, interview by Nicole Plett. Rutgers University, 21 October 2008; Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 205-209, 220.

personal awakening and consciousness that spurred her engagement with and interest in artistic themes that explore the politics of black womanhood in the United States.

Early in her career, Cox developed photographs that examined African American communities' experiences of violence as well as photographs that indicted Western artistic practices that frequently relied on the erasure or invisibility of black individuals. In 1994, Cox created *It Shall be Named* and *Hottentot Venus*, the first of many photographs in which the artist used photographs of her body in tandem with historical resources discussing African Americans to produce images that sought to affirm and reclaim the black body from a visually marginalized and subjugated position in the dominant visual field. *It Shall be Named* is a multi-paneled collage of individual black and white photographs depicting a nude black man. Arranged in the shape of a crucifix, the hanging installation appeared in the Whitney's *Black Male* exhibition.⁴⁷ Cox maintains that the identification of the nude black male body as the victim of crucifixion developed from her research the Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture. Recalling her experience in the archive, Cox cites "they had piles of scrape books with the actual newspaper clippings from all these lynchings down South. That left an indelible mark on me."⁴⁸ Cox suggests that her experience in the Schomburg exposed her to historical events in African American history in which she had previously been unfamiliar. In addition to visualizing images of lynched bodies in the archive, Cox notes that she was particularly disturbed by the methods used by whites to memorialize the

⁴⁷ Artress White, "Fragmented Soul," 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

lynchings of African Americans. Cox cites that her learning about the dismemberment of the black body, particularly the black male body during the ritual of lynching, informed her composition of *It Shall be Named* and her decision to showcase the figure without genitalia.⁴⁹ *It Shall be Named* importantly foreshadows Cox's interest with religious iconography, as seen later in her re-envisioning of popular Judeo-Christian figures and at times photographing her own body within these visual counter-narratives, as seen in her photography series, *Flipping the Script*. Additionally, *It Shall be Named* ignited an ongoing engagement with black histories from the United States and Jamaica, as seen in her *American Family* (2001) and *Queen Nanny of the Maroons* (2004) photography series. Cox's experience at the Schomburg fueled her interest and examination of black histories and prompted her to develop a series of self-portraits in which she used self-performance to rescript the black female body in the visual field of signification.

In 1994, Cox also created a black and white self-portrait of herself entitled *Hottentot Venus*. Standing profile with her gaze directed toward the viewer, a nude Cox dons a set of highly polished brown prosthetic breasts and a matching prosthetic buttocks. Cox's wearing of exaggerated prostheses over her own breasts and buttocks references the life of Saartjie Baartman, a young South African woman brought to Europe during the eighteenth century and placed on display for the purposes of exhibiting the so called primitive sexuality and genitalia of women of African descent.⁵⁰ Baartman was placed on

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See the following sources for discussion about Baartman's life and the public display of her body, Lisa Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image*; Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*; Michael D. Harris, *Colored Images*; Kimberly Wallace Sanders, *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*; Deborah Willis, *Black Venus* 2010.

display until her untimely death, after which, her genitalia was posthumously removed from her body and preserved to circulate as a spectacle in Paris until 2002.⁵¹ Remarking on Cox's re-envisioning of Baartman, Lisa Farrington comments that Cox's *Hottentot Venus* "transforms Baartman from a victim into an empowered woman at the controls of her own representation."⁵² Farrington also suggests in her discussion of the black female nude in Western Art, that Cox's photograph is not only an example of Cox's active participation and engagement as a black woman "looking back" toward the viewer but also an assertion of black-identified beauty.⁵³

Cox's imaging of herself as Baartman, and reconfiguration of the black female gaze from spectacle object to empowered subject relates to other black women artists such as Renée Green, Carla Williams, Suzan Lori Parks, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Weems, and Joyce Scott, who have recovered Baartman's image using their own bodies or other discursive methods (photography, mixed media, performance, literature, etc.) to resituate black womanhood and the image of the black female body from a position of disempowered and marginalized subjugation, to self-possession and personal empowerment.⁵⁴ Such works function as counter-narratives that challenge the legacy of

⁵¹ Almost two hundred years after Baartman's death, the French government returned her remains home to South Africa in 2002. See Rachel Holmes, *African Queen*, 103-111.

⁵² Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image*, 224. In addition to Farrington, other scholars have cited Cox's direct engagement with the viewer as an example of her confronting the masculinist gaze in a manner similar to the woman in Manet's *Olympia*. See Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently*; Debra Singer, "Reclaiming Venus"; Farrington, "Reinventing Herself," Shelly Eversley, "Renee Cox: The Big Picture," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 18 (2003):73.

⁵³ Ibid. Farrington and Amelia Jones among others, have discussed Cox's gaze in conversation with Manet's *Olympia*.

⁵⁴ See the following artists and their works related to Baartman: Joyce Scott, *Women of Substance* (1985); Lorna Simpson, *Unavailable for Comment* (1993); Renée Green *Sa Main Charmante* (1989) and *Revue* series (1990); Carrie Weems, *The Hottentot Venus* (1997); Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (1996); Elizabeth

denigrating images and stereotypes made about black women and contribute to the formation of an ongoing archive in which black women's lives and bodies can be validated and celebrated. In the same year, Cox co-created *Hottentot 2000* (1994) with African American artist Lyle Ashton Harris. *Hottentot 2000* is a large format colored Polaroid from Harris' *Good Life* series (1994). Situating *Hottentot 2000* as a "reclaiming of the image of the Hottentot Venus," Harris states that the image was about exploring his identity as a black artist creating and selling work "in a culture that is by and large narcissistically mired in the debasement and objectification of blackness...."⁵⁵ In the image, Cox stands profile against a red, black and green background, the symbolic colors representative of Black Nationalism and African pride and independence. Although Cox wears the same shiny metallic prostheses around her breasts and buttocks, the photograph is different from the black and white image she first created. In *Hottentot 2000*, Cox bends her left arm at the elbow to rest her hand on the side of her hip, a gesture that appears similar to her pose in *Hottentot Venus*. However, in *Hottentot 2000*, Cox's gesture is sassier—her gaze more direct, confident and exacting. It appears in this image as if she has placed her hand on her hip not to uphold the prostheses or to approximate a pseudo-scientific photo intending to measure the circumference of her private parts, but rather a gesture signifying black female confidence and pride. Both Harris and Cox have been at the forefront of artistic exchanges to re-envision "the image of the black" in

Alexander, "The Venus Hottentot" (1990); Deborah Willis, *Tribute to the Hottentot Venus* (1992), and Carla Williams. Of note, Green, Simpson and Weems' creative projects about Baartman are also artworks in which the artists consciously chose not to reproduce an image representative of Baartman's black female body. See Singer, *Reclaiming Venus*.

⁵⁵ Alan Read, *The Fact of Blackness* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, ICA.), 1996 150.

Western culture.⁵⁶ Their collaborative project acknowledges the complex history and visualization of Baartman while also providing a context to resituate a legacy of exploitation and surveillance within an alternative or new discursive space in which black womanhood can be venerated.

Photographs such as *It Shall be Named*, *Hottentot Venus*, and *Hottentot 2000* showcase Cox's engagement with black history and her use of archival sources to reposition the black body, particularly the black female body, from a marginalized position in dominant U.S. society to a place of empowered and willful subjectivity. From 1995 until 2001, Cox created several photographic series including *Raje* (1998) and *American Family* (2001), artwork that articulated her engagement with concepts related to black history and her efforts to re-visualize the black female body as an empowered subject. Situating her art in 1980s appropriation art and feminist subjectivity studies, Cox also created a controversial piece of artwork in the 1990s that would solidify her presence in artistic circles and with mainstream audiences.

Yo Mama's Last Supper

Renée Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper* ignited a firestorm of controversy when it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum's *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* exhibit in 2001. Created in 1996, Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper* is a large five-paneled photograph depicting a revision of the biblical last supper shared by Christ and his apostles. Cox reimagines Leonardo Da Vinci's fifteenth-century painting *The*

⁵⁶ David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Last Supper by portraying herself as the Christ-figure surrounded by her black and brown apostles, with the lone exception of the character Judas, who is portrayed as a white man. In addition to situating herself as the martyred deity, Cox is also completely nude except for a piece of fabric resting on each of her outstretched forearms. In response to Cox's interpretation, then Mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani ignited a virulent campaign against Cox's work stating that the photograph was "anti-Catholic" and "disgusting."⁵⁷ As Nicole Fleetwood and Michael Eric Dyson among others have argued, Giuliani's criticisms against Cox and her interpretation of the last supper had more to do with a fear and revulsion of a naked black female body, especially one meant to figuratively represent God, than the claims to anti-Catholic prejudice.⁵⁸ In addition to Giuliani's assessments of Yo Mama's Last Supper, art critics vehemently accused Cox of strident narcissism and lambasted the artist as self-indulgent because of her decision to use her own unclothed black body as the subject in the photographs.⁵⁹ Despite the overwhelming dismissal of Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper* as narcissistic, I read Cox's image not only as enactment of "excess flesh" as Nicole Fleetwood puts it, but also as a moment of what Amelia Jones identifies as "radical narcissism."⁶⁰ Although Cox and other commentators

⁵⁷ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 106.

⁵⁸ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Michael Eric Dyson, "One Man's Sacrilege, One Woman's Sanctity," *Chicago Sun Times*, February 20, 2001, Editorial, sec. 31.

⁵⁹ Ariella Budick, "A Controversy Creates Undeserved Hype," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 March 2001, sec. Art Exhibits.; Michael Kimmelman, "'Yo Mama' Artist's Past as Superhero," *New York Times* 17 February 2001. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/17/nyregion/critic-s-notebook-yo-mama-artist-s-past-as-superhero.html>; Peter Plagens, "Arts Extra: The Censorship Drill Again? Yo Mama!" *Newsweek*, 28 February 2001.

⁶⁰ Jones identifies Hannah Wilkes' as "a feminist body artist" whose *Art News Revised* (1975) photograph and her *So Help Me Hannah* projects (1978-1984) engage the long-standing Western codes of female objectification while "reiteratively exaggerating" this code to solicit and confront the male gaze. See Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 149-195.

have remarked about the publicity and notoriety that Giuliani's decency campaign stirred, I see Cox's interpretation of the last supper as one of many examples in which Cox uses her body to invoke the historical and contemporary maligning of the black female body and to re-present the black female body, through her persona enactments, as beautiful, regal and self-possessed. In other words, Cox's photographs are more than self-portraits or the artist's figuring of herself, rather the photographic projects are forms of individual expression that speak to her positionality and experience as a black woman artist who has "[refashioned her own individual subjectivity] to encompass the historical determinations that cumulatively shaped it."⁶¹ Thus, Cox's personae enactments as Jesus or in the case of her *Raje* photography series, her character performances as a black woman superhero who fights white supremacy and societal discrimination, make evident the ways her performances can be situated within personal and collective shared experiences of black womanhood.

Since her first photographic works, Cox has asserted her "right" to speak her mind and to create artwork that speaks to her experiences. Despite criticisms from the art world, Cox has not apologized for her unflinching engagement and use of her own life experiences to inform her work.⁶² Cox maintains that she uses her body as a "conduit" for her photographs because she believes "that working with the self is the most honest representation of being."⁶³ Cox's photographic oeuvre, exemplifies the various ways she

⁶¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Representing Women: The Politics of Self Representation," 304.

⁶² Ibid.; Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Renée Cox, interview by Nicole Plett, Rutgers University, 21 October 2008; Renée Cox, interview by Adelaide Damoah, www.adelaidedamoah.com 13 February 2013.

⁶³ Renée Cox, "Feminist Art Statement" https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/renee-cox

has put her body “to use” for her own and other black women’s empowering means. In other words, her creation of various black women personae via diverse photographic series honor and validate her own life experiences as a black woman while also allowing her to recall and connect with black women’s shared experiences of their race, class, gender and sexual positionalities.⁶⁴

2008

The debut of Renee Cox’s *Discreet Charm* series in 2008 coincided with an array of visual representations depicting upwardly mobile black women in the media. *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* photograph series and the debut of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* series represent only a small subsection of the visual images in U.S. dominant popular culture in 2008 that represented black women’s success in terms related to economic affluence, physical beauty, and social capital. The ladies appearing on the Atlanta housewives television series were amongst several African American women whose presence in such niche markets as daytime- talk shows, magazine publishing, television series, and the political realm impacted the dominant field of vision. Prior to Bravo’s racial diversification of the housewives casts, several other networks including BET, CW, and UPN, depicted and at times celebrated African American women as lead protagonists in popular television series and as real-life, successful entrepreneurs,

⁶⁴ Ibid.

entertainers, and civil servants.⁶⁵ 2008 stands out as an extraordinary year for black women's visualization in the dominant visual field. Thus, the mostly-all African American cast from the Atlanta series represented only one televisual instance in which black women appeared as successful entrepreneurs, celebrities, and leaders in their respective fields. Drawing attention to the ways that black women impacted popular culture, particularly in the visual realm, places the debut of the black housewives on cable television in a historical context that highlights the discursive representation of black women in the dominant visual field. Moreover, considering the ways in which prominent African American women celebrated professional achievements and embarked on new entrepreneurial endeavors that shaped the media marketplace further situates Cox's performances of wealthy black womanhood within a broader cultural context of visual representations that portrayed black women as economically affluent, sexually desirable, and socially autonomous.

Black women's contributions to visual culture, their mediated imaginings, and the fictionalized identities they created in 2008 illuminate the ongoing struggle over the multiple and oftentimes conflicting meanings of black womanhood. Considering the ways black women experienced professional success in dominant media as well as the representations depicting "successful" black women, highlights the frequency in which black women were visually imagined as economically powerful women with important

⁶⁵ For a discussion of these instances see the following sources: Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Beretta Shomade, *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002; ---, ed. *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University,) 2012; Lisa Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady*.

socio-cultural capital in 2008. Oprah Winfrey's accomplishments as a media mogul and the celebration of the United States first African American First Lady, are not isolated events or representations of affluent and leisured black womanhood, but rather they are part of a broader mediated and social context in which black women were represented in dominant media as professionally accomplished, fashionably astute, and economically resilient. It is against this media context that viewing audiences met the ensemble cast of Atlanta's housewives. Examining the ways black women influenced the media marketplace as entrepreneurs, writers, and celebrities who articulated their own wide-ranging versions of black womanhood and in some cases, created fictional black women characters who reflected the dynamism of black female life, contextualizes the visual milieu in which Cox debuts *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* series. The foregrounding of these other instances in which black women appeared and influenced the dominant landscape of visual entertainment in 2008 locates Cox's performance of wealthy black womanhood in *Bougies* within a historical context of visual representations that depicted black women as professionally and financially accomplished and as images and icons of success in twenty-first century popular culture.

POSTFEMINISM

Commencing in the 1980s, public sentiment and popular culture's portrayal of and understanding about Feminism in the United States changed. Social, political, and economic rights previously associated with feminist activism, such as gender equity in the workplace and in the home, critiques of heteronormativity and homophobia, access to

birth control and discussions about reproductive choice, became mainstream and were no longer associated with grassroots feminist activism and intellectual praxis. Consequently, feminism, a social movement that was once defined by the wedding of intellectual scholarship with grassroots activism, was publicly portrayed as a defunct and unnecessary social movement that had *already* accomplished its intended goals and therefore was no longer necessary or needed in the United States and Britain. Feminist scholars, particularly those in media and visual studies, responded to this growing historical amnesia by naming and problematizing what they identified as postfeminism or the structural and institutional reproduction of discourses about gender equality and “choice” in concert with neoliberal-capitalist values.⁶⁶

Feminist media studies scholar, Angela McRobbie identifies this socio-cultural phenomenon, as “the new gender regime” or the socio-cultural context in which women’s

⁶⁶ Post-Feminism,” as it is understood by feminist scholars and media critics, is the practice of theorizing the future of feminist intellectual and organizational practice as well as the critical assessment of the ways in which language once associated with feminist activism is incorporated into popular culture discourses about gender, namely westernized constructions of womanhood. Scholars within this field of study examine the internal debates occurring within feminist communities as well as the discourses surrounding the future progress and impact of feminist activism within the United States and Britain. For publications about “postfeminism,” see Veronica Chambers, *Having It All? Black Women and Success*; Bonnie Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Woman’s Movement since 1970* (State College: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996); Susan Douglass, “Manufacturing Postfeminism”; Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Crown, 1991); Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Carolyn Maloney, *Rumors of Our Progress Have Been Greatly Exaggerated: Why Women’s Lives Aren’t Getting Any Better*. (Emmaus, PA: Modern Times, 2008.); Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Post-Feminist’ Era* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Sarah Projansky’s *Watching Rape: Film and Television in a Post-feminist Culture* (New York: New York University, 2001); Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Woman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Natasha Walters, *The New Feminism* (London: Little, Brown, and Co, 1998); Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to ‘Post-feminism’* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2001); _____, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: Women’s Press, 2000); Andi Zelsler, *Feminism and Popular Culture* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008).

decisions, even those that reified heteronormative patriarchy and capitalist hegemonic oppression are presented in public discourses as evidence that feminism *worked* and is no longer needed since *all* women allegedly have *equal* access to and an endless supply of educational, material, social, and economic opportunities.⁶⁷ The gender identity of this “new female subject” rests on economic and cultural activity, or “consumer citizenship,” a type of political, social and economic allegiance that guarantee one’s membership within the nation state.⁶⁸ Historically marginalized communities of women, particularly women of color, queer women, and trans women, are transformed or marketed as “commercialized identities” whose presence in visual media is allegedly acknowledgement of their equal access and participation in the U.S. nation state. The “new gender regime,” then, insists that all women everywhere, regardless of their race, class, sexuality, age or other identity markers, can obtain certain identified markers of success identified as desirable and commiserate with the pursuit of the “American Dream.”⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

Bougies is an autobiographical reflection of and visual meditation on the privileges of socioeconomic affluence as articulated by Reneé Cox in her personae-play performances of upper-class black womanhood. I maintain that Cox’s adoption of various

⁶⁷ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 55-90.

⁶⁹ Postfeminism much like the concept of “post-black” is premised on postidentity ideologies that regard individual agency and a belief in the state’s adoption of equality standards for all individuals regardless of their race, class, gender or nationality. For a discussion about the concept of postblack see the following sources, Thelma Golden, *Freestyle*; Derek Conrad Murray, “Post-Black Art” in *Post-Soul Satire*; Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 202-206.

black women personae who have access to disposable income, recreational leisure, and international travel allows her to engage, reflect and, comment upon her own experiences of wealth and “success” while also surveying and engaging with the socio-cultural landscape in which images of affluent black women are made common. Even though Cox’s exploration of wealth can be read as strident narcissism or navel gazing, I suggest that the artist’s privileging and at times reveling in what can be read as her celebration of her own wealthy social status is also a viable and important means by which she illuminates the saliency of the popular icon and image of wealthy black womanhood in dominant popular culture. Cox’s grandiose meditation on the joys and woes of upper-class life then, is not only a means of documenting her personal experiences as an affluent black woman, but also a strategy to place her personal experience in conversation with a socio-cultural moment in which images and visual representations of wealthy black women are normalized, even though black women’s access to this privileged social and economic position remains exceptionally rare.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Cherise Smith, “Why I am not Buying Beyonce’s Brand of Feminism.”

CHAPTER TWO:

Imagining Wealthy Black Domesticity: The Politics of Renée Cox's Princess Housewife Enactments

That's the kind of work I want to do. Sort of take all these historical wrongs and turn them into rights.⁷¹

-Renée Cox

Recall: The action or the act of calling someone or something back; an invitation or summons to return to or from a position, situation, or place.⁷²

-Oxford English Dictionary

When my family and I first got into the public eye, we didn't know what to say or how to act. We were stuttering and changing the way we talk...Like we were the damn cast of *Leave it to Beaver* and whatnot. I was June Cleaver in the middle of it all, trying to project myself as perfect and talk proper and act like we were something other than what we are. I was listening to every word I said, trying to make sure I pronounced it correctly, and making sure I didn't sound Southern or illiterate. I wanted to sound right, you know? It took only a few days of that, before I decided all of that June Cleaver mess wasn't going to work for me—for us. It was stressing me out. Finally, I decided the best thing for me to do was be me—to talk the ways I talk and say whatever the hell I feel like saying and do what I normally do...⁷³

-NeNe Leakes

In 2008, Renée Cox adopted her usual style of self-portraiture and persona performance in a new photography series entitled *The Discreet Charm of The Bougies*, of

⁷¹ Artress Bethany White, "Fragmented Souls: Call and Response with Renée Cox," in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 55.

⁷² In addition to the standardized definition of recall offered by the Oxford English Dictionary, my use of the term "recall" is informed by Performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor's theoretical concept of scenario which she defines as a "paradigmatic system of visibility that is formulaic, portable, and repeatable." Situating the scenario as a vital act of transfer, Taylor argues that attending to the ways that scenarios "recall" or transfer past situations and memories, social knowledges and histories, and individual and collective memories offers the opportunity to see and understand the ways that the past traffics and exists in performances and visual texts. The process of recall is one of several components that make up the scenario paradigmatic framework. See Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 28-32; 53-55.; Oxford English Dictionary, ed., s.v. "recall."

⁷³ NeNe Leakes, *Never Make the Same Mistake Twice: Lessons on Love and Life Learned the Hard Way*. (New York: Touchstone, 2009): 168.

which *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* are two of the featured portraits.⁷⁴ Cox playfully adopts and performs an upper-class black woman persona by assuming the role of a well-to-do housewife and an alter-ego persona of her housewife character known as “Missy.”⁷⁵ Cox’s housewife enactments relate to and engage with the recent surge of housewife imagery in dominant popular culture.⁷⁶

The homemaker of today’s celebrity culture is freed from the “domestic labor” and social mores that at different moments in United States history, championed Republican Motherhood, the cult of domesticity, and in the Post World War II period, the

⁷⁴ At the time of the dissertation’s publication, Cox had retitled the *Housewife* photograph to *Black Housewife* and retitled *Missy at Home* to *Pool Table*. Cox’s decision to rename some of the photographs in *Bougies* appears commiserate with her inclusion of new photographs to the online series, as noted in the dissertation’s introductory chapter. For the purposes of this dissertation, I elected to use the titles Cox assigned to the photographs during their initial debut in 2008.

⁷⁵ In *Missy at Home*, I argue, the viewer is made to believe that “Missy” is a different but related identity of the housewife character, as Cox uses styling techniques and props similar to those seen in *Housewife*. The suggestion that “Missy” is a character extension or persona of Cox’s already fictional black housewife is also supported by the designation of “Missy” in the titles of the following photographs in which Cox appears, in the context of the home and neighborhood with dress, demeanor, and accessories commiserate with her upper-class housewife persona: *Miss Thang*, later retitled *Missy by the Pool*, *Missy by the Pool*, later retitled *Missy and Afro by the Pool*, *Missy’s Jumpoff*, *Missy at Home*, later retitled *Pool Table*. Additionally, Cox ascribes the identity label of “Missy” to her black woman traveling persona, as seen in the following travel photographs: *Missy in Beijing*, *Missy goes to Ghana*, *Missy in Bali*, and *The Enlightenment of Missy*. This is an interesting and layered artistic choice that speaks to Cox’s various upper-class black woman personas and the ways that she intends for the personas to be viewed in conversation together. The travel photographs featuring “Missy” can be read either as a separate character persona identified as a single, upper-class black woman who is *different* from the upper-class character situated in the wealthy domestic sphere, but nevertheless occupies a similar subject position as Cox’s housewife character as it relates to race, class, and gender. This observation, that of Cox presenting two different characters or versions of upper-class black womanhood is especially salient when considering the changes in the photographic environments (the move away from the context of the home and neighborhood) and the altering of her hair and clothing, as seen in photographs like *Missy in Beijing*, *Missy in Bali*, and *The Enlightenment of Missy*. On the other hand, the situating of the black woman traveler as wealthy and with clothing attire and hair styling similar to the upper-class black woman seen in the photographs taken “at home” and “in the neighborhood” also allows for a reading of the black woman traveling persona as an extension of Cox’s housewife/trophy wife persona.

⁷⁶ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*: 117-152.

Joan-Cleaver model of domesticity.⁷⁷ The affluent housewife, as she is represented in dominant media today, is relieved of “traditional” domestic duties like childrearing, cooking, and cleaning. Instead, she lives a life of luxury that includes personal chefs, fitness trainers, and hired staff. Her errands consist of frequent trips to the spa and fashionable boutiques rather than the grocery store or her children’s school fieldtrips. With minimal domestic responsibilities, mansion-size homes, and generous amounts of disposable income, the twenty-first century affluent housewife has become the coveted emblem of desirable womanhood.⁷⁸

Cox’s housewife enactments engage with the popular imagery of luxurious domesticity as seen in today’s dominant visual field while also presenting opportunities to analyze and consider how contemporary images of affluent black housewives relate to and are in conversation with black women’s domestic labor during previous historical periods. Modeling her personae after the celebrity housewives made popular on cable television, Cox’s black housewife character relishes in leisure time by the pool, confidently displays her hyper-manicured body, and delights in receiving services from hired wait-staff. In this way, Cox as artist-photographer engages with dominant images of

⁷⁷ See the following sources for discussions about the changing visual representations and societal standards associated with housewives living in the United States: Caitlin Flanagan, *To Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing our Inner Housewife*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2006; Katy Kelly, “Princess for the Post-feminist Generation” *USA Today* September 2, 1997, p.A20; Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, *Interrogating Postfeminism*; Sean Redmond, “Intimate Fame Everywhere.” In *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, eds Su Holmes and Sean Redmond. London: Routledge, 2006, 27-43; Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007; Jennifer Reed, “Beleaguered Husbands and Demanding Wives: The New Domestic Sitcom.” *Americana: The American Popular Culture Online Magazine* (October 2003).

⁷⁸ Negra, “What a Girl Wants?,” 117-152.

hyper-manicured domesticity to construct her own version of elite black womanhood. Embracing and referencing the contemporary landscape that celebrates posh domesticity, Cox's personae-play performances as a "kept" woman highlight the historical circumstances that denied black women the social standing within the United States to have been considered "housewives" or ladies by U.S. society more generally.⁷⁹ Cox's wealthy black woman personae performances reference the increased acceptance or perhaps tolerance for black women with socioeconomic privilege while also illuminating more generally the ways that black women's race, gender, and oftentimes, economic positionalities prior to the late twentieth century, prevented them from receiving the societal designation of "housewife" or "lady." Cox's housewife enactments as seen in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* address a twenty-first century dominant visual field in which black women can and do occupy social statuses as wealthy housewives while simultaneously considering the socio-cultural context of the domestic sphere as a literal and symbolic arena in which black women were denied positions of privilege and social esteem.

This chapter, then, situates *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* as scenarios of domesticity. Cox's *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* photographs, I argue, are scenarios of domesticity in which Cox creates her own black woman-centered narratives of wealthy domestic leisure and economic affluence. Within each photograph, Cox as artist-photographer and personae performer, creates a visual narrative about upper-class black

⁷⁹ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*; Deborah Gray-White, *Ain't I A Woman and Too Heavy a Load*;

domesticity that explores a black woman's privilege and leadership in the twenty-first century home. I suggest that Cox relies on the styling and comportment of her body as well as the use of various props to create an image of the domestic realm in which black women are in charge. Attending to the details of her persona enactments that is, her personal styling, bodily comportment, and construction of the photographic landscape to be-come the housewife and Missy, I maintain that Cox's photographs are scenarios of domesticity that take into account black women's histories as enslaved subjects while also privileging current representations of black women as upwardly mobile citizens. From this vantage point, Cox's *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* photographs are but several scenes or narratives in a long list of scenarios of domesticity, with the inaugural scenario of domesticity as it relates to black women, being black women's lived experiences as enslaved and free domestic laborers in white homes.⁸⁰

This chapter situates *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* as photographs that challenge linear and teleological notions of fixed time, and instead conceptualize temporality specifically the contemporary icon of the black princess housewife in conversation with black women's past experiences as laborers in the domestic sphere. Cox's photographs "scramble time" as M. Jacqui Alexander calls it, to create an encounter or conversation between historically distant representations of black womanhood, the "here and now" as represented by Cox's black princess housewife performances and black women's

⁸⁰ Taylor maintains that scenario is "a portable framework that bears cumulative repeats." Not only are there many versions of specific scenarios, Taylor maintains, but she argues that scenarios as "meaning making paradigms" are simultaneously passed on and also subject to frequent adaptation, "reversal, parody, and change" oftentimes informed by existing and prevailing ideas and values. See Taylor, 28-31.

previous positions as enslaved subjects and domestic workers in white homes and establishments-- the “there and then.”⁸¹ I pay particular attention to the ways Cox creates two different but related upper-class black housewife personas. I maintain that Cox’s performance as a “respectable” upper-class black housewife in the case of *Housewife* and that of the “trophy black housewife” or the sexy and physically desirable housewife in *Missy at Home* allows for an analysis that situates the current iconicity and popularity of the affluent black housewife in conversation with the legacy of controlling images related to black womanhood.⁸² Moreover, distinguishing between Cox’s different housewife performances also reveals the ways in which the representation of the upper-class black housewife in dominant popular culture is informed by postfeminist discourses that construct the sexy and economically affluent housewife as the revered symbol of contemporary femininity.⁸³

“Transforming and Reimagining the Domestic Sphere,” grapples with Cox’s own process of enacting and engaging with contemporary representations of black womanhood in the domestic realm and the ways that such practices are linked to postfeminist ideologies of idealized womanhood. Additionally, I argue that Cox’s housewife enactments engage in a process of *recall* or the summoning of previous scenarios of domesticity that foreground the centrality of black women’s experiences in

⁸¹ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexuality, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁸² The Oxford English Dictionary defines a trophy wife as “a wife usually regarded as a status symbol.” OED, 2nd ed., s.v. “trophy wife.”

⁸³ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 93.

the domestic realm in the past and makes evident how these past experiences continue to reverberate today.

HOUSEWIFE

In a photograph titled *Housewife*, a black woman sits on an orange sofa with her face directed towards the camera's viewfinder. She is wearing a two-piece black suit with rhinestone details, black nylons and closed-toe strappy shoes. With one hand resting on the textured sofa, she places her other hand on the nape of a large white poodle. With its face directed away from the camera and the woman, the poodle sits at attention, resembling a life-sized figurine more than an actual pet. The dog's shaggy white fur resembles the texture and color of the floor rug while also bringing viewers' attention to the other white details in the photo, two white pillows on the couch, the black woman's jewelry accessories, and the large windows bordered by stark-white trim. The contrast between white and black accessories, clothing, and props is reinforced with the presence of a white woman photographed subject. Like the black woman seated, she also wears the contrasting colors of black and white. Her solid black dress is accented by a white trim on the collar and sleeves and a wrinkled white apron that hangs around her waist. With her gaze directed toward the black woman, she bends at the waist, hands extended as she holds a tray of alcohol and offers it to the seated black woman. A coffee table, supported by wood slabs, leaves little room between the women and the dog. A set of yellow and brown-hued candles of varying heights and a green ash tray sit on top of the marble slab. In the top left corner a black and white photograph with a sizeable physical presence

looms from the background. The photograph depicts a woman of color. Her face has been cropped off from the image as she stands nude except for a pair of black high-heels. With both hands, she holds a giggling toddler outstretched across her mid-section.

Figure One: Reneé Cox, *Housewife*, 2008



I maintain that Cox's housewife performance in the *Housewife* photograph is an effort to link the upper-class black female body within respectability discourses. Seated

with her gaze directed toward the camera's viewfinder and donning a fitted black suit and sheer black nylons, Cox's performance of wealthy domesticity in this instance is intended to show the black housewife as distinguished, refined, and the leader over the domestic sphere. This particular imaging of black domesticity as aligned within a politics of respectability refutes popular discourses about the black female body as out-of-control, scandalous, and loud. Scripting black female domesticity in this way is particularly interesting in light of the representations of black housewives in dominant popular culture, namely the cast members from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and the negative feedback and commentary about the four black cast-mates. Moreover, it aligns with a postfeminist presentation of the black female body as an emblem of economic, material, and social success, and is therefore assumed in dominant popular culture to be an "empowering" image of black woman identity.

MISSY AT HOME

In another image from Renée Cox's *Bougies*, titled *Missy at Home*, a black woman stands leaning against a bar counter. Tilting her torso to the left and with her knees slightly bent, she rests the upper half of her body on the bar surface. Although she appears to be the intended focal point of the image, her visual prominence within the photo seems slightly overshadowed by the other props in the image—a mounted three-paneled portrait depicting a nude black woman, sizeable double-casement windows, a sizeable pool table and bench and a modular bar with liquor bottles and shakers of varied heights. A quick scan of the image suggests that the woman is enjoying a game of pool in

her home's "game room" or entertainment area. With her eyes averted from the camera's viewfinder, she appears focused on the pool game in progress. She is wearing a black laced robe, with a matching black bikini-style set. The robe is open at the breast-line and thighs, and buttoned at the torso. Her strappy black heels fasten at the ankles and expose her black-toenail polish, which matches the color on her fingernails. Wearing a shiny silver ring around her ring finger, she holds a caramel-hued beverage in a brandy snifter. In her other hand she rests a cue stick against her torso and down the length of her mid-section and thigh. On the floor to her right, a yellow and red framed image, the subject of which is indiscernible to the viewer. To her right, three portraits, forming a triptych show a black woman standing nude with a strip of white fabric across her arms. In the image she stands behind a table, bathed in a white table linen and with platters of fruit and bread on top of it. In the other images, two groups of men, wearing first-century clothing, talk amongst themselves, while one man, the singular white photographed subject looks toward the nude black woman.

Figure Two: Renée Cox, *Missy at Home*, 2008



PRINCESS HOUSEWIVES

I categorize *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* as princess housewife enactments or performances in which Cox assumes the persona of an upper-class black housewife. Feminist scholars Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters' designation of the term "princess housewife" applies to the popular representations of suburbanite domesticity in which housewives are portrayed as sexy and glamorous women whose daily activities entail few

if any of the responsibilities of a conventional housewife such as domestic work and whose schedules revolve around their social activities, fitness regimen, and shopping excursions.⁸⁴ An “emblem of leisure and luxury,” according to Munford and Waters, the princess housewife’s socioeconomic status has freed her from domestic labor and employment outside the home. Although she is seldom shown engaging in housekeeping or other duties associated with the conventional housewife, the princess housewife performs a different type of labor—the “labor” of beautifying. She is responsible for keeping her body and the home physically attractive through the routine practice of physical exercise, maintaining expensive styling regimens, the hiring of employees to perform household tasks like cooking and cleaning, and orchestrating and attending social functions. Cox, in her persona enactments as an upper-class black woman, adopts the popular culture image of the hyper-groomed and leisured housewife. Cox’s engagement with popular culture to fashion her performances of black womanhood is not new. From her re-framing of popular Western Art pieces, once emblems of popular culture to her enactment as a Jamaican military heroine as Queen Nanny, Cox consistently uses the dominant field of vision as a reference point for her creative envisioning of black womanhood.⁸⁵ Cox’s persona enactments as the upper-class black housewife relate to and are in conversation with the proliferation of visual media and popular interest in middle class and wealthy housewives in the twenty-first century dominant popular culture.

⁸⁴ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014); 92-93.

⁸⁵ Cox’s engagement with popular culture as a reference point for the personas she enacts mirrors artist Cindy Sherman’s use of popular culture for her source material and her ongoing engagement with the “images of woman question.” See Mulvey, “A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body,” 284-286.

THE 21ST CENTURY BLACK HOUSEWIFE

In 2009, popular celebrity housewife, Nene Leakes released her book *Never Make the Same Mistake Twice: Lessons on Love and Life Learned the Hard Way*, a blend of personal confessional and self-help adages and anecdotes about her life as one of the most famous housewives on the Bravo network's television series, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Leakes meteoric rise in celebrity status was due in part to her brash tacks, no nonsense, take charge persona on the hit television series. Whether she was dishing out the latest gossip or rehearsing the drama from a shopping excursion during her personal confessional to viewing audiences, now a standard feature on reality television shows, NeNe exhibited a televisual character that was assertive, humorous, and affluent. Even with her pension for gossip and "keeping it real" character persona, Leakes publicly acknowledged the pressures she and her family experienced as they tried to live up to an imagined image of familial domestic harmony. Leakes admits that she was haunted by the ghosts of housewives past.⁸⁶ By acknowledging her initial efforts to demonstrate the characteristics embodied by fictional television housewife Joan Cleaver, Leakes importantly calls attention to the presence of the housewife icon throughout dominant popular culture, and the ways in which this image of white, middle-class, heterosexual, suburban domesticity continues as the standard or at least the idealized image of domestic

⁸⁶ Leakes' reputation of saying anything to anyone, no matter the subject matter or whether it would be considered inappropriate by black respectability standards is considered by some individuals in black communities to be representative of an "authentic" or essential blackness and has also been referred to in African-American vernacular speech and in media (television, film, and popular culture) aimed at U.S. black audiences as "keepin' it real."

womanhood.⁸⁷ Leakes initial aspirations to convey this standard of femininity is especially interesting in light of the fact that *Real Housewives of Atlanta* debuts in 2008, more than fifty years after *Leave it to Beaver* has ended.⁸⁸ Leakes quickly asserts that the “June Cleaver mess wasn’t going to work for me—for us...It was stressing me out.” However, her initial attempts to fit her black upper-class woman identity and that of her family into the post-war idealized standard of domestic femininity and the nuclear family speaks to the enduring legacy of a specific image of white domestic femininity.

THE HISTORY OF THE HOUSEWIFE ICON

Gendered expectations for middle-class white men and women during the Victorian era developed along a strict binary logic that divided men and women’s labor and social activities between two distinct and separate spheres. White men were expected to inhabit the public sphere or in other words, contribute their intellect and physical labor to working arenas outside of the home such as politics, education, business, and manual labor. Conversely, white women were expected to inhabit and work in the private sphere of the home as housewives.⁸⁹ White middle-class women’s responsibilities included raising the children and inculcating them with the family’s ideological beliefs, creating and maintaining a well-kept home, and embodying a domestic femininity premised on

⁸⁷ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*; Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 11.

⁸⁸ *Leave it To Beaver* debuted in 1957 and ran until 1963.

⁸⁹ Lydia Maria Child, *Good Wives* (Boston: Carter, Hendee, and Co), 1833; Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford), 1987; Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1989; Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework*. (New York: Pantheon Books), 1982.

what scholar Barbara Welter identifies as the “cult of true womanhood.” According to Welter, white middle-class women living during this period focused on cultivating piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, virtues that were thought to capitalize on women’s allegedly innate abilities to rear children, exert moral influence, and take care of the home.⁹⁰ Under the cult of true womanhood, white women were also expected to cultivate a home environment in which their husbands could find safety and refuge from the changing industrial landscape. The domestic hearth then was viewed as the family’s bulwark of stability against the rapidly changing economic and political climates and a space in which the next generation learned to become “fit” citizens. The concomitant celebration of the domestic hearth as a place of refuge against the booming industrial market place and a space of moral influence spurred a social climate whereby women who engaged in home-centered labored were valorized as models of genteel womanhood.⁹¹

A cursory survey of late nineteenth century popular culture reveals a social climate in which white middle class women expressed considerable interest and exerted a lot of physical and intellectual energy to the questions of appropriate domesticity. Cultural texts from the period encouraged women to devote their aspirations, energy, and talents to cultivating a home that would serve as a respite away from unbridled industrial development and a social context to nurture moral and religious values. Literature and magazines during this era heralded women as the leaders responsible for regulating and

⁹⁰ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1866.”

⁹¹ Ibid.

maintaining the stability of the home. Championing the well-known adage that “time is money” Lydia Maria Child’s *The American Frugal Housewife* was a popular domestic manual that encouraged women to attend to housebound activities such as cooking, cleaning, personal fashion, and home décor with frugality.⁹² From practical tips about removing carpet stains to instructions about keeping the dish water hot, Child’s handbook preached the virtues of thrift while providing advice about cleanliness, household maintenance, and child rearing. Other books such as Catherine Beecher’s *The Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841) and the bestseller domestic manual *The American Woman’s Home* (1869) which she co-authored with her famous sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, sought to professionalize domestic work and frame household chores as respectable labor that benefitted the family and the nation state. Although the aforementioned texts celebrated domestic femininity and women who ascribed to the attributes associated with the cult of true womanhood, other popular culture texts satirized the image of the “kept” woman.

Popular nineteenth-century literature such as Gustave Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary* (1856) and Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), in particular, offered a more critical perspective about the housewife icon. Both texts challenge the representation of the upper-class housewife as a beacon of virtue, morality and selfless duty to family and nation. In doing so, these authors interrogated the *limits* of the domestic sphere for

⁹² Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife* (Boston: Carter, Hendee, and Co), 1833. Child’s maintained that the addition of “American” to the title was the result of “an English work of the same name,” the addition of the nation-state designation speaks to ways in which women’s “duty” to the home was positioned as both a “higher calling” and virtuous act toward her family, but also her extended community and the nation.

women's self-actualization. By exposing the female protagonists' disillusionment with their social status and relatively isolated position of privilege, the authors critique the self-entitlement and narcissism of the bourgeoisie while also complicating ideas that *all* women could find personal fulfillment as housewives. In many ways, Flaubert and Ibsen's texts can be viewed as early precursors to more recent twentieth century texts that have presented critical and dystopian views of the housewife and social value systems that limit women's sphere of social, moral, and economic influence to the domestic sphere, such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972). Cox and Leaks' housewife performances as well as the icon of the princess housewife in general, remain haunted by nineteenth century images of virtuous and domestic white womanhood and the ways in which the housewife image was construed as an icon of heterosexist obligation to the nuclear family and the nation state. It is against this history of discursive representation and imaging of white domesticity and economic privilege that haunts and informs Cox's housewife performance in *Housewife* as well as Leakes' initial efforts to conform herself and her family into a an archetype of white familial identity.

BLACK 'LADY' HOUSEWIVES

Posing slightly to the right of the photograph's center, a smartly dressed black woman meets the viewer's gaze. The directness of her gaze toward the camera, coupled with her clothing attire and accessories, and the surrounding props situate her as the focal point of the image. She poses for the viewfinder with her back straight, chest directed

toward the camera, and head slightly tilted to meet the viewer. She is the only photographed subject to interrogate the camera, to acknowledge the viewer's presence and to say mockingly or perhaps matter-of-factly, I see you. As if posing for a painted portrait, she rests one hand delicately on the orange couch while the other hand frames the poodle's nape. The sleek black color of her hair, dark colored suit and nylons coupled with white accessories: a pearl necklace and bracelet and jeweled accents on her suit throws the white woman's clothing, posture, and presence into higher relief. The white woman, wearing a different arrangement of black and white clothing stands bending at the waist. Her legs bare and arms outstretched in service to the seated black woman.

Wearing a fitted two-piece suit, pearls and sheer nylons, while seated and posing for the camera, the black woman distinguishes herself from the other photographed subjects in the image. Cox's comportment and arrangement of the image to convey her black woman persona's wealth can be understood within black feminist conversations identifying and problematizing the visual, written, and verbal discourse about "black ladies." The "black lady," a historical and socially determined construct, serves as a category of representation for black women who by virtue of their socioeconomic status, comportment of their bodies, and in the late twentieth century their acquisition of professional degrees and employment are categorized as "ladies."⁹³ The black lady,

⁹³ Women of African descent were historically denied the opportunity to be viewed as "ladies" because within the dominant, white supremacist popular culture of the United States, black women, because of their alleged lasciviousness, inhumanity, and difference from white women could not be ladies. For a discussion about the ways black women were excluded from the identity marker of lady see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*; Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*; Victoria Wolcott, Deborah Gray White, *Ain't I A Woman and Too Heavy a Load*; and Shirley J Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era," *Journal of Negro History* 77, no. 2 (1992):66-73.

according to black feminist theorist Wahneema Lubiano is the archetypal symbol of the black female par excellence because of her pursuit of educational degrees, adherence to respectable fashion and comportment, and participation as an employed white-collar laborer.⁹⁴ However, as Lubiano points out in her analysis, the black lady is also an important emblem of deviance, of black female ambition gone awry. Scripted in the field of signification as pathological, the black lady is the “female overachiever and betrayer of a possible black patriarchy—but whose existence is noted as least as far back as the eighteenth century...”⁹⁵ Although the black lady controlling image is the corporeal and economic opposite of the welfare queen controlling image, she nevertheless represents black female deviance because of her education and socioeconomic status which is marked as a threat to the progress of black male patriarchy and the nation state.⁹⁶ Cast as a perpetual overachiever, most often to the detriment of black men’s economic, political, and social progress, the trope of the “black lady” exists as the specter of refined moral uplift and decorum, but also an example of black feminine deviancy. A controlling image of black womanhood, rather than a flexible and possibly empowering representation of black female identity, the trope of the black lady celebrates particular markers of success while also virulently reinforcing sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy. Cox’s enactment of a wealthy housewife persona with an attention to the ways in which black women have

Additionally, see the following sources for a discussion about the black lady as a controlling image of black womanhood: Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* and *Black Sexual Politics*; Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens and State Minstrels”; and Lisa Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady*.

⁹⁴ Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens and State Minstrels.”

⁹⁵ Ibid, 339.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

been denied the status identification of lady and the socio-cultural emphasis placed on black upper-class women's comportment within the dominant visual field.⁹⁷

Cox stages twenty-first century black domesticity as a space of personal leisure, financial stability, and material wealth reliant on certain performances of respectability. By comporting her body as upper-class and respectable, Cox establishes as artist-photographer a relationship between domesticity, socioeconomic status and performances of black womanhood. Cox's selection of clothing in *Housewife* is an important detail of her enactment as a wealthy black housewife. The *Housewife* image is one of few photographs in the *Bougies* series whereby Cox comports her body, within a narrative of "respectable" black female domesticity. Cox relies on the comportment of her body specifically her attire and the styling of hair, to locate her housewife performance within a narrative of black respectability.⁹⁸ Her tailored black suit and pearl accessories distinguish her class position and distance from the labor taking place within the household. Although both women are wearing black clothing, the white details of the wait-staff woman's collar, sleeves and apron are visual indicators of her status as employee, especially when referenced against the black housewife's impeccably tailored suit which reads as employer. The housewife's different class positionality is also evident

⁹⁷ Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady*.

⁹⁸ The politics of respectability according to leading historian Evelyn Higginbotham "reflected some African Americans' attitudes about the importance of bodily comportment, civic engagement, morality, and personal hygiene to individual and collective achievement during the early twentieth century. See *Righteous Discontent*. A method of survival and tool of empowerment, the politics of respectability had "subversive implications," as Higginbotham argues, because it encouraged African Americans' participation in civic engagements and collective struggle as a means of refuting white supremacist ideologies that viewed blacks as biologically and culturally inferior.

when comparing her seated position to that of the white woman working as wait-staff. Cox as artist-photographer performs her black housewife identity with an attention to the politics of respectability as a means of distinguishing the black woman's socioeconomic position as different from and privileged from the white woman in the photographed image. Attending to the ways that Cox performs her black housewife persona within the realm of respectable black femininity highlights the significance of the politics of respectability to black communities and the ways in which the respectable comportment of the body in the twenty-first century, much like in the past, relied on the visual constituting of oneself within certain "accepted" codes of behavior and dress.⁹⁹

Cox's body is carefully comported to convey economic affluence and reserved privilege. The erect position of her back and head, the fitted and matte-black finish of her suit, and the feminine crossing of her legs at the ankles cohere to cast Cox as part of a carefully created and managed environment of refined elegance. The silver button-studs that appear across the shoulder-plates and both sides of the torso accentuate the strand of pearls around the black woman's neck and arm as well as her small pearl drop earrings. Perhaps, what is most striking about this image is not the suit or jewelry accessories, but Cox's emphasis as photographer-artist on the housewife's arms and legs. Viewers familiar with Cox's photographic work will immediately recognize that in *Housewife*, as is the case with most of the photographs in *Bougies*, Cox has replaced her back-length

⁹⁹ For a discussion about black communities' visualized performances of respectability see the following sources: Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*; Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*; Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black*; Deborah Willis, *VanDerZee, Photographer 1886-1983*; Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*; Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*.

locks for a long-straight wig. Additionally, her housewife enactment harkens back to an earlier period in women's fashions, particularly black women's church and labor fashions, when nylons were "required" accessories to complete one's outfit. The sheer black nylons appear much like a throw-back or nod to past years in which black women's performances of respectability involved covering one's bare legs. The sheer-black nylons, coupled with the closed-toe shoes that buckle around the ankle and the crossing of her legs at the knees and ankles, register as an effort to assert the housewife's femininity and lady-like status.

Cox's performance as a twenty-first century upper class black "housewife" is informed by the ongoing legacy and re-articulation of respectability or uplift politics in twentieth and twenty first century African American communities. Cox's housewife enactments recast the politics of respectability for a twenty-first century audience. Her posturing of contemporary, wealthy black domesticity—fitted black suit, sheer nylon tights, toe-enclosed shoes and conservative bangs matched by straight hair locates her enactment of the black princess housewife within several important traditions. Cox's decision to style her hair as chemically treated or "permed" suggests that she locates her enactment of upper-class domesticity within important conversations about concerning the politics of black women's hair. The historical and contemporary evaluation of black women's hair according to texture, style, maintenance, and length continues to serve as a site of intra-racial and interracial tension.¹⁰⁰ Black women's decisions to straighten their

¹⁰⁰ Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters*; Ayana Byrd, *Hair Story*; Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*; Lanita Jacobs-Huey, *From the Kitchen to the Parlor*; Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics"; Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising*; Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 172-175.

hair using various methods (perm-relaxers, straightening combs, extensions, and wigs) has developed as a result of ideas about “good hair” vs “bad hair.”¹⁰¹ A black woman’s decision to straighten her hair on the one hand can be read as a tactic to fit in with white standards of beauty. By portraying her housewife persona as a black woman with straight hair Cox demonstrates her awareness about the ways straight hair in black communities is linked to ideas of wealth, white-collar professionalism, and beauty. Cox’s decision to photograph herself as a woman with straight-weaved black hair, as opposed to the stylized “natural” locks style she normally wears, highlights her understanding of and engagement with the politics of black women’s hair, and the ways that this “organic matter produced by physiological processes” is coded as an indexical marker of black women’s social value and worth in many black communities.¹⁰² Cox’s straight long hair, then, coupled with her business-professional attire and accessorizing of her outfit with conservative jewelry—pearls, locate her performance within a tradition of black women assuming and performing their race, gender and class identities according to the standards of respectability.

Cox’s construction of herself as a black housewife with middle-class affluence is central to her conveying via performative enactments as the housewife and as the photographer-artist of the series, the “charms” of *black* economic and social success. Cox surrounds her housewife persona with the charms of wealthy domesticity: contemporary

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰² Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. In 247-264. For additional resources about black women’s relationships to their hair, see the following texts: Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*;

art, hired wait-staff, leisure time, and expensive clothing. Her body as well as the furnishings and props around her serve as indexical markers that convey the housewife's economic security and social status. Cox acknowledges the importance of respectability to black communities through her housewife enactments and the significance of photographic technology to displaying and performing respectability. As persona artist and photographer-artist in *Housewife*, Cox is both a witness and participant to black communities' ongoing investment and efforts to reproduce respectability in private and public images of self, family, and community. Through her strategic enactment of respectability, Cox provides access to and places restrictions on viewers' access to the housewife's body.

Using the comportment of her body and clothing, Cox presents an image of upper class black domesticity that keeps the intimate and private details of the housewife's life from viewing. With knees fastened together and legs demurely tucked to the side, the black woman in the photographed image meets the viewer's gaze. Cox's arrangement of her physical body and attention to portraying that body with sheer black nylons, glossy-straight hair, and a perfectly fitted suit, cohere together as a set a of diverse puzzle pieces that when fastened together create a cohesive image. In this way, Cox's housewife performances in *Housewife* explore the politics concerning black women's work outside the sphere of the domestic realm and the legacy of representations related to black women's domestic work. Cox positions contemporary black housewife performances within a tradition of black women's strategies of resistance and protection under the guise of respectability and dissemblance. Cox's crafting of her housewife persona within the

tradition of respectability and dissemblance practices acknowledges the significance of such performances to black women's positioning of themselves as ladies within their home and communities and the ways that performances of upper-class black domesticity in the past and now was tied to black women's comportment of their bodies and homes within the realm of respectable domesticity.

Cox's enactment of upper-class domesticity in the *Housewife* eclipses the dominant image in the popular imagination of whiteness as the ideal body in which upper-class domesticity is most aptly suited. Even though the comportment of the black female body within a narrative of respectability and black lady performances is informed by the ghosts of white domestic femininity, Cox uses her performance as the housewife to put forth a new image of upper-class domesticity. Cox's figuring of upper-class black female domesticity offers a connection between her own and NeNe Leakes' housewife performances. Leakes' comments about the specter of June Cleaver as the imagined domestic ideal highlights the ghostly presence of white domestic femininity and the ways in which this image of domestic perfectionism is a racial and gender category that even though previously denied to black women nevertheless continues to impose itself on the shoulders of black women living in the twenty-first century. Leakes' comments touch upon the ways in which economic affluence and domesticity have been and continue to be conflated with whiteness and white middle-class standards of nuclear family. Leakes' conceptualizations of ideal domesticity and womanhood were not the fictional characters of Florida Evans or Claire Huxtable, but rather a version of domestic femininity that was unobtainable to black women living a generation before Leakes and her fellow

housewives.¹⁰³ Against this narrative, Cox's enactment as the respectable black housewife, much like Leakes' performances as a princess housewife on the Atlanta series can be understood as a re-scripting of the inaugural scenario of domesticity in which black women were discursively excluded from the category of upper-class housewife, even if and when their socioeconomic status enabled them to confine their domestic labor to their own homes. Although Leakes "comes to her senses" dismissing her initial concerns to fit in within the tradition of white middle and upper-class visions of domesticity, however, what goes unspoken by Leakes is that the ghost of June Cleaver remains. Although several decades have passed since June Cleaver was celebrated as the epitome of (white) middle-class domesticity and womanhood, her ghostly presence that is the image of who is a housewife and what it means to have access to this identification continues to haunt Leakes and others identified as upper-class housewives in contemporary culture, even as the expectations and standards for women change to meet a new wave of commercial capitalism.

Cox however deviates from her performance of both the respectable black lady and the postfeminist sexy black body in important ways, most specifically by scripting her lady performance without the presence or representation of a spouse, male or female.¹⁰⁴ Constructing her black woman identity as a housewife without reference to a

¹⁰³ Even though Florida Evans (Esther Rolle) and Claire Huxtable (Felisha Rashad) were wives and mothers who worked outside the home, I think Leakes' reference to idealized domesticity as outside the parameters of blackness is illustrative of the history in which most black women, even in the fictional world of popular culture, did not have the luxury of relegating their domestic labor to their own homes.

¹⁰⁴ Although there is widespread discursive praise for black women who exhibit determination and perseverance by overcoming barriers to higher education, white-collar employment, and home ownership, signifiers of the "American Dream" ideal, black women occupying this race, gender and class positionality

partner, Cox challenges the tendency for a politics of respectability as a performance of “appropriate” heterosexual black womanhood. Moreover, her excess flesh enactments in the case of the *Yo Mama* image, and *Missy at Home* and *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* can be viewed as scenarios in which Cox as artist-photographer enacts a type of radical narcissism in which she uses her body as respectable lady and sexually desiring and desirable trophy wife to create and celebrate a domestic sphere in which black women rule. Seeing Cox’s self-portraits as the housewife from this vantage point, allows for a reading of her enactments as performances that “obviate the desiring male subject (loving herself, she needs no confirmation of her desirability from him),” as Amelia Jones puts it, because as subject/object, she assumes and declares her own desirability and value, separate and apart from the male gaze.¹⁰⁵ Situating Cox’s performance in this light, her persona enactment as the wealthy and respectable black lady of the home in *Housewife* and her excess flesh enactments in *Missy at Home* suggests that Cox creates a visual narrative about black women’s ownership and oversight over their own bodies and the domestic realm. In the case of both *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*, Cox creates a domestic sphere in which a black woman presides over the household. Cox’s figuring of a black woman as the housewife-employer represents a reimagining of the inaugural scenario of domesticity in which black women labored as domestic workers in white

are also the frequent targets of communal derision. Despite the privileged class position of “black ladies,” black women who occupy this positionality remain subject to intra-racial and interracial commentary that criticize their personal decisions, particularly in the area of sexuality and education/career. Black ladies are cast as threatening anytime their sexual or professional identities are thought to challenge heteropatriarchal ideals of black male leadership and or their assumed privileges are thought to adversely affect black men.

¹⁰⁵ Amelia Jones, *Body Art*, 181.

women's homes. In creating her own vision of domestic harmony in which her black woman housewife persona rules, Cox importantly recalls the past scenarios of domesticity in which black women labored.

Leakes' television persona assuredly prides herself on talking and saying "whatever" she feels like, however, what she does not reveal in her memoir-confessional are the new standards of femininity in which she and the other housewives are expected to live up to. Unimpeded by the strictures of cleaning house, watching the children, and having dinner prepared when their husbands arrive home, Leakes and her fellow cast-mates are part of what cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie identifies as a postfeminist "new gender regime" in which idealized womanhood is marked by "aggressive individualism, a hedonistic female sexuality, and obsession with consumer culture" often through the guise of discourses about "freedom and choice."¹⁰⁶ McRobbie importantly identifies postfeminist discourse as "taking into account" values and ideologies of feminist thought such as sexual freedom, equal rights, and discourses of self-determination and empowerment, however, the articulation of such "rights" in dominant discourses often translates into an eclipsing and demeaning of feminism as a political movement engaged in the critique of institutional racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*. 5, 13.

¹⁰⁷ McRobbie argues that one of the hallmarks of postfeminism is the "consumer-led capitalism" which incorporates "women's issues" such as birth control, sexual identity and subjectivity, professional development, and equal opportunity in the work place as the norm that always has been, as well as connected to consumption, rather than the result of feminist activism, 40.

POSTFEMINIST HOUSEWIVES

Cox's presentation of black femininity is a domestic fantasy in which a black woman serves as the lead protagonist. One of the important aspects of Cox's performances in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* is her portrayal of the home as a space of comfort and respite for black women. In addition to settling the housewife into comfortable settings of plush couches and recreational rooms, in the case of *Missy at Home*, the housewife is also reminiscent of representations and discourse that suggest that black women always have their acts together.¹⁰⁸ Both *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* present Cox within a narrative of finished or "together" sexy femininity that is matched by what appears as a stable and lush environment of wait-staff, pets, and leisure. In this fantasy visual field, we as the viewers, not only desire Cox's body that is her manicured appearance, but also her lifestyle—the access to her things and possessions. Cox's presentation of the black princess housewife in her tranquil enclave is indicative of the social and political context or postracial and postfeminist discourses which espouse that everyone regardless of their race, class and gender have equal access to the American Dream. Feminist media studies scholar, Angela McRobbie identifies this socio-cultural phenomenon, as part of "the new gender regime" or the socio-cultural context in which

¹⁰⁸ Visual representations and intra and interracial conversations about black women have often centered around idealized images of black women as being "super women" or women who hold their families and lives together despite tremendous odds. Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, and Trudier Harris, among others have challenged this mythos and the problems of such representations. Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength." In more recent years, the portrayal of black women as women with supernatural strength and a theatrical zeal for life despite the numerous structural and interpersonal challenges they face has been recast in the image of the black diva who has her life, most importantly her hair, fashion, and persona impeccably under control, so much so that she is recast as the expert of all things related to material consumption. See the following television series

women's decisions, even those that reify heteronormative patriarchy and capitalist hegemonic oppression, are presented in public discourses as evidence that feminism *worked* and is no longer needed since *all* women have *equal* access to and an endless supply of educational, material, social, and economic opportunities and resources. Women's successful ability to constitute this gender identity rests in large part on their ability to consume. The gender identity of this "new female subject" rests on economic and cultural activity, or "consumer citizenship," a type of political, social and economic allegiance that intends to guarantee or solidify one's membership or citizen status within the nation state.¹⁰⁹ Historically marginalized communities of women, particularly women of color, queer women, and transgender women, are transformed or marketed as "commercialized identities" whose presence in visual media is allegedly acknowledgement of their equal access and participation in the U.S. nation state. The "new gender regime" insists that all women everywhere, regardless of their race, class, sexuality, age or other identity markers, can obtain status- identified markers of success, such as college degrees, expensive cars, couture clothing and accessories, as well as large homes. This phenomenon of racial inclusivity in popular culture motifs about housewives is especially evident in the reality-television format on shows like Bravo's *Real Housewives* series as well as in fictional television series such as *Desperate Housewives*.

Often through the guise of high profile achievements of women and girls, feminist values are incorporated into the discursive fabric of U.S. popular culture, mostly via the

¹⁰⁹ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 55-90;

increasing numbers of women and girls who are shown as successful in a broad range of institutions, including higher education, corporate enterprise, popular media, and collegiate and professional sports.¹¹⁰ However, the embrace and celebration of women and girls in this way eclipses the significance of feminism as a political movement dedicated to giving women and girls' greater access to institutions in which they had historically been denied. Moreover, as Cherise Smith and others have pointed out, the image of the hyper-successful, financially powerful, and sexy mogul popular in today's media, fundamentally ignores the ways in which this positionality is exceptional-- one of immense social, economic, and political privilege that the majority of women in and outside of the United States do not have access.¹¹¹ Even though Leakes and her fellow cast-mates are represented as independent women who "speak their minds," own successful businesses, take charge over their sexualities, and espouse a women's empowerment-type discourse, what Leakes and her entourage fail to vocalize (or what is removed during the final edits) is the ways that they are the exception not the rule in black communities. That in fact, most black women, and women in general, do not have the luxury of hired staff, personal assistants and fitness trainers.¹¹² Further, the focus on shopping and attending the right social events eclipses the reality that this representation of womanhood is embedded and relies upon capitalist labor as well as each of the housewives continued investment in the labor of consumer capitalism which requires that

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 14, 18-23.

¹¹¹ Cherise Smith, "Why I am Not Buying Beyonce's Brand of Feminism."

¹¹² Ibid.

they “do” their bodies in a way commiserate with a new archetype of idealized domesticity. Even though Leakes and the other ladies of Atlanta can recline from the labor” of cleaning and cooking, because of paid staff, this ease is offset by a “lifelong and carefully staged body maintenance” in which they are expected to project and embody a type of black upper-class feminine identity that remains silent against social inequality and injustice and instead celebrates the rewards of wealth, sexiness, and social capital.

Cox’s embodied enactment as the affluent housewife in *Missy at Home* seems less about showing her dominance over the domestic landscape and acquisition of material goods, and more about showcasing how she is part of the consumable and desirable scenery. Without meeting the viewer’s gaze, the black woman appears unaware of the viewer’s presence. Her casually arched torso and the slight bent of her knees suggest she’s in a moment of relaxation and quiet contemplation. With her line of vision cast toward the pool table and perhaps beyond it, we are made to feel as viewers, that we have stumbled upon a solitary game of pool, that the housewife remains unaccompanied. With a black lacy negligee that accentuates a black bikini and bare legs, we see the housewife as desirable part of the landscape.

In *Missy at Home* Cox embodies and performs a sensual seductiveness that is commonly identified as a hallmark of postfeminist representations. Although the black housewife does not direct her gaze towards the camera’s viewfinder in *Missy at Home*, there is a distinct feeling or sense that she is aware of her desirability and the ways in which her physical body is marked as sexually desirable and consumable within the domestic landscape. The deliberate posing of the housewife’s body to suggest, perhaps,

her own awareness and interest regarding her sexual desirability, poses interesting questions in light of postfeminist critics' discussions about the "re-sexualization and "re-commodification" of women's bodies in contemporary popular culture.¹¹³ "Indeed what is novel and striking about contemporary sexualised representations of women in popular culture," according to Rosalind Gill, "is that they do not (as in the past) depict women as passive objects but as knowing, active, and desiring sexual subjects."¹¹⁴ Gill argues that current constructions of femininity portray women as knowledgeable and engaged sexual subjects, but in such way that does not benefit or rectify the limiting dichotomies of virgin/whore, etc. of previous decades.¹¹⁵ Moreover, Gill argues that such representations employ a fantasy like image of women's sexual expressiveness that is commiserate with the commodification of women's bodies as objects, and most often heteropatriarchal narratives of sexuality. From this vantage point, the image of the affluent black housewife might be understood as an emblem of sexual desirability but also conspicuous consumption. Women's sexual expressiveness and desire, then, is not about their subjectivity at all, but rather the ways in which their sexualities can be employed in the service of un-egalitarian, global capitalist markets. Equally important, and what Gill does not acknowledge, is the ways that such representations impact black women. Postfeminist rhetorics that perpetuate the false notions of colorblind societies that link women's sexualities to capitalist exchange fail to acknowledge the social effects and impact of

¹¹³ Rosalind Gill, "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Re-sexualization of Women's Bodies in the Media" *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 3, no. 1 (2003), 101.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

such images and discourses on black women. In particular, the assertion of this type of femininity does not take into account the history of enslavement experienced by black women, a social and capitalist production in which black women were sexual commodities and their wombs considered the place by which American capitalist markets would meet the demands of a growing industrial economy. Moreover, the enslavement of women of African descent resulted in a series of controlling images that, on the one hand, constructed black women as sexually lascivious and, on the other hand cast them as asexual pieces of property.¹¹⁶ Black women's contemporary experiences and articulation of their sexualities, then, cannot be understood without an attention to the ways that their identities, especially their sexualities, have been intricately linked to racial subjugation and violence in the past, the repercussions of which continue to haunt contemporary representations of black women.¹¹⁷ I would like to suggest that Cox's presentation of the housewife as a sexually desirable woman, one who willfully and proudly asserts her physical desirability, simultaneously acknowledges the postfeminist context in which women's bodies, even black women's bodies, are presented as consumable products in a lifestyle of consumption while also celebrating black women's sexual expressiveness and knowledge as engaged and desiring subjects who deftly negotiate their sexualities for their own empowering ends.

¹¹⁶ Lisa Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image*, 19-25; Evelyn Hammonds, "Black Wholes"; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

¹¹⁷ Lisa Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image*, 20-22; Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Saidiya Hartman, "Excisions of the Flesh," Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*; Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Kimberly Wallace Sanders, ed. *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*.

PREVIOUS SCENARIOS OF DOMESTICITY

In her enactments as the wealthy domestic leader in *Housewife*, Cox engages in two important processes of *recall*. On the one hand, Cox's figuring of the domestic hierarchy as black woman centered engages and reanimates the long history of black women's forced domestic labor in the United States. With little recourse or political redress, black women worked in the areas of domestic work during slavery and thereafter. In addition to the textual documents that witness to black women's forced subjugation in the realm of the home, visual archives testify to black women's secondary status as household servants during slavery.¹¹⁸ Even after the eradication of slavery in the United States, black women continued to work as domestic workers in white homes. By performing as a wealthy black female body, specifically as a "housewife," Cox summons those histories in which the title of housewife and the economic capital to inhabit such a status was denied to the majority of black women. Cox's enactment of black female wealth and domesticity summons black women's past encounters with the camera and other visual mediums in which their subordinated status within the domestic sphere was recorded in private albums and in the dominant field of representation. Cox's inversion of the racial hierarchy to privilege the black woman as housewife, employer, and lady challenges visual articulations in which black women's subordinated status as domestic workers was visually articulated in popular culture. Cox pictures the domestic sphere as

¹¹⁸ See the following sources: Shawn Smith, *American Archives and Photography on the Color Line*; Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 52-93.

an arena of respite and power reimagines visual scenarios of domesticity in which black women appeared as domestic servants and wait-staff in Western Art. Cox demonstrates her artistic and intellectual acumen in *Housewife* by reimagining Manet's *Olympia* as a visual narrative in which the black woman is the star and the subject of the viewers' interests. Cox's photograph as visual evidence of a domestic scenario in which a black woman presides over the domestic space challenges this visual history. As Cox performs and documents her performance as the upper-class housewife she also summons and bears witness to these important textual and visual histories in which black women were denied the social, political, and economic freedom to live as housewives in their own homes.

THE GHOSTS OF DOMESTIC SCENES PAST

Cox's enactment as the upper-class employer in *Housewife* represents a careful restaging of the inaugural scenario of domesticity. In the scenario of domesticity offered by Cox, a black woman occupies the privileged position of housewife, lady and employer. Unlike inaugural scenarios of domesticity in which black women labored in white women's homes as nursemaids, wait-staff, and cooks, Cox's scenario of domesticity in *Housewife* locates the black female body in the position of executive lead in the domestic realm. Creating this visual scenario of the twenty-first century home, Cox destabilizes the racial and domestic hierarchy that historically has elevated white womanhood over black womanhood in the domestic realm. She relies on various visual cues to visually convey the privileged position of her own black body over that of the white woman. As I have

argued earlier, one important way Cox asserts her position of domestic privilege over that of the white woman wait-staff is via their contrasting outfits. Her persona's black tailored suit accented by pearl and silver jewelry highlights the pale dullness of the white woman's standard uniform. Cox's decision to use a suit in her performance of upper-class domesticity is important for several reasons.

On the one hand, the suit professionalizes Cox's body. Even though she composes and titles the photograph to reference her black body as housewife, Cox's wearing of the suit further distances the visual image of the black female body from ideas of domestic and manual labor. The wearing of the suit coupled with the white woman's standardized "maids" uniform throws into relief the phenotypic, stylistic, and labor differences between the two women. Cox's wearing of a suit to establish the economic privilege and labor authority of her housewife figure might also be understood as a hyperbolic strategy. By this I mean, in the context of 2008, Cox's two-piece suit with silver accents appears dated and reminiscent of fashion wear from the 1980s or 1990s. The suit coupled with the large white poodle, shaggy carpet and green ashtray appear passé, a throwback to past times. Moreover, Cox the artist prides herself on her fashion acumen having spent years in the fashion industry as a professional photographer. Thus, the suit is intended to illuminate the economic and social division between her and the white woman wait-staff while also conveying her sense of humor as artist-photographer to viewing audiences. Cox as the housewife, dons the suit with a tongue-in cheek attitude, as if to say, I want you to know that this is a performance and I am letting you know that I am making fun of this lifestyle, even as I take seriously what it means for me to be wealthy and for me as

well as other black women in the twenty-first century to have the wealth and power to employ white women. Cox's infusion of humor, however, does not eclipse the emphasis she makes on distancing her own black female body from labor. Cox partly constitutes her economic privilege as the housewife through the physical comportment of her body. Enacting her social and economic privilege, Cox directly addresses the viewer with her gaze, and presents her fashion her body and posture to convey sophistication and a reserved demeanor. With her back straight and hand resting delicately on the couch, Cox as her housewife persona, presents herself as a woman of economic means. Cox's suit, strappy high heels and nylons are inappropriate attire for anyone doing manual labor.

In contrast to her relaxed but self-assured position, the white woman wait-staff communicates discomfort with her body. Unseated, the white woman stands, knees buckled into straight lines and arms bent at the elbows as she serves the black woman a beverage. Furthermore, her hair light and blonde is pulled back into a ponytail or bun, in contrast to Cox's leaving her hair down and framing her face. Even as Cox performs her wealthy black woman persona and establishes using clothing attire and the corporeal positioning of the body to portray the black woman as the housewife-employer, Cox maintains through the use of white accessories the ways her housewife's lifestyle remains shaped by figurative and literal symbols of whiteness.

Cox's physical body in the image, is literally surrounded by whiteness. In addition to the stark white walls that surround her (with the exception of *Yo Mama*), Cox's body in the photograph is also enclosed by white props, including the fluffy white pillows on the couch, the white shaggy rug, an off-white poodle and the white woman serving as

wait-staff. In addition to Cox's phenotypic blackness and the blackness of her clothing attire and hair, the vibrant color and texture of the couch serves as a vibrant prop to highlight the contrasting colors. Glorifying and signaling Cox's grandeur, the couch's color and textured material draw strict contours around her housewife body, making whiteness, an identification which is often made invisible and neutral, now stark, obvious and detectible within the photograph. Representing the presence of whiteness as surrounding and enclosing the black housewife suggests that even with her economic capital, the space in which black women assert themselves as the leaders over the home has been and continues to be a racialized negotiation. Cox's ability to claim her wealth, engage in leisure, and live as the housewife rests on the hierarchical displacement of the white female body as the "lady" of the home and the valorization of the black woman as no longer servant, but the individual subject being served. Cox's photographic enactment of the black woman-housewife destabilizes the oldest of hierarchies and originating scenarios of domesticity, those visual and ideological scenes that silenced black women and relegated their presence in the domestic sphere to the label of slave, domestic worker, inhuman, and non-lady. In addition to the ways that *Housewife* reorders the domestic sphere as the realm of black female leisure and white female labor, Cox's reimagining of the inaugural scenario is also a poignant critique about the representation of black women in Western Art.

Casting a willful look of acknowledgment, a black woman, the name of which we do not know, directly engages the viewer. With the slight tilt of her torso and legs towards the viewer's right, she aligns her body and gaze with the camera's viewfinder.

She is the only photographed subject to interrogate the camera, to acknowledge the viewer's presence and to say mockingly or perhaps matter-of-factly, I see you. Cox's staging of her body and the domestic environment in which her housewife rules challenges the historical-artistic legacy in which black women were relegated to the status of servant and invisible "other." In her performance enactment as the wealthy black housewife, Cox tackles black women's troubling presence in the dominant visual field by stylistically and thematically composing her image to reinterpret Manet's well-known *Olympia*.

Debuting at the Paris Salon, *Olympia* was the culmination of a two-year project that had commenced in 1862. In the image, a nude white woman comfortably reclines on a chaise covered with layered fabrics. The viewer's gaze is immediately drawn to her nudity, made more apparent by the small details of her accessories: a bloomed, red flower that rests behind her left ear, red-tinged lips, and a small, rather unremarkable bracelet.¹¹⁹ With her eyes directly and daringly meeting the viewer's gaze, the arm closest to the viewer is neatly folded into a ninety-degree angle, while the other hand is fanned out, discreetly and intentionally covering her genitalia. Despite nineteenth-century Parisian art viewers' relative familiarity with the unclothed white female body, Manet's painting departed from the general artistic impulse of the period in several important ways. Most importantly, Manet's *Olympia*, through composition and subject matter, presented a

¹¹⁹ For most artists of the period, capturing the nude white female on canvas was a means of portraying archetypal images of white, European standards of beauty such as the goddess Venus or the biblical character Eve. See Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid", Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 76-80; Lisa Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*.

woman, whose very occupation as well as her corporeal comportment within the image, asserted her subjectivity and conveyed that she was in command and held ownership over her sexuality. Such a willful acknowledgement and acceptance of white female power and identity assertion elicited social awe and disapproval.¹²⁰ To the left of the viewer's gaze, a black woman, named and identified as Laura, stands far off from the nude woman.¹²¹ Her body positioned directly behind and at the foot-end end of the chase recedes into the dimly lit background of the canvas. Her hair is hidden from the viewer, covered with a light brown- fabric that is similar to the cloud-like folds of white fabric that billow out into a ruffled collar and loose sleeves around her arms.

In addition to framing her own black body as the subject of the photograph and the focal point in which viewers' eyes should rest, Cox incorporates several stylistic cues to challenge the nineteenth century painting's veneration of white womanhood. In contrast to Manet's portrait, which depicted a nude white woman prostitute addressing the viewer, Cox styles her representation of self-possessed and empowered womanhood through the figure of the clothed black female body. Cox addresses and boldly confronts the stereotypes and controlling images of black womanhood that by showing the black female body as respectable while confident and assertive. Even though Cox's persona enactment of "respectable" wealthy black womanhood could be interpreted as another instance in which upper-class black women are portrayed as asexual and devoid of sexual

¹²⁰ In addition to portraying the white female body in ways that differed from classical renderings of white women which portrayed white women as having an appealing and desirous form of naiveté, Manet's use of bold and stark strokes to compose the painting would have startled art critics of the period.

¹²¹ Black feminist scholar and artist Lorraine O'Grady is one of the first scholars to identify the black female attendant, as a subject, a person, whose name is thought to have been Laura.

expression, I maintain that Cox configures this particular performance of wealthy black domesticity in this way so as to refute popular discourses which maintained that the mere presence of the black female body was evidence of deviant sexuality. By recasting the black female body as the subject as the desiring and desirable subject of the photograph, Cox challenges eighteenth and nineteenth century art discourses which maintained that figure of the black female servant was intended to mark the presence of illicit sexual activity and venerate white womanhood as the desirable subject.¹²² Unwilling to associate the housewife's body with any form of sexual lasciviousness, Cox binds her knees together, foreclosing the viewer's access to the housewife's body. Through closed legs, coated in nylon to ensure no access, Cox visually forbids identification of the housewife as sexually available or promiscuous. Cox's staging of her body and the domestic environment in which her housewife rules, challenges the image of black womanhood in the canon of Western art history. In Cox's rendering of female subjectivity, the white woman's gaze, that of *Olympia* and her predecessors and iconic antecedents, is displaced by Cox's physical body and assertion of her sexuality, power, and desirability as she directly confronts the viewer with her subject position in the photograph. Cox's reimagining of the black woman as employer, as lady to be served, and the recording of this imagining via photographic technology, literally and figuratively moves Laura to the foreground. Challenging the figure of the retreating black female servant rendered subservient, silent, hypersexual or asexual in the domestic hierarchy,

¹²² Lisa Collins, *The Art of History*; Lisa Farrington, 19. Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 79. Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid."

perhaps we might read Laura's gaze as "sideways" to begin with. That is, her stare, rather than "blank" as O'Grady describes is in fact, a glare that "talks back" and looks upon the nude Olympia with thought and actions that are not voiceless or silent, but instead say, "heffa please!"

Cox's re-envisioning of the scenario of domesticity, the black woman looks out toward the viewer—she commands the gaze. In contrast to Manet's image which depicts the black servant Laura as directing her attention toward the nude white woman reclining, Cox resituates the black female body in the position of desirable and admired subject/object. Thus, the white woman employee directs her attention to her black woman employer. In this reversal of the racial hierarchy in the domestic sphere, the white woman becomes the prop or appendage in which the black woman's social capital is made evident. As the artist-photographer, Cox has staged the scene to privilege black women's perspectives and to showcase their aesthetic worth and beauty.

Cox is not the first black woman artist to address the representation of black womanhood in Western Art or to directly engage and challenge Manet's conceptualization of ideal feminine beauty in *Olympia* as white-European.¹²³ In 1997, Carrie Mae Weems created five black and white photographs that she collectively entitled *Not Manet's Type*. In each of the paneled frames, Weems included a black and white photograph of herself taken in the privacy of her bedroom. Weems' self-portraits resemble frozen visual narratives from an everyday scene in which an ordinary black

¹²³ Jennifer DeVere Brody, "Black Cat Fever;"; Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image* and "Reinventing Herself," Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over."

woman, in deep contemplation, explores the shape and contours of her own unclothed and clothed black female body in the privacy of her home as a means of exploring and mourning the absence and marginal status of black women in Western Art. Characteristic of Weems' artistic style of combining photographic imagery with text, the images in *Not Manet's Type* expose and critique the invisibility of black women in Western Art and in the canon of art history. Challenging the valorization of white womanhood as the epitome of aesthetic beauty, Weems indicts such famous artists as Manet and Duchamp. In her rhetorical voice, Weems castigates both male artists, as individuals who "never considered me." In doing so, she resolves in her visual and textual confessional that she will paint from her perspective of the world like Frida Kahlo "who from her bed painted incessantly-beautifully" and in doing so documented and honored her beauty despite others' unwillingness to do so. Similarly black woman artist, Mickalene Thomas revised Manet's centering of the white nude female body as a the object of the male gaze by creating her version of *Le Dejeuner sur L' Herbe* (1863) in a painting entitled *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010). Photographed in the Museum of Modern Art's sculpture garden, Thomas' photograph features three black women confidently and assertively directing their gaze toward the viewer as they engage in an afternoon lunch. Surrounded by an array of flowers and resting on vibrant-colored cloths, the women look glamorous and self-possessed in their seventies style dresses. Thomas who often works with her mother as her aesthetic muse along with other black women models prides herself on creating work that decenters the authority and vision of the

white male heterosexist gaze and instead recasts black women.¹²⁴ Prior to Thomas's re-envisioning of *Le Dejeuner sur L' Herbe*, Cox created *Cousins at Pussy Pond* (2001), a photographic reinterpretation of the nineteenth century artists image of luncheon date in the park. Cox reimagines the afternoon picnic with herself as the featured photographed subject.¹²⁵ With her locks styled in a beautiful up-do, Cox confidently addresses the camera as she sits nude on a brightly colored sheet in front of a grassy area and pond. Resembling a queen of sorts, Cox is accompanied by two athletic-looking black men who confidently hold spears in a protective and playful gesture. Cox has a long history of critiquing the image of white womanhood as the apotheosis of desired beauty.¹²⁶ *Housewife* is one of many photographs in Cox's oeuvre including *Baby Back* (2001) a revision of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *Le Grande Odalisque* (1814) and various photographs from her *Flippin the Script* series in which she photographs herself and several black men as iconic biblical characters such as Jesus, Mary, and David. In each of these images, Cox challenges the image and prominence of whiteness in Western Art by inserting her own black body into the visual field.

Cox's visual assertion of her positionality as the lady of the house, and corporeal designation of the white woman as the black woman's domestic worker or servant through the use of uniformed attire and the posturing of her body importantly disrupts and challenges the image of the servile and docile black woman-servant that appeared in

¹²⁴ Lisa Melandri, ed. *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*; and Matthew McLendon, *Beyond Bling. Voices in Hip Hop Art*.

¹²⁵ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 114.

¹²⁶ Joanna Isaak, *American Family*; Kimberly Springer, "Policing Black Women's Sexual Expression"; "Gallery" on reneecox.org

nineteenth and early-twentieth century Western Art. Cox's reconfiguration of the domestic hierarchy by displacing and in essence, demoting the white female body to the position of servant and consequently no longer a "lady" or ruler of the domestic hearth, positions black womanhood at the center of narratives concerning domestic femininity. This explicit challenging of white women's power within the private sphere creates a literal and symbolic place in which black women "rule," and therefore are able as subjects to claim race, class and gender positions previously unavailable to them to as enslaved women, and domestic workers in white women's homes but also in the imaginations of viewing publics whose exposure to the iconography of genteel womanhood featured the white woman as the desirable and in control subject and the black woman as the lascivious or muted help maid. Much like the stir caused by Edouard Manet's influential and unsettling debut of *Olympia* in 1865, *Housewife* similarly challenges viewers' conceptualization of power, eroticism, and pleasure by positioning Cox as the black woman-housewife as the primary photographed subject, and perhaps more importantly, the intended subject for the viewer's desire and gaze. Deviating from Manet's vision of self-possessed and assertive womanhood in the figure of the white woman, Cox possesses the black female body with the power to look.

Aligned with Cox's own description of her photography as multilayered, *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* importantly foreground Cox's past photographic enactments. Cox relies on her embodied performance as an upper-class black housewife to recall, or summon several histories related to black women's image-making practices in the dominant visual field. In addition to crafting her own scenario of domesticity

through her performative enactments in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*, Cox also challenges the racial hierarchy and privileging of white women as housewives by re-envisioning past scenarios of domesticity. Cox reimagines and rescripts past scenarios of domesticity in which black women were relegated to domestic labor outside their own homes as enslaved women and individuals given second-class citizenship status by enacting the persona of a wealthy black housewife who is a “lady” but also the leader who oversees the household. In doing so, Cox’s housewife enactments address the visual legacy of artistic depictions which positioned black women as invisible and subordinate others. Moreover, Cox situates her housewife performances in conversation with previous photographic scenes in which she uses self-portraits to acknowledge the beauty and value of own black female body. Including photographs from her famous *Yo Mama* series in both *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*, Cox suggests that images of the nude black female body, when created by black women and for the purposes of celebrating black women, provide affirmation and visual evidence of black women’s intrinsic value. In addition to comporting the upper-class black housewife as “lady-like” or respectable, Cox also tests the limits of respectability for black women living in the twentieth century by incorporating *Yo Mama* and *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* self-portraits taken from earlier photographic series in which she photographs herself nude. Using previous “excess flesh” enactments of her own nude body, Cox explores the visual counterpoint of the black female body coded as the “respectable” (clothed) housewife by positioning an image of her unclothed black female form.

Yo MAMA

A black and white photograph hangs in the left-hand corner of the image, bordered by a cherry-wood frame and tiled brick. The photograph, a large-scale portrait depicts a black woman sans clothing or accessories except for a pair of black pumps. The upper-portion of her face—eyes, nose, forehead and hair have been removed, concealing her identity from the viewer, the result perhaps of an imperfectly cropped image. The woman bends her arms at the elbows, forearms now creating a ninety degree angle to hold a giggling toddler, whose small frame serves as a bisecting line at her abdomen. The size of the photograph and the visual magnitude of the photographed black woman's body looms over the other photographed subjects in *Housewife*. Casting a protective and watchful gaze over the black woman seated on the couch and her white wait-staff, the black woman in the photograph is given deity-like status as she is depicted as the head of the household.

Figure Three: Renée Cox, *Yo Mama*, 1993



Photographed in 1993, *Yo Mama* is a stunning portrait of a nude Cox and her then toddler, son. *Yo Mama* is part of a series of self-portraits taken by Cox between 1992 and

2001. Each photograph in the series appears with the “Yo Mama” moniker and explores to some degree, Cox’s experiences of her race, gender and class identity, particularly as it takes shape during her experience of motherhood.

Cox’s presentation of her nude black female body in *Yo Mama* contrasts with her persona as the upper-class black housewife who is fully clothed and “respectfully” comporting her body. Cox’s situating of *Yo Mama* in her *Housewife* photograph on the one hand can be read as the artist’s efforts to place an image of her real self as photographed in *Yo Mama*, as in dialogue with a persona character, the bougie black housewife. From this vantage point, *Yo Mama* can be interpreted as a symbol of the way that Cox figuratively and literally looks on the constructed image of her housewife performance and conveys to viewers that she, the real woman taking and constructing the photograph, is in charge of the domestic scene visualized in the image.

On the other hand, Cox’s situating of *Yo Mama* in *Housewife* might also be understood as a complex narrative about black women’s in/visibility within dominant popular culture. Cox’s rendering of the upper-class black housewife as fully clothed—a body made unavailable for viewers’ gazes, is a strategic performance by which she as artist-photographer illuminates black women’s daily practices of truth-telling and concealment. Whereas the housewife’s knees are neatly fastened together foreclosing all accessibility to her most private parts but revealing her face in a direct confrontation with the viewer, the black woman photographed as “yo mama” reveals her body while simultaneously concealing her identity. Cox’s decision to exclude her face in the recaptured portrait of *Yo Mama* in *Housewife* marks an intentional move by the artist to

determine the boundaries and borders in which the black female body is made visible. In the *Yo Mama* portrait, Cox proudly bears her breasts, torso, pudenda, and legs. With her legs opened in a v-stance that takes up space and highlights her strength and beauty, Cox's figuring of black womanhood in *Yo Mama* highlights the means by which black women artists use their nude or partially clothed bodies as a means of self-expression and identity making. Cox uses both her nude and fully clothed black body to create a double-voiced dialogue of visibility between *Housewife* and *Yo Mama*. In doing so, Cox importantly demonstrates the ways black women artists use their bodies to locate the black female body in a context of productive looking that refracts a normative, white, male and heterosexual gaze and challenges the contemporary and historical limitations placed on black women. Including *Yo Mama* in *Housewife*, Cox showcases yet again, a moment of black female agency. Showing two very different presentations of the black female body within the domestic environment, Cox teases out the complicated history of black women's experiential lives and positions within the domestic realm and the dominant visual field. Cox's strategies of performing the black female body as respectable, upper-class, nude and unidentifiable, showcases how she embodies the roles of both artist-photographer and performance artist to highlight the strategic uses of the black female body to enact an oppositional gaze that challenges historical and contemporary instances to silence and make black women invisible.

Because the black female body within the visual field has been and continues to be rendered as already and always explicit and excessive, especially when unclothed, black women since the period of enslavement have had difficulty negotiating a balance

between asserting their womanhood, and acknowledging, honoring, and expressing their sexualities.¹²⁷ Black feminist scholars have importantly acknowledged the limitations of respectability for black women, particularly the ways respectability politics spurred a culture of silence that urged black communities to suppress black women's sexual expressions, especially those falling outside heteropatriarchal standards.¹²⁸ Deborah Willis, Carla Williams, Daphne Brooks and Nicole Fleetwood among others, have acknowledged the ways that discourses of respectability, especially as articulated in dominant visual culture, problematically labeled and visualized black women into narrow binary categories that either depicted black women as romanticized virtuous figures "racially fit" for community uplift or on the other hand, devious and ill-reputable prostitutes.¹²⁹ Through what cultural studies scholar bell hooks as identified as an "oppositional gaze" also understood as a "productive" form of looking according to Nicole Fleetwood, black women have used their own bodies and visual technologies such as photography to contest the controlling images of black womanhood such as the black lady, Jezebel, and Mammy, while articulating their sexual identities.¹³⁰ Black women,

¹²⁷ Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*; Lisa Farrington, *Creating their Own Image*; Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy*. (New York: Farrar, 2003); Kimberly Springer, "Policing Black Women's Sexual Expression."

¹²⁸ For additional discussions about the politics of respectability as well as the ways that the politics of respectability works in the policing of non-heteronormative black sexualities see the following sources: M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*; Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*; Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*; Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell*; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Kimberly Springer, "Policing Black Women's Sexualities"; Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body a Photographic History*; Carla Williams, "Naked, Neutered, and Noble."

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought and Sexual Politics*; bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators."

then, have used photography to assert power and agency over their personal and public lives and visually document their experiences of love, self-pleasure, and eroticism. The accessibility of photographic technologies has provided black women with the means to determine the extent to which they revealed their personal identities or assumed identities commiserate with the standards of respectability. Cox's black housewife enactments in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* visualize the tension between portraying the black female body as demure, asexual, or with a permissive expression of their sexualities in twentieth century popular culture and black women's own articulation of their personal desire for and desirability as sexual subjects.

At tension with Cox's display of middle class respectability and "dissembled" acts in *Housewife* and *Yo Mama* however, is her disavowal of what could be considered respectable comportment in *Missy at Home*. Posing semi-clothed in lacy black negligee and bikini, the housewife in *Missy* appears to have dismissed the corporate-like attire of the two-piece suit for seductive night-wear. Deviating from her pearl-wearing necklace and bracelet as seen in *Housewife*, the housewife residing at home in *Missy at Home* engages in the use of her body as a site of what can be considered disrespectful, that is, a performance and use of the body that is hypersexual and seductive. By presenting the wealthy black housewife as a desirable sexual being, one who freely expresses pride in her physical appearance and a willful acknowledgment that this body is and can be a subject of sexual longing, Cox creates a photographic narrative to explore the ways in which the black female body has historically been viewed as excessive. Her artist-photographer and performative enactments of black domesticity in the figure of the

trophy wife as seen in *Missy at Home*, coupled with the photograph of her nude performance in *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, offer a visual counter-narrative to the stifling portrayal of black women's domestic lives and relationship to domesticity within the realm of respectable performance.

With her gaze directed toward the pool game, Missy casually props her left elbow unto the crowded table that makes up the bar. Bringing a glass of Appleton rum to her lips, as if in deep thought about something other than her next move on the game table, she leans in bending at the torso and with her legs to support her relaxed position. The eye moves from her gaze to the cue stick. The stick forms a bifurcating line between her legs, drawing viewers' attention to her exposed thigh and strappy-blacks sandals. She's an image of beauty, sexiness, and sass. The two-piece black suit featured in *Housewife* is an afterthought, a hazy image of a previous performance no longer needed for this portrait of the private sphere.

Engaged in a performance that relies on the corporeal enactment of the partially unclothed black female body, Cox draws on the image of the disrespectful or sassy black female body and the ways in which this over-determined image of black female sexuality and identity-existence exists in contemporary visual culture. By performing an excess flesh enactment within the domestic realm, Cox demonstrates black women's strategic use of their bodies via performance and photography to examine black women's performances of sexual desire and desirability. No longer designating herself as "housewife" in *Missy at Home*, Cox has taken up another persona for her wealthy housewife, the sexually desirable black trophy wife. In this image of domesticity, Cox's

hair and signature rum glass are the only remnants from *Housewife*. In *Missy at Home*, Cox has traded her two-piece black suit for another black ensemble, a sheer-lace bodysuit with matching bra and panties. Assuming a gaze and posture that remains unconcerned or perhaps unaware of the viewers, Missy stands poised and ready to make her next move. When viewing this image, it appears that viewers have entered a more private realm of the domestic sphere than the image of respectably domesticity portrayed in *Housewife*.

Deviating from discursive presentations of black womanhood as asexual or sexually repugnant and lascivious, Cox presents a display of black female sexuality that as Nicole Fleetwood puts it, “acknowledges but does not adhere to racialized and sexualized aberrance.”¹³¹ Performing black female domesticity as excess flesh enactment, Cox recasts the vision of black womanhood and domesticity. Undeterred by the politics of respectability or other controlling images of black womanhood and domesticity, Missy is the desirable and desiring subject. Although her gaze is cast away from the camera’s viewfinder, Cox asserts the subject position as one belonging to black women through her enactment of excess flesh. The partial opening of her negligee to reveal glistening and toned thighs seems reminiscent of photographs from earlier series, such as *Baby Got Back* and *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben*, images in which Cox proudly showcases her body for the viewer. Sheer with slight openings at the neck, stomach, and just below the vaginal area, Missy reveals a new kind of flesh, a flesh that no longer signals or renders the black female body “captive” but rather speaks to the use of the

¹³¹ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 111.

nude or partially covered black female body to enact “new possibilities of seeing and experiencing pleasure and play” in the dominant visual realm, even if, such images of black womanhood “play into dominant conceptions of racialized sexuality.”¹³² With the cue stick lingering between her legs, a phallic reference symbolizing emboldened agency, Cox’s persona enactment as the sexy black housewife seemingly answers Evelyn Hammonds call for black women to make their sexual agency, subjectivity and desire visible.¹³³ Cox’s performance as Missy “troubles” the visual field by validating the partially unclothed black female body in the domestic realm. Cox importantly stages black female sexuality and desirability in ways that free the hyper- (in)visible image of the docile, asexual Mammy in the domestic sphere or the controlling image of the lascivious Jezebel whose sexuality rendered explicit but only for the purposes of the white or black, heterosexist male gaze.¹³⁴ Challenging these “partial images” of black womanhood through the use of her semi-clothed body, Cox seizes upon the historical attempts to restrict black women to a silenced and docile terrain within the domestic sphere by reenacting a gaze of anticipation, longing, desire, and, pleasure. This image of black female desire does not erase the surveillance and violence experienced by black women, however, it does signal the “impossibility of a totalizing gaze” as Fleetwood puts it, and illuminates the ways in which black women’s visual artists like Cox use photography to visualize and record black women’s insurgent practices.

¹³² Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 136.

¹³³ Evelyn Hammonds, “Black Wholes”.

¹³⁴ Arguing for a reading of Hannah Arendt’s nude or semi-clothed self-portraits as examples of radical narcissism, Amelia Jones maintains that Arendt’s photographs solicit the gaze and reflect it back in an articulation of self-possessed subjectivity. See Jones, *Body Art*, 170-184.

YO MAMA'S LAST SUPPER

A five-paneled photograph, Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, is a black woman's revision of Christ's last supper with his disciples before his crucifixion. Embodying Christ in black female form, Cox stands front and center addressing the viewfinder. Taking her place at the center of the table, she stands straight, gaze directed upward toward the heavens and her arms open in ninety-degree angles, as if in a position of surrender. With the exception of a white piece of fabric draped over her forearms, Cox is nude. To her left, a white man with curly hair holds a mug tightly with both hands. He stares outward, the subject of his viewing unknown to the viewer as his gaze looks beyond the photograph's frame. Next to him, two black men mingle to themselves, as three others stare into the camera lens suspiciously. On Cox's right side, which is actually hidden from the viewer's sight in the *Missy at Home* photograph, several black men form two triads. One man glances in Cox's direction toward the center of the table, as others look cautiously beyond the photograph's frame or talk amongst themselves. Several bowls of fruit rest on top of the table, along with a few plates of tortilla-shaped bread, glasses and receptacles for holding wine. *Yo Mama's Last Supper* is a revisionist interpretation of Leonardo Da Vinci's fifteenth-century painting, *The Last Supper*, but perhaps more important and significant to this project's focus, a depiction of God as a black woman.

Figure Four: *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, 1999



Cox's display of her nude body in *Yo Mama's Last Supper* is an enactment of excess flesh that privileges the black female body as an agent/subject of supreme knowledge who is worthy of respect, admiration, and worship. *Yo Mama's Last Supper* is a black woman's re-visioning of the originating scenario of betrayal. Identifying herself as the Savior, a woman of perfection, grace, and humility, Cox also acknowledges the ways in which black women have been offered as sacrificial lambs for their families, communities, and systemically. Placing the black female body in the position of sacrifice testifies to black women's very real sacrifices made on behalf of their families and communities, but also the ways in which black women's sacrifice of themselves (their health, lives, subjectivity, wellness, etc.) for others, is met with betrayal and violence.¹³⁵ Black feminist scholars such as Michele Wallace and Trudier Harris, among others have problematized the myth of the black superwoman and identified "this disease called strength" as a burdensome social and community obligation that unfairly casts black

¹³⁵ Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength;" Michele Wallace, *Black Macho*.

women as the perpetual saviors of the race.¹³⁶ Who better to understand the position of sacrificial giving than a black woman, who as Zora Neale Hurston so aptly put many years ago, was “the mule of the world?”¹³⁷

With arms extended in a position of reception and acceptance, Cox acknowledges the historical and contemporary tendency in dominant popular culture to identify black women and the black female body with strength and self-sacrifice. Cox’s performance as Jesus, the one who would die for the world’s sins, reveals the infectious and deathly nature of “the virus of strength” that has often cost black women their lives.¹³⁸ Cox’s re-envisioning of God as a black female deity is also an indictment and critique of whiteness. Cox uses her nude body to make a symbolic statement that testifies to the purity, reverence, and importance of the black female form. The apotheosis of the black female body is contrasted against a white, male betrayer. Judas, who sits to the right of the black woman savior, is the only subject identified as phenotypically white. Aloof from Cox as the savior figure, Judas is also the social outcast among his black and brown peers. The two men closest to him mingle to themselves, with their backs against him amplifying his status outside the grouped triads of black and brown disciples. Cox’s positioning of her own body in relationship to the white male body indicts whiteness and

¹³⁶ For sources about controlling images related to black women and strength as well as black women’s own interpretations about the problems of being perceived as unwaveringly strong see the following: Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman*; Trudier Harris, “This Disease Called Strength” *Literature and Medicine*, Vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 109-126. ; Sheri Parks, *Fierce Angels*; Michele Wallace, *Black Macho*;

¹³⁷ Hurston’s quote about black women’s liminal and subjugated place within U.S. society is articulated via her protagonist and heroine, Jaine Crawford, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

¹³⁸ Trudier Harris, “This Disease Called Strength” 110.

specifically challenges popular associations of goodness with whiteness and evil or things considered “bad” as black. Cox’s revision of this infamous biblical scene reverses the tide of history by placing a black woman in the position of savior as well as judge, while white manhood is cast as the deceiver and evil one, the bearer of the gravest injustice, the killing of the savior. *Yo Mama’s Last Supper*, then, is more than a commentary on morality but a political and social statement about the ways in which race and gender have been used to perpetuate anti-black sexism. In addition to aligning black femaleness with perfection and with the divine power to castigate whiteness, *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* venerates the black female artist as visionary and artistic genius. Embedding *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* in *Missy at Home* foregrounds the black female artist and muse as the architect and central subjects of a classical piece of art. One of the most fascinating things Cox acknowledges by placing *Yo Mama* in a photograph from *Bougies* is the ways in which black women have been excised, ignored, or criticized in the canons of western art and in contemporary art criticism.

When *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* was included in the *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2001, a public outcry ensued. New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani was a particularly vocal proponent against Cox’s work, explaining that it violated social decency and was defamatory to Catholicism and religion more generally.¹³⁹ Describing Cox’s work as “disgusting” and “outrageous,” Giuliani called for the establishment of a decency commission to set

¹³⁹ “The Mayor and the Arts, Round 2,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2001, A18; Fleetwood, 106.

artistic standards and to cut taxpayer support for the museum.¹⁴⁰ Giuliani's outcry toward Cox's artistic piece had less to do with decency standards and more to do with his own and the public's aversion, disdain and "love" for the nude black female body.¹⁴¹ Black feminist art historians have been at the forefront of scholarship concerning as scholar Lisa Collins puts it, the "contemporary visual predicament" of black female visibility "as well as "the brutal history of enforced overexposure of black women's bodies."¹⁴² Cox's posing as a nude black female Christ and the controversy over her artistic expression highlights the ways in which the "black female body presents a problem in the visual field."¹⁴³

Portrayals of the black female nude, as art historians Judith Wilson and Lisa Collins among others have argued, are rare in comparison to the numerous examples of white female nudes in American and European Art.¹⁴⁴ The absence of the nude black female body within these artistic canons stems from various social, political, and economic systems deriving from the system of enslavement and the ongoing exploitative practices of the twentieth century.¹⁴⁵ In addition to the absence of the black female nude from Western Art, Cox's nakedness also elucidates the perverse desire and love for black women that produced a historical past in which black women have been the emblems of

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*.

¹⁴² Lisa Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*, 38.

¹⁴³ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 109.

¹⁴⁴ Lisa Collins, *The Art of History*, 38; Lisa Farrington, "Reinventing Herself."; Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle, Wash: Bay Press, 1992).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

sensuality and objects of lust.¹⁴⁶ Given the complex history in which black women have been visualized in the dominant visual field, Giuliani and other critics' aversion to Cox's reinterpretation of the Last Supper is more than an argument about religion and decency. Giuliani's campaign against Cox's artistic re-envisioning of The Last Supper reflects the pre-existing and ongoing "problem" of the black female body in the dominant visual field and the perception that race, gender and sexual difference poses a threat to the dominant status quo. As Nicole Fleetwood has so aptly articulated, "the vitriolic response" to Cox's work by Giuliani and others was not to be outdone by art critics, who expressed ambivalence and disregard for Cox's work. Fleetwood notes that many art critics "expressed hesitance, and occasional revulsion, at the sight of a naked black female body placed at the center of artistic debates and visual narratives."¹⁴⁷ This public outcry by politicians and art critics is in contrast to the ways that white male artists, across history, have been celebrated for their artistic depictions of Jesus and other biblical stories or biblically inspired tableaux.

Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper* "talked back" to the history of black women's racist and sexist exclusion from Western Art by creating an image that validated her own black female body and situated black womanhood in the position of privilege and prestige. When questioned if she created *Yo Mama's Last Supper* to increase her fame, Cox responded that she created the piece and her many other artworks for personal inspiration and confidently affirmed that she had "a right to interpret the Last Supper just

¹⁴⁶ Collins, *The Art of History*, 41; Lorraine O'Grady; Sander Gilman; Springer, *Skin Deep: Spirit Strong*.

¹⁴⁷ Fleetwood, 108.

as Leonardo da Vinci created the Last Supper with people who look like him.”¹⁴⁸ The social sanctioning of Cox via impassioned public campaigns, artistic criticism and even silence is reminiscent and reflective of the ongoing sanctioning of women of color artists who have dared to define Judeo-Christian or Catholic deities or saints from black and brown-women centered perspectives.¹⁴⁹ Cox showcases her knowledge of art history but also tests the boundaries of artistic expression, acts that artists are often and should be celebrated for by declaring that viewers of *Yo Mama's Last Supper* and society writ large take her and her art seriously. Cox stands literally at the center of the table as well as figuratively at the center of the image as the creator of the photograph. Cox uses her own body to demonstrate the beauty of the black female body and form while also creating a vision of black female deity and dominion. Using her own body and photographic expertise as a staging ground, Cox contributes to the ongoing project of creating narratives by and about black women.

¹⁴⁸ Monte Williams, “Yo Mama’ Artist Takes on Catholic Critic,” *New York Times* February 21, 2001, B3.

¹⁴⁹ In addition to Cox, I am thinking particularly about Latina artists Alma Lopez, Yolanda Lopez, and Marion Martinez whose feminist reinterpretations of the Virgin of Guadalupe have been subject to similar critiques of indecency and blasphemy. See the following sources: Sandra Cisneros, “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” *Ms. Magazine* July-August, 1996, 43-46; Jo Ann Isaak, “American Family” *Renee Cox: American Family* (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 2001); Betty LaDuke, “Yolanda Lopez: Breaking Chicano Stereotypes,” *Feminist Studies* 20, no. (1994):117-130.

CONCLUSION: PROTECTING THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

To the left of the frame, a black woman stands poised in a defined stance. She is nude and wearing three-inch black pumps. Unable to see her eyes, to meet her gaze, the viewer's line of vision moves downward, past the woman's neck, breasts, and muscular torso. Arms, poised in ninety-degree elbow bends, she securely holds a giggling toddler, who serves as a bisecting line across her midsection. The black and white photograph, now a mixture of contrasting grays in its photographic reproduction, is protected by glass. The black woman in the photograph, within the photograph, appears to loom over the other photographed subjects. Her body and her presence preside, rule, and protect the space. She stands head and shoulders above the employed white staff, a signal of her spatial rule, as well as a secure and mirroring presence to the black housewife who rests comfortably and assertively on her couch. Mounted in the housewife's home and safeguarded behind transparent-protective material, the black female body has created a space of safety and security for black woman well-being in the domestic environment.

This chapter examines Cox's persona enactment as a wealthy black housewife in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*. It argues that each photograph is a scenario of domesticity in which Cox crafts a persona of wealthy black womanhood to engage with contemporary representations of wealthy black housewives in dominant popular culture and to explore the ways that contemporary images of black women and domesticity are informed by black women's labor in the domestic sphere as enslaved women. Cox negotiates the temporal distance of black women's relationship to the domestic sphere by including self-

portraits from her previous *Yo Mama* series. In doing so, Cox shifts the temporal milieu to make visible the ideological traffic between two temporally distant images and experiences of black womanhood. Cox uses her body as both artist-photographer and performer to adopt various character personae to explore previous scenarios of domesticity and the ways that narratives about black women's bodies, labor, and identities inform present outcomes. Cox's persona enactments as an upper-class black housewife calls attention to black women's engagement with the politics of respectability, dissemblance, and excess flesh enactments to challenge the legacy of controlling images and stereotypes about black women but also their strategic and empowering practices of self-definition.

CHAPTER THREE:

“Luxuriating in her Misery”: Black Female Disillusionment, Personal Suffering, and Domestic Violence in *Bougies*

It’s about an African American woman who is luxuriating in her misery. She’s alienated, she’s lonely; she is living in her head so to speak.¹⁵⁰

-Renée Cox

Where did that come from? It came because here I was living in suburbia, I’m living in Chappaqua, and I’m around these women who are on Valium and pain killers and drink cocktails. They’re privileged but they’re alienated and they’re isolated. They’re alone...So I took that idea from the environment that I was in...¹⁵¹

Renée Cox

Is there a space where she belongs?
Is there a corner of a dark cave
she is free to cling to?
Where may she find
empathy, peace?

Medusa
Renisha
She is bereft of her sisters
And we her sisters
Mourn her loss.¹⁵²
-Sheree Renee Thomas

On November 2, 2013 an African American woman knocked on the door of a suburban home in Dearborn Heights, Michigan, during the early hours of the morning. What the young woman wanted from the occupant and why he came to the door armed and shooting remains unknown. However, the verifiable facts are that Renisha McBride, age nineteen, died from a fatal gunshot wound to the head on this fall day and that the loss of her life to homicidal violence is a reminder of the vulnerability that black women and girls continue to face in the twenty-first century United States in suburbia in

¹⁵⁰ Renée Cox, interview at Gallerie Nordine Zidoun in Paris. November 2008.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQS3hOh639M>

¹⁵¹ Renée Cox, interview by Nicole Plett. Rutgers University, 21 October 2008.

¹⁵² Sheree Renee Thomas, “A Poem for Renisha McBride.” Crunk Feminist Collective.

particular. In response to McBride's murder and the deaths of many African American women and men by white police officers or white individuals, writer and activist, Sheree Thomas wrote a poem to honor McBride's life. "A poem for Renisha McBride" articulates Thomas's feelings of loss and sadness and the ways that McBride's death affects communities of black women—"we her sisters mourn her loss." Because of black women's subordinated status in the United States, they much like the feared gorgon Medusa from Greek mythology are relegated to the periphery of dominant culture as undesirable figures or less than fully human individuals.¹⁵³ Thomas' poem reflects on black women's marginality in the United States and the ways this positionality leaves black women and girls vulnerable and without a figurative and at times literal place to call home. In this sense, Thomas portrays black women as both wanderers in search of a place of empathy and peace and also as collective community that mourns the loss of any of its members. Select photographs from Cox's *Bougies* series similarly explore this idea of black women's alienation while also expressing sorrow and sadness for the burdens that black women experience because of their race and gender. Through her persona enactment as a "troubled" housewife, Cox explores the "burdens" of upper-class black womanhood.

¹⁵³ Thomas's reference to Medusa in her reference to black female alterity and marginality is especially interesting in light of the definition of a "gorgon" as a female monstrous in appearance and unbearable to look at. Thomas importantly equates Medusa's mythical undesirability and alienation as similar to black women's experiences of living in a social context in which their bodies and lives are often viewed with disgusted disdain and fear. The literature discussing black women's marginality in the United States is extensive, here are a few notable texts that address black women's histories as second-class citizens in the United States. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Cherie Moraga, ed, *This Bridge Called my Back*; Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*; Barbara Smith, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*; Hortense Spillers, Harriet Washington, *Medical Apartheid*; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load*.

“Luxuriating in Her Misery” examines Cox’s critique of the domestic environment as a place of dissatisfaction, containment, self-injury, and violence for black women. It focuses on Cox’s embodiment of the upper-class housewife persona to name, explore and critique the affective dimensions of upper-class black womanhood, specifically the way she authors a black woman centered experience of alienation, self-abuse, and violence. Unlike chapter one, which focused on Cox’s strategies of recalling black women’s previous and contemporary scenarios of domesticity through the lens of “scrambled time,” this chapter examines Cox’s use of the camera and performative strategies to narrate a different story about black womanhood and domesticity, one that challenges idealized conceptualizations of the upper-class black woman and home.

The photographs analyzed in this chapter, *The Jump Off*, *Pill Popper*, and *Sleepwalking* focus on personal and societal issues that are frequently invisible or uncommon in visual representations of upper-class black domesticity. I argue that each of the photographs can be read as a “troubled” housewife scenario in which the once idealized icon of black wealthy domesticity is now a representative emblem of failed domesticity. I suggest that Cox structures her display of the housewife as dissatisfied and bored, desperate and out-of-control, isolated and lonely to satirize the celebratory and romanticized image of upper-class domesticity that circulates in postfeminist representations of womanhood in dominant media. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, I maintain that Cox’s troubled housewife performances explore the reality and consequences of feeling overburdened or overwhelmed by societal and personal

expectations.¹⁵⁴ Cox's performance as the isolated and lonely upper-class black housewife "luxuriating in her misery" as she puts it, critiques this "disease called strength" or conceptualizations of real and fictional black women as towering sources of strength, literal and figurative "superwomen" who are infinitely able to manage and endure incredible suffering, loss, violence, and degradation.¹⁵⁵ Cox's troubled housewife scenarios showcase her efforts as an artist photographer to complicate the images assumed to be successful representations of black women. I take up the following questions to analyze the selected photographs as troubled housewife scenarios: How does Cox arrange the photographic landscape and her performances (gestures, comportment, and photographic landscape) to chronicle the housewife's troubles? What techniques does Cox use to portray the home and neighborhood as confining for the black housewife? In

¹⁵⁴ Mercedes Bunz argues that the mechanisms of patriarchy, sexism, and other forms of oppression against women takes place in a new or different form because of twenty-first century global capitalism. Bunz suggests that women are no longer given the "choice" to stay home or work, but rather they are increasingly met by the discourse of productivity. Plagued by the "paradigm of excessive demands," women today are overburdened, not necessarily by a political and social debate about whether a mother is allowed to work or whether being-a-mother is work, but rather that no matter which decision women make, they are made to feel guilty or unfit even when they elect to do both. The woman of today, according to Bunz, is a "must do woman" who is expected to "be a good mother, successful in [her] profession as well as—naturally—a good wife and love" (223). Bunz's analysis is an apt description of postfeminist expectations for middle and upper-class women. However, what Bunz does not mention at least explicitly, is the ways in which the "must do woman" is represented as middle or upper-class and that the ability to name one's life as "overburdened" and to seek out and have actual support systems in the way of childcare, housekeeping, cooking and professional mentorship, are in fact mostly unavailable to working class or poor women, or women without interpersonal partnerships and/or extended kinship networks. See Mercedes Bunz, "Liberated from What? Within Flexible Capitalism, Excessive Demands are the New Oppression" in *It's Time for Action (There's No Option). About Feminism*, ed. Heike Munder (Zurich: Migros Museum, 2007), 209-227.

¹⁵⁵ In her signal essay "This Disease Called Strength," historian Trudier Harris, examines the construction of black female fictional characters as "towers of strength" and the ways that representing black women as having supernatural feats of strength is in actuality a new stereotype. See Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength" *Literature and Medicine* 14.1 (1995) 109-126; See the following texts for a discussion about representations of black female strength, Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*.

what ways does she identify the domestic environment as physically and psychically unsafe for black women?

I maintain that Cox's photos can be read as scenes that critique the postfeminist myth of the domestic sphere as a place of safety, refuge and comfort for black women, and instead, situates the home and neighborhood, the private sphere, as a place of dissatisfaction, isolation, and hardship for black women. In doing so, Cox contributes to black women's ongoing discussions and critiques of the nuclear family or home and black communities while also challenging the tendency in black-oriented media and postfeminist mythology in popular culture to categorize black women with professional and economic affluence as idealized role models of "successful" black womanhood. Situating Cox's photographs in this way, highlights the instability and tenuousness of the princess housewife domestic performance of "having it all together—all of the time," and creates an important context for discussing the ways in which black women's limited economic affluence does not reflect black women's safety or health and wellbeing in the twenty-first century United States. Cox's disappointed and paranoid performances of upper-class black female domesticity challenge postfeminist discourses that proclaim instances of black female wealth as proof of equal access and opportunity. In doing so, Cox creates a visual narrative that explores the complexity of black womanhood by examining from a black woman centered perspective, dissatisfaction and isolation, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

Throughout the *Bougies* series, Cox explores how representations of the upper-class black housewife can be used to signify many subject positions.¹⁵⁶ Assuming a persona as the troubled rich housewife in *The Jump Off*, *Pill Popper* and *Sleepwalking* Cox draws on previous scenarios that have addressed domesticity and discontent. In each of the photographs, Cox showcases a situation in which the housewife has lost her ability to maintain the decorum and posture of respectable and hyper-manicured appearance. Unlike *Housewife* which appears as a portrait of domestic perfectionism or *Missy at Home* which resembles a magazine photo spread of a sexy celebrity while lounging around at home, this group of photographs depict scenes in which the once prospering black housewife appears dissatisfied, paranoid, unraveled and lost. This set of images explores what happens when the domestic sphere, specifically the home, the neighborhood, one's lifestyle, becomes a form of imprisonment. This idea of containment is amplified by Cox's strategies as artist-photographer to compose the photographs in a way that resembles surveillance photos. Cox positions the viewer of the images as a voyeur or unknown surveyor of the black housewife's private affairs. In each of the images, the camera-viewfinder is positioned as an uninvited spectator who appears to be curiously watching the housewife's actions. Cox the model assumes the character of an unsuspecting housewife engaged in her daily routine while Cox the artist constructs an environment in which the viewer is positioned as an intruder. Positioning herself and the viewer as unwelcome surveyors, Cox allows the camera to intrude into the housewife's

¹⁵⁶ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 72.

private moments. Visually and conceptually similar to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1979), Cox allows the camera "to intrude into moments in which [the housewife] is unguarded, sometimes undressed, absorbed into her own world in the privacy of her environment."¹⁵⁷ In presenting herself as a detached and desperate black woman spiraling out of control with addiction and vulnerable in her environment, Cox provokes a mixture of anxiety and reticence on the part of the viewer, simultaneously welcoming viewers to look on unobserved while also indicting them for their willingness to stare and observe the black woman's most personal and intimate affairs. Registering a series of troubles for the photographed subject and those viewing the images, Cox chronicles the housewife's successive failures to maintain the poised confidence she exuded in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*. Prompting viewers to consider "the discourse of silence" and invisibility about black women's sexual dis/satisfaction, alienation and isolation, chemical dependency and physical vulnerability in black communities, Cox considers the habits and experiences that prompt the housewife persona to go in search for peace.¹⁵⁸

In an interview during an exhibition of *Bougies* at the Galerie Nordine Zidoun in Paris, France, Cox described the series as a photographic visualization of what she termed, "*Desperate Housewives* meets *Valley of the Dolls*."¹⁵⁹ Cox's description of her photographic series as a combination of *Desperate Housewives*, the popular ABC

¹⁵⁷ Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body," 288.

¹⁵⁸ Evelyn Hammonds, "Toward of Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality"; Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell*; Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words"; Kimberly Springer, "Policing Black Women's Sexual Expression"; Lisa Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady*; Carla Williams, "Naked, Neutered, or Noble."

¹⁵⁹ Renee Cox, interview at Galerie Nordine Zidoun, Paris France in 2008.

primetime television series about five middle-class women who were friends living on Wysteria lane, a fictional street in a middle-class suburb, and the late 1960s film success, *Valley of the Dolls*, based on Jacqueline Susann's popular novel of the same name title, about three women who become entangled in drug abuse, alcoholism, and other self-destructive patterns as they seek meaningful professional careers and romantic relationships suggests that the artist-photographer wanted *Bougies* to speak about the privileges and at times, nightmarish outcomes that happen in the domestic realm.¹⁶⁰

Cox's identification of her series as a meeting between two popular visual narratives about middle and upper-class women's experiences of class mobility, particularly their "failures" to acclimate successfully and consistently into the home because of substance abuse, failed relationships, and even death, suggests that Cox purposely constructed her version of upper-class black womanhood, in the case of the home and neighborhood as both a site of personal contentment and pleasure, but also a dissatisfying and potentially harmful environment. Cox is careful to detail the luxuries of the "good life" such as sitting pool side, having service staff, and wearing expensive clothing, lifestyle choices that are available to upper-class black women while also chronicling the ways in which this lifestyle, and specifically the domestic areas of the home and neighborhood can cause personally hazardous consequences such as alcoholism, substance abuse, isolation, and violence. In this way she chronicles as a visual artist and performs the "highlights" and pleasures of economic security and then

¹⁶⁰ Both *Desperate Housewives* and *Valley of the Dolls* include storylines examining middle-class women's discontent with their personal lives, problems with substance abuse, suicide, and experiences in unfulfilling relationships and careers.

shifts in tone and theme to mark the “costs” of this lifestyle by showing her black woman persona character’s gradual demise into insomnia, drug addiction, and discontent. I maintain that Cox characterizes the upper-class domestic realm in this way, particularly a black woman’s experience of it, to suggest that her black woman persona, just like the characters in *Desperate Housewives* and the protagonists in *Valley of the Dolls* can and do find comfort and pleasure in their lifestyles, they also struggle and fail to meet the challenging demands of staying “beautiful,” managing their homes, and maintaining their relationships and therefore engage in un/successful attempts to leave their domestic environments. Cox’s persona enactments as a troubled black housewife in *The Jump Off*, *Pill Popper*, and *Sleepwalking* can be read as a visual meditation about a black women’s unraveling from her pristine and structured presentation of self.

THE JUMP OFF

In a photograph titled *The Jump Off* a black woman lays across the bed. Her gaze is cast in the direction of the camera’s viewfinder, yet her eyes are averted away from the viewer suggesting that she is in a moment of private self-reflection. The image is a close shot of a woman laying down and facing the camera, while the other individual in the bed, with his or her back to the camera, hides their face from the woman and the viewfinder. The woman lies on the bed, torso and legs exposed. Her lover or partner, partially covered by the white comforter is shirtless. Unable to see his or her facial expression, one wonders if she or he is asleep, upset, or perhaps simply disinterested in the black woman. With her bangs swept to the side, hair falling over her shoulders, she is

wearing a sheer black lacy bra and panties set. A silver necklace around her lower abdomen rests just above her pubic area. She has casually used her hand to prop up her head as she folds her arm into a forty-five degree angle revealing her silver jewelry: two silver bracelets and a large silver ring on her ring finger. In the other hand she holds a glass of amber-colored liquid. Directly in front of her, on the perimeter of the bed frame a book the title of which is not visible is splayed open, a short distance away from a bottle of what appears to be the signature black and red label of Appleton Rum and a handful of blue pills.

Figure Five: Reneé Cox, *The Jumpoff*, 2008



The context of Cox's performance in the bedroom, as well as her corporeal display, and clothing allows for *The Jump Off* to be interpreted as several distinct yet related scenarios. From one vantage point, the housewife's facial expression can be read as an expression of black female desire and sexual expressiveness. The term "jump off" references a casual sexual partner with whom the sexual relationship extends beyond a one night stand but does not and is not intended to be an exclusive monogamous relationship. At an initial glance, *The Jump Off* could be read as nothing more than Cox's narcissistic interest in showcasing her svelte body for all interested viewers. The

photograph is composed in such a way to ensure that the black woman's body fills a significant portion of the frame. The lighting is such that the complexion of her skin and the contours of her physical shape are amplified against the stark white sheets. The viewer's gaze is immediately drawn her facial expression which conveys distance—that her mind is elsewhere. Furthermore, the image is composed to make the black woman's body the central focal point, making the other individual in the bed, the make-shift window, and even at times the bottle of rum and pills, receded into the background. Despite the explicit interest and effort to highlight her minimally clothed form, Cox reveals her body in what scholar Nicole Fleetwood would identify as an example of an “excess flesh enactment,” that is, the display of the nude black female form, but not as a means of narcissistic engagement, but rather as a way to signal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies through a politics of respectability and to willfully and intentionally refute such claims.¹⁶¹

The Jump Off visually signifies a transition within the thematic content of the photographs and Cox's persona enactments in *Bougies*. The housewife's partially nude body and visible disillusionment in *The Jump Off* marks a turning point in the series in which Cox as artist-photographer uses the unveiling of the housewife's physical body and her visible display of her emotional dissatisfaction with her environment to open up a complex examination about disrobing, that is an examination of the limits of “respectable” comportment for black women. By showcasing her own partially nude

¹⁶¹ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 112-117.

body, Cox creates a space to explore black women's sexualities, desire for pleasure and the actions taken to create pleasure, as well as the complexity, and sometimes difficulty black upper-class women encounter when expressing their sexual desires.¹⁶² To some viewers, *The Jump Off* may initially appear as the manifestation of Cox's indulgent need to draw attention to her beautiful physique. However, I maintain that Cox's physical unveiling of her body as part of her housewife enactments is actually a way of visually conveying the shift in the photographic narrative from the façade and performance of upper-class black domesticity to its less glamorous realities. By this I mean, Cox engages in an excess flesh enactment to signal how her housewife character is affectively disrobing and peeling off the layers to expose her vulnerabilities.

The Jump Off is a bridge between the multiple facades and testimonies Cox offers through her housewife performances. Cox shifts her representation of the upper class housewife from a more public display of upper-class domesticity to showcasing the black housewife's intimate affairs and personal encounters within the home to interrogate the intimate and private dimensions of the housewife's feelings. The image of a partially unclothed housewife met with an expression of dissatisfaction as seen in *The Jump Off*, connects to past photographs, *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*, images in which the

¹⁶² I maintain that Cox's performance of black female sexuality acknowledges the long-standing need or reasons black women maintained a politics of respectability, her designation of her black woman character as the respectable "housewife" in *Housewife* while also electing as artist-photographer to create an upper-class black woman identity that does not rely on the on the aggressive shielding of her body or the concealing of her sexuality. In this way, Cox foregrounds the visibility of her partially nude body and does so within a context that situates the black female body as a sexual agent willfully negotiating her desires, even if and when, those desires are left unmet. For a discussion about black middle class women's sexualities and representations of a black female sexuality see Lisa Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady*.

housewife is portrayed as respectable and confident. In *The Jump Off* the black housewife's sheer negligee and shoes have been removed. She is no longer standing or sitting, but rather reclining in a bed with her presumed lover. The viewer has been given greater access to view the black woman's body and entrance into the more private dimensions of the home, that of the bedroom. Cox as artist-photographer, gradually unveils the housewife's body to viewers. Changing her attire to match the affective unveiling of the housewife's interior Cox's housewife persona transitions from wearing the long-sleeved black suit in *Housewife*, a black bikini with a sheer lace robe in *Missy at Home*, to a set of sheer black panties and bra in *The Jump Off*.

Although the housewife has removed the proverbial skin-suit, pearls, the more public persona of "acceptable" upper class domesticity, she remains displeased and uncomfortable in the domestic environment. In a sophisticated artistic and intellectual move, Cox creates a tension between the housewife's desire and ability to shed the public respectable persona for a candid expression of sexual desire through the excess flesh enactment of her exposed body. *The Jump Off* shows the black housewife at home in her body. In this image, more so than *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*, the viewer comes to view the housewife as a desiring sexual subject who has acted upon or intended to act upon (if the sexual encounter has been unfulfilled) expressing her sexual desire. The prospect of reading the image as one of disillusionment and disappointment is further amplified by the presence of a bottle of alcohol next to a bunch of blue pills.

The bottle of bronze-like liquid, Appleton Rum, is a featured mainstay in Cox's black housewife photographic enactments. Appearing as a prop in *Housewife*, *Missy at Home*,

and also in *The Jump Off*, the signature bottle of liquor occupies a consistent presence in the domestic landscape. In the *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* photographs, the signature bottle of rum and snifter functioned as a type of accessory prop, a cue intended to chronicle the housewife's engagement in a moment of leisure. Viewers familiar with Cox's biography as Jamaican might assume that the alcoholic beverage is a nod to personal ancestry and pride. Cox's decision as artist-photographer to foreground the rum bottle, cap removed and placed next to scattered blue pills coupled with the housewife's lackluster expression represents a shift in tone from the other photographs in *Bougies*. Cox's facial expression, a mixture of longing and disappointment, coupled with the rum bottle three quarters full, and rum glass in hand, while in bed, prompts the viewer to ask different questions, to move beyond casual assumptions that suggest the bottle is a neutral emblem of one's affection and ties to the home country. Even though the blue pills could represent the black housewife's foray into prescription addiction and substance abuse, a deadly combination, the pills because of their blue hue also seem indistinguishable from the popular euphemism for Viagra, the "little blue pill." A number of possible narratives exist when considering the presence of Viagra, rum, a distant lover, and a disappointed black woman. Is the man in the black woman's bed her lover? An in a moment of excitement she or he thought it would be fun to borrow her husbands' prescription? Or maybe the man in the bed next to her is in fact her husband who needed "help" in the bedroom and unfortunately, much to the black housewife's dismay, could not perform? Whether the presence of the pills is intended to expose the black housewife's "troubles" with her lover or husband, the focus on the use of alcohol and drugs suggests that Cox as

artist-photographer desires to create a scenario in which the black woman's world is unpleasant and unsatisfying. The rum in this instance, coupled with blue pills and a facial expression of dissatisfaction, leads viewers toward a new or evolving story about the black upper class housewife. Cox's housewife performances have shifted.

Cox as artist-photographer sheds the historical skin of respectability and dissemblance by crafting her "Missy" housewife persona in a way that reveals a direct and assertive black female sexuality. Celebrating a black female sexuality that moves and is in action, not awaiting her "verb," Cox challenges the historical silence around black women's sexual desire and sexual experiences and lives while also creating a space to contemplate the complexity and perhaps the difficulty of such expressions.¹⁶³ In this way, the housewife's corporeal unveiling signifies her shedding of respectable pretense and the masquerade of domestic perfectionism previously visualized in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*. *The Jump Off* then serves as an interstice, an in between space, in which Cox reveals the layers of a complex black female identity that can and does move between performances of respectability, sexual expression and desire, and emotional and physical states of uneasiness. Addressing the complexities of black female experience via an engagement with the partially clothed black female body as well as the visible expression of discomfort and displeasure, Cox suggests that even when black women are afforded opportunities to express their sexualities and live more full and authentic lives, the world

¹⁶³ Spillers, "Interstices," 153.

of the upper-class domestic environment remains a place in which the black female body can feel uncomfortable, awkward, vulnerable, and unsafe.

On the other hand, *The Jump Off* and its function as a “troubled” housewife scenario can also be interpreted as a narrative about black women’s experiences of dissatisfaction, disappointment and isolation. As the first photograph in the series in which Cox enacts a troubled housewife identity, a black woman unable to or unwilling to maintain the façade of contentment, *The Jump Off* could also function as the merging between two existing persona identities: that of the sexy housewife who willingly engages in an extramarital affair or a casual sexual fling and the housewife overwhelmed by her drug dependency. Situating *The Jump Off* photograph as a visual narrative about black women’s isolation and dissatisfaction within their nuclear homes and black communities, Cox’s mediation on black female dissatisfaction could also appear as a self-indulgent photograph in which Cox as artist-photographer displays her minimally clothed body for the purpose of relishing in her body’s sex appeal and ability to fit within U.S. societal standards of idealized femininity. Cox’s performance as the disillusioned, disinterested, and possibly hungover housewife seems to resist such a reading. Portraying her character persona as disillusioned and unsatisfied suggests that the visual scenario is intended to convey an experience of black female loss, disappointment and sadness. Moreover, *The Jump Off*, when placed in conversation with other troubling scenes in which Cox enacts her wealthy black housewife character who is struggling with substance abuse and isolation, the image appears to a greater extent, to be a satirical commentary, as opposed to a self-indulgent practice of navel gazing. Taking into consideration Cox’s comportment of her

body and the configuring of the bedroom setting as a place of discontent, *The Jump Off*, can be viewed as an image in which Cox, as the conceptualizer of the photograph, wants the domestic space in which she has constructed for her characters to register as a place of containment and arguably inhabitability, verses a convenient backdrop to flaunt her beauty. Moreover, her decision to corporeally disrobe and reveal her housewife character differently than from the presentations of upper-class domesticity seen in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home*, metaphorically reflects Cox's granting her viewers increased access to the most inner parts of the housewife's home. In addition to seeing *The Jump Off* as an expression of black female desire and the complexity and ongoing negotiations black women make to articulate or hide sexual desires, the photograph serves as an introductory image to a more nuanced examination of black women's experiences of drug dependency and isolation in the suburban domestic environment.

PILL POPPER

On a clear sunny day, next to mailbox 48, a black woman stands near a gray trash bin. With her hands gathered in fists she tightly clutches a white trash bag as she simultaneously pulls it from the gray container. As if unaware of the camera's presence, she casts her eyes upward toward the sky casting a look that combines fear, hesitation, and desperation. She is wearing a sleeveless brown gown. The top of the gown is shaped in a V-neck and exposes a glistened neck and toned arms. The skirt, pleated and full, falls past her ankles, just above a pointed foot covered in a flesh-colored patent leather heel the same color as her dress. Near her dress, four orange bottles of pills lay scattered on

the ground, some still concealed in their containers while others are splayed on the ground. She appears all alone on a street lined with rows of mailboxes, bordered curbs, and green shrubs.

Figure Six: Renée Cox, *Pill Popper*, 2008



Cox playfully situates herself as a black housewife in the midst of a downward spiral in *Pill Popper*. Stepping away from the comfortable confines of her home and beyond the grassy border of her estate, Missy has wandered into the street to recover

something previously discarded. Although she remains well-dressed, hair in place, the housewife has left the familiar territory of her suburban home, exposing viewers to a less savory side of her persona and extracurricular activities in the domestic sphere. With one foot positioned away from the plastic receptacle as if ready to flee, the other leg remains directed toward the bin, providing physical support for the rest of her body as she hastily empties the bag's contents. Transgressing an imagined boundary, from home to the street, Cox examines the many "faces" of Missy and her efforts to straddle the boundary between a politics of respectability, or the appearance thereof, and her drug addiction. Cox's *Pill Popper* is a satirical critique that addresses dominant culture's anxiety, concern, and fascination with the wayward, posed as dutiful and glamorous, housewife.¹⁶⁴ Her housewife performance in *Pill Popper* parodies popular culture references that mock the discontent or ill-mannered but materially prosperous housewife.¹⁶⁵ Cox's situating of her own black female body in the role of a wealthy black housewife struggling with chemical dependency simultaneously mocks the rich and famous as well as celebrities' struggles with drug abuse while also acknowledging the

¹⁶⁴ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*.

¹⁶⁵ ABC's *Desperate Housewives*, which ran for a successful eight seasons, from 2004-2012, and Bravo's *Real Housewives* series' 2004-current, reflect popular television's fascination with middle and upper-class domesticity. Of note, each of these television series addressed the housewives' challenges with their own or friends and family's issues with substance abuse and addiction. In particular, *Desperate Housewives* characters, Lynnette Scavo (actress Felicity Huffman) struggles with her addiction to her children's A.D.D medication while fictional character Bree Van De Kamp (actress Marcia Cross) battles alcohol addiction, while trying to stymie the challenges in her personal life. Additionally *Desperate Housewives* cast member, Shawn Pyfrom, known as the fictional character Andrew Van De Kamp on the television series, openly discussed his battles with addiction. Moreover, HBO's *Nurse Jackie* (2009-current) and Showtime's hit television series, *Weeds*, also addressed middle-class women's issues with drug use.

very “real” stories and perhaps warranted public concern for reports about middle and upper-class women’s abuse of prescription painkillers.¹⁶⁶

As viewers of *Pill Popper*, the audience is positioned as an unnoticed and unsolicited voyeur. Casting a satirical eye to black and white communities’ ongoing surveillance of the black female body, Cox also makes us laugh as viewers of this image of a well-dressed black woman rummaging through her trash for prescription pills in broad daylight.¹⁶⁷ Her facial expression conveys anxiety and caution, but also absurdity and familiarity. Cox’s figuring of the black lady as a drug dependent woman humorously makes fun at the stereotype of the wealthy woman who bored and lonely, becomes addicted to prescription pills. The sweetheart-shaped bodice as well as the billowing flows of the gown highlight the housewife’s carefully pointed toe, angled daintily to the side of her body, as if striking a dramatic pose.

¹⁶⁶The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines “prescription painkillers” as “opioid or narcotic pain relievers, including drugs such as Vicodin (hydrocodone), OxyContin (oxycodone), Opana (oxymorphone), and methadone.” Additionally, the CDC reported that nearly 48,000 women died from prescription drug overdoses between 1999 and 2010. The same report also found that “for every woman who dies of a prescription overdose, thirty women go to the emergency department for painkiller misuse or abuse.” See Center for Disease Control, *Prescription Painkiller Overdoses: A Growing Epidemic Especially Among Women*, July 2013 (Atlanta, GA: CDC, 2013)

<http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/PrescriptionPainkillerOverdoses/index.html> For discussions about prescription –drug abuse among women see the following. John O’Neil, “Mortality from the Pharmacy” Section F, Column 1, Health and Fitness, New York Times, January 25, 2005, pg. 6; Sabrina Tavernise, “High Rates of Opioid Prescriptions Among Women Raise Birth Defect Fears” Section A. Column O. pg. 18 January 23, 2015, *New York Times*.

¹⁶⁷ In dominant U.S. culture, the image of drug addiction, especially when associated with a public figure like a celebrity is often portrayed as an instance of excessiveness, flamboyance, and humor, rather than a situation that elicits public pity or sadness based on the individual’s serious illness. This is in contrast to images of poor, homeless, or working class individuals’ struggle with substance abuse and addiction, which although normalized in real and fictionalized depictions of drug dependency more often than not, elicits an apathetic sympathy. Exceptions to this rule occur when a celebrity or public figure dies of a drug overdose or suicide.

Cox relies on gestures, facial expression, and the posing of her body to convey melodrama and dramatic flair.¹⁶⁸ As if posing humorously for a candid while a friend looks on, Cox stares into the sky and angles her body to convey a “woe is me” expression. Cox playfully admits via her facial expression and body, that she intends for viewers to share a mutual laugh with her and at her, as she too, takes part in making fun of at a stereotype of wealthy womanhood, that of the well-to-do, hyper-manicured, I have everything, yet my life is so tragic, housewife.¹⁶⁹ Cox’s humorous performance as a prescription-addicted housewife demonstrates her sophistication as a savvy consumer of popular media by acknowledging U.S. viewer’s fascination and interest with substance abuse among women. For all of its humor and light-heartedness, Cox’s satirical reflection about the imperfections of the suburban upper-class housewife and perhaps U.S. audiences’ fascination with the housewife as social misfit, the image is also a cautionary note to viewers, an “expression of both grievance and grief,” in which Cox acknowledges the potential for the wealthy domestic enclave to be a space in which black women’s needs are left unfulfilled.¹⁷⁰ In this way, Cox’s persona enactment in *Pill Popper* chronicles the black housewife’s growing discontent with her domestic space. At one time, as seen in *The Jump Off*, the housewife’s desire for sexual pleasure, personal fulfillment or other longings was confined to the hallowed halls of her bedroom and fanciful daydreams, however, now, the viewer becomes keenly aware of her addiction to

¹⁶⁸ Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*; Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad*.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 11.

prescription pills, an effort to mediate the pain that stems from her growing dissatisfaction with the domestic environment. *Pill Popper* importantly addresses albeit humorously, U.S. audiences interests in fictional middle class and wealthy suburban housewives failures and efforts to maintain the façade of perfection while managing addictions. Humor, however is also the balm or aid that allows Cox to simultaneously poke fun of “desperate housewives” and acknowledge long held social anxieties about the blackening of suburbia as well as popular concerns about the “failures” of U.S. suburbs to serve as bulwarks against “urban” crime, violence, and drugs.¹⁷¹ In this way, Cox as artist-photographer aggressively def[ies] the status quo” by “poking holes” so to speak at the societal tendency to portray the “respectable” and wealthy black female body as an emblem of virtuous achievement and progress.¹⁷² Sophisticated and nuanced in its rendering of wealthy black domesticity, Cox’s portrayal of the housewife also examines the limits of upper-class mobility and satisfaction for black women. Her performance as a well-dressed and materially affluent housewife addicted to prescription pills offers several important standpoints for understanding black female experience.

Cox’s embodied performance as a drug-dependent wealthy housewife challenges and denounces popular beliefs and images that suggest that black women who enact corporeal performances or economically meet the standards of “black respectability” embody or represent “successful” or idealized models of black womanhood. Her persona enactment as the black housewife-lady, complete with weave, high-heels, and the fancy

¹⁷¹ Jimmie L. Reeves, *Cracked Coverage*.

¹⁷² Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire*. 1, 4-5.

neighborhood, casts dispersions and critiques postfeminist ideals suggesting that the black female body is no longer viewed as a deviant outlier because of her “achievement” and presumed access to spaces of privilege. Adorning herself as a black lady housewife, well dressed and in the confines of an established neighborhood, Cox highlights the intertwined fates that black women of various social classes share because of their statuses as black and female. Her dress, a beautiful loose and flowing fabric appears flawless. Her makeup is done and she has even taken the time to add matching pumps, for a trip to the trash can. Despite the tidiness of her corporeal performance, Cox’s housewife is in an emotional state of disarray. Scrambling frantically to recover her over-prescribed or perhaps stolen medication, Cox acknowledges the ways in which the black lady is frequently attacked or viewed as a threat to the black family and community. Beyond a simple performance of black respectability or lady-like status, Cox uses her body and its figuring as a troubled wealthy housewife to do different work with the black female body.

As photographer and performer, Cox purposely associates her wealthy, well-sculpted body with an excessive form of deviance. The black lady, as cultural studies and black feminist scholar Wahneema Lubiano has argued, is made to signal “black cultural strangeness.”¹⁷³ The black lady, much like her counterparts in the controlling image pantheon—jezebel, sapphire, the tragic mulatto, etc.—is scripted in the field of no

¹⁷³ Lubiano, “Black Ladies.”

signification and therefore occupies a troubled presence in the dominant visual field.¹⁷⁴ Cox performs the black lady drug addict identity as a means of confounding viewers' different perceptions about black women. She refuses to give viewers an "easy" reading of black womanhood. She disrupts common postfeminist ideas that the black lady, a black woman embodying respectability, with access to financial means, and engaged in sexual pleasure (heterosexual fulfillment only), is primed and ready to thrive in a capitalistic-derived and supported domestic economy that negates black women's well beings. Cox's display of the black female body as upper-class housewife and black lady, acknowledges and recounts the significance and repetition of performances of respectability as they relate to African American communities.

Cox carefully construes the black female body in *Pill Popper* as refined, ordered, and corporeally together. With toned arms that lift a hefty bag of disposed goods, the viewer is again drawn to the woman's sculpted and well-exercised physique, a key attribute when embodying "princess housewife" status. Although it appears she has hastily ran out of the house to grab the trash before its removed from her premises, she nevertheless has managed to have her hair and nails done, and include her signature pumps. Even as the housewife rummages through yesterday's goods, she does so beautifully. The glistened sheen on her skin and the long billowing folds of her skirt paired with flesh-nude pumps contrasts with the image of drug dependent black woman. Cox de-familiarizes upper-class black womanhood by showing the image of alleged

¹⁷⁴Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*.; Lubiano, "Black Ladies, "333; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 203.

respectability, wealth, and class, as a drug-addicted and dependent woman. Her performance enactment of upper class domesticity in an environmental situation in which the black female body is rendered excessive, not because she is poor or unrespectable, but because of her blackness and failure to manage her own body and therefore the domestic enclave makes the black female body “strange” and therefore outside the script of overdetermined and predictable histories. By performing her body with difference, Cox challenges tendencies to read the respectably comported black female body as more relatable, and less threatening to audiences by showcasing the misery of her wealth and unsuccessful performance of “appropriate” domesticity. Cox performs her black housewife identity as out of place, on the border, and metaphorically and symbolically off the estate. In doing so, she speaks to black women’s un-belonging status in multiple spheres, within the black home, within the white home, among the upper-classes. Locating black female identity in a space of liminality, but not stagnation, Cox’s photograph and performance as a housewife in demise opens up possibilities by questioning what the legitimate and real spaces for black women’s wellbeing and belonging. *Pill Popper* brings viewers of Cox’s series to an important crossroads. Where does the black woman belong? Where is her home?

Pill Popper, a photograph intended to chronicle the black housewife’s growing instability and lack of fulfillment in the domestic sphere, is part of Cox’s larger aim to showcase the importance of critiquing twenty-first century imaginings of wealthy black domesticity. Although Lubiano would probably argue that Cox’s persona enactment as the trouble housewife because of her addiction will be viewed as the black lady’s less

articulate sister, the welfare queen, I suggest that Cox purposely scripts her body to signal respectability and “ladylike” status alongside the stereotypical associations of drug abuse with blackness in general and black working class womanhood in particular to critique state practices and regulations that label drug addiction as a malady impacting the working poor and poor for the purposes of surveillance and the reification of class division. Cox’s pill-popping housewife denounces the post-feminist use of the black female body to champion values of meritocracy or the common belief that black women’s economic status allegedly removes them from facing varying degrees of emotional and mental distress. Cox suggests that chemical dependency and various states of un-wellness are not singly the province of the poor black masses, most often symbolized in black female form as the welfare queen, nor white princess housewives. Drug addiction, in Cox’s narrative is portrayed as a consequence of black women’s surveillance, containment, and disappointment within the domestic sphere of the home. Cox uses her body to make the black female body disruptive in the field of vision, but disruptive for the purpose of indicting critique. Cox’s undone housewife then, is the ultimate “threatening outlaw” because she unleashes havoc in the suburban neighborhood by mocking and acknowledging the presence of prescription drug use in upper class communities while also critiquing the mythic conceptualization of wealth and domesticity as an ideal space for black women to rest at home. The housewife’s gradual undoing within a suburban-identified domestic space, sets the tone for Cox to highlight, via her black female body enactment, the agency and movement made possible when

black women work within and beyond the confines of scripts associated with black female deviance and outsider-status.

Cox's portrayal of an upper class black housewife as a crazed woman addicted to prescription pills challenges popular assumptions about wealthy black womanhood and domesticity. One of several overtly satirical reflections in *Bougies, Pill Popper* represents Cox's foray into discussions about chemical dependency, conceptualizations of strength, and the mythos that wealth equals happiness and contentment, topics that are not commonly identified with images of upper-class black women. Although Cox's satirical reflection about drug addiction and upper class domesticity pokes fun at and critiques bougie folks and indict them for having more or just as many problems as working class individuals, Cox's look at addiction is also a more pointed reflection about the instability of the domestic sphere, even the wealthy domestic enclave. Shrouded in secrecy and covered by the mantle of evergreen trees and bushes, Cox's chemically dependent housewife is a picture of isolation and desperation. Removed from the furnished surroundings of her home and even the watchful eyes of wait staff, the housewife, when left to her own devices is an anxious and scared substance abuser. This portrayal of black womanhood suggests that the spatial and social landscape of wealthy domesticity can potentially pose harm to black women. Cox's performance of wealthy domesticity in this image debunks the myth in many black communities that somehow social status and wealth accumulation as well as corporeal performances of being ladylike ameliorate the hardship for blacks in general and African American women in particular. Cox's prescription-addicted housewife importantly reveals the ongoing challenges black women

face, even when they appear to have met the intra-racial and larger societal demands and expectations of idealized black womanhood. *Pill Popper*, although humorous in its rendering of black female addiction, represents an important shift in the photographic series in which Cox continues to represent the domestic sphere, specifically the neighborhood, as a place of black female undoing and vulnerability. Cox continues her critique of the domestic sphere as a place of black female discontent by showing the housewife as liminal and peripheral to the home space in *Sleepwalking*.

SLEEPWALKING

The sun is beginning to set or is perhaps, on its way up. Caught somewhere between sunset and sunrise, a black woman walks on a patch of grass near a paved road. The photographer has caught her midstride, both arms moving away from her body, suspended in the air. Barefoot and with her hair slightly disheveled, and wearing a long white sundress exposing her shoulders, she appears to have embarked on an unplanned stroll through a neighborhood. In the background, some distance behind her, the viewer can see a portion of a residence, a white stucco arch with a gray slanted roof, shielded mostly by green shrubbery and trees. To her left, age old evergreens stand still and cast a shadowy presence over the grass and on sections of the paved road. Her right side is exposed to the street. She is the only photographed subject in the image, except of course, a shadow. The shadow, a darkened silhouette of a man's head and upper-torso, a menacing figure burned into the fabric of her off-white dress.

Figure Seven: Renée Cox, *Sleepwalking*, 2008



Cox's *Sleepwalking* is a visual meditation about the black housewife's dissatisfaction with her domestic environment and her failure or perhaps unwillingness to maintain idealized standards of wealthy black femininity. *Sleepwalking* is different from Cox's previous housewife enactments in that she performs her housewife persona as a woman completely out-of-touch with the presentation of her body and her surrounding environment. In the photograph, the housewife appears to have stepped out of the house unprepared and unaware of the public's intruding gaze. Her hair is no longer neatly

tucked behind her ears and the stylishly cut bangs that normally fall just above her brows have been casually moved to the side. Large sections of hair fall into loose and uncombed clumps that hang over her shoulders. The meticulous styling, arrangement, and maintenance of hair, particularly in black communities, is viewed as a necessary part of performing femininity and maintaining social status. To deviate from “doin’” one’s hair or “getting” one’s hair done is to violate strict un/spoken rules about black femininity.¹⁷⁵ The dress, the same style as the one worn in *Pill Popper* but a cream color, appears more like a gown that has been worn to bed or napped in. Previous photographs of the black housewife show her as actively involved and invested in maintaining a stylish appearance. Following a disappointing “roll in the hay” as seen in *The Jump Off* and even while recovering prescription pills from the trash like in *Pill Popper*, Cox’s black housewife persona appears composed, aware of her surroundings and conscious of her need to publicly convey flawlessness, even during private moments within the home that are unintended for public viewing. In this performance of wealthy black domesticity, Cox’s housewife appears to have failed.

Sleepwalking, I argue, is Cox’s critique of the inhabitable and problematic conditions of the domestic environment. Cox as artist-photographer, has abandoned the playful and sassy account seen in previous Bougies photographs and instead opted for a more serious recounting of Missy’s home life. Unlike the satirical tone of *Pill Popper* and

¹⁷⁵ For discussions about the politics of black hair, see the following sources: Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*; Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics”; Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising*; Ayana Byrd, *Hair Story*.

other photographs, Cox's *Sleepwalking* relies on moments of "non-humor" to construct the domestic environment as unsuitable and unsafe for the black housewife.¹⁷⁶ Setting aside strategies of hyperbole and exaggeration, Cox's *Sleepwalking* scene warns against the dangers of an existence predicated on labor and performances of femininity that rely on consumerist practices and capitalist interpretations of "success." Imaging the black housewife as sleepwalker, a woman outside of the protection of home and unaware of her surroundings, Cox highlights the inability for wealth or socioeconomic prestige to protect black women from forms of substance abuse, self-harm and violence. A narrative about a black woman's marginal and vulnerable in the domestic realm, *Sleepwalking* is a visual rendering of the black female body in crisis while in the neighborhood.

Showing the black housewife subconsciously sleepwalking in her neighborhood, Cox creates an image of the domestic realm, specifically the neighborhood as a place of entrapment and vulnerability for black women.¹⁷⁷ Corporeally present but consciously absent from herself, Cox as the troubled housewife carelessly wanders through her neighborhood. With her gaze suspended toward the path ahead of her, eyes held in a dream-like state, she is unconscious and unaware of her body. Like *Pill Popper*,

¹⁷⁶ Miriam Thaggert. *Images of Black Modernism*, 109.

¹⁷⁷ Cox's use of her body and the upper-class context to discuss violence against black women sheds important light on black women's experiences of violence. This is particularly important in light of the societal and community focus on black men as the "only" or most significantly impacted targets and survivors of state and community violence. See the following sources for discussions about black community's neglect and silence about violence against black women: Pearl Cleage, *Mad at Miles*, Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," 1255.; Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd, "Beyond Superwoman: Justice for Black Women Too," *Winter* 2014. <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/beyond-superwoman-justice-for-black-women-too>; Beth Richie, "Battered Black Women: A Challenge for the Black community," *The Black Scholar* 16:40-44; Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*; Crunktastic, "On Black Men Showing Up for Black Women at the Scene of a Crime," Crunkfeminsitcollective.com.

Sleepwalking insists on positioning the viewer as a voyeur, an unknown and unannounced observer, watching, as a black woman loses her way. Despite these similarities, the photographs differ in important ways. In *Sleepwalking*, Cox is not engaged in a humorous dialogue with the viewer. *Sleepwalking* does not create a context in which the photographer and viewer can share in a mutual chuckle or bond over a comedic performance of the parodied party. Instead, the image is disruptive and jarring because of its content. A black woman, unconscious of her actions and her body's whereabouts, is being watched by a shadow character who appears to be a man. Cox purposefully creates a place of discomfort for her housewife character to jar viewers from the association of viewing suburbia and wealthy housing areas as places of freedom, safety, and contentment for black women.

As the troubled housewife in *Sleepwalking*, Cox wears a cream-colored dress, pleated and cinched at the waist, immediately draws the viewer's gaze. She appears luminous, glistening, a light to navigate the dark terrain around her. To stare at her face is to know that something is off kilter. She appears vacant and lost. She is no longer the princess of the estate or the sexually alluring and desirable woman, instead she appears vulnerable and unsure of her surroundings. The trees lit and extending beyond the photograph's look like beams of gray-ash, quietly resembling the asphalt surface near the black woman's feet. In her enactment as the troubled housewife, Cox uses visual cues such as the use of unnatural light to portray the housewife's body as a site of prey. Although the housewife walks freely in the open space of her neighborhood, she is surrounded by trees, shadows and pavement. The rendering of the neighborhood as bare

and unidentifiable suggests that Cox wants viewers to see the housewife as isolated and alone, perhaps even forgotten. The trees cast dark shadows on sections of the housewife's path, while the branches extend like tentacles as if reaching out to envelop the black woman walking.

Cox presents the neighborhood as a site of unruly environmental hazards and isolation to challenge myths about the suburban environment as a place of safety for black women. By creating a landscape that appears to engulf or imprison the wealthy black housewife, Cox critiques the grand myth of postfeminism that wealth and access to the capitalist marketplace relieves women, particularly black women from the burdens of gender violence and discrimination. Creating an environment that intends to trap the black housewife, Cox's *Sleepwalking* deconstructs postfeminist discourses that mistakenly assume and purport that black women's economic success and acquisition of material possessions prevent them from experiences of violence and hardship. Representing the housewife's environment as a place of entrapment, Cox explores the ways in which neighborhoods, that is the communities in which black women live, remain unsafe for black women to move freely.

With the environment literally folding in on the housewife and offering no clear exits, Cox suggests that viewers take seriously the dangers that lurk in spaces that seemingly offer safety, comfort, and wellbeing. Cox's employment of photographic technology and embodied performance to critique the limited options available to black women at home and connects her exploration on the limits of the domestic sphere to other black women artists including LaToya Ruby Fraiser, Audre Lorde, Anne Petry,

Faith Ringgold, and Gloria Naylor to name a few.¹⁷⁸ These forms of artistic production have been central to the production of black feminist criticism and black women's activism that has challenged the mythic rendering of the domestic environment as a place of safety for black women. In addition to the positioning of the environment as a place of imprisonment for the housewife, Cox uses *Sleepwalking* to discuss the role of violence, particularly domestic violence in black women's lives.

CRIMES AGAINST BLACK WOMEN

Samantha Dean. Sherrice Iverson. Kassandra Perkins. Anita Hill. Robyn Rihanna Fenty. Islan Nettles. Tanee McCall. Karyn Washington. Cicely Tyson. Renisha McBride, Desiree Washington. Janay Rice.¹⁷⁹

Beloved daughter, friend, coworker and expecting mother, Samantha Dean's body was found behind a strip-mall dumpster in Bastrop, Texas in February 2015. A volunteer for Austin's Police Department's Victim Services Unit, Dean was fatally killed by three gunshot wounds to the head. Dean leaves behind a mother and sister and a host of family, friends and loved ones. The perpetrator is now believed to be Dean's former boyfriend, a former Austin police officer, and father of her unborn child. In 1997, Sherrice Iverson, age 7, entered a restroom alone in a Nevada Casino. Camera footage from the casino shows Sherrice entering the restroom and being followed by two white men. One man left immediately after entering the women's restroom, the other man, however, was

¹⁷⁸ LaToya Ruby Frasier, *The Notion of Family*; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*; Anne Petry, *The Street*; Faith Ringgold, *Slave Rape series*.

¹⁷⁹ The names of Black women and girls who experienced violence of varying kinds, including domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, state violence, self-harm, and homicide.

recording exiting the restroom twenty-five minutes later. Sherrice's body was later found bound, sexually assaulted, strangled and discarded, by then nineteen-year old J. Stroyhe.

The list of names referenced above belong to black women and girls who lost their lives to or experienced intimate partner, communal, or state violence. They are a small representative sample of the countless black women who have passed away or survived varying degrees of abuse, suffering and violence at the hands of loved ones, intimate partners, peers, strangers and the state. In addition to creating a narrative about upper-class black women's experiences of containment and isolation, *Sleepwalking* prompts viewers to consider the presence and impact of violence on upper-class black women.

I argue that Cox constructs the neighborhood as unsafe for the black housewife to critique the valorization of the suburban or wealthy domestic enclave as a place of safety for black women. *Sleepwalking* challenges the postfeminist fantasy that feminism is no longer needed or necessary for women's equality as well as the assumption that access to education and the acquisition of wealth ensures women's safety. In addition to exposing that wealthy black women are not immune from violence and acknowledging that violence takes place even among the financially privileged, *Sleepwalking* is also a cautionary narrative for black women in general, an image that pays homage and acknowledges black women's exposure and vulnerability to violence in their homes and communities regardless of their age and socioeconomic status. The image of the

housewife, asleep and unaware of the individual watching her, identifies the neighborhood as a space of surveillance and potential unsafety for black women.¹⁸⁰

Cox's personae enactment as the mentally unconscious housewife and the composition of the photograph to convey the housewife's unawareness of potential dangers depicts the domestic environment of the neighborhood as unsafe and threatening to the black female subject. Cox's enactment of the housewife as vulnerable creates a context for viewers of the images to situate her fictional rendering of the unsuspecting housewife who is stalked at home with real accounts of black women's experiences of domestic violence. Approximately one in four women (27.3%) is estimated to have experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact in their lives.¹⁸¹ In 2007, the U.S. Department of Justice reported that on average between one and three women a day are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in the United States.¹⁸² Black women experience higher rates of domestic violence than other women in the United States, a National survey on intimate partner violence found that "an estimated 29.1% of African American females are victimized by intimate partner violence in their lifetime."¹⁸³ According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, African American women experience

¹⁸⁰ For a discussion about black women and girls' experiences of violence in their homes and neighborhoods, see Nikki Jones' signal monograph, *Between Good and Ghetto*.

¹⁸¹ Kathleen Basile, Melissa T. Merrick, et. al. "Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence, Stalking, and Interpersonal Violence Victimization—National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, U.S. 2011. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Surveillance Summaries*. Sept. 5 2014 (63): 1-18. http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6308a1.htm?s_cid=ss6308a1_e

¹⁸² Shannon Catalano, "Intimate Partner Violence in the United States." U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics. <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ipvus.pdf>

¹⁸³ Extent, Nature and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey" 2000. U.S. Department of Justice.

intimate partner violence at a rate 35% higher than that of white females and 2.5 times the rate of women of other races.¹⁸⁴ Additionally a Centers of Disease Control study published in 2008 found that women experience more than two million injuries from intimate partner violence each year and that often the presence of violence within the home increased the likelihood that women abused drugs and alcohol and the likelihood that that they and their children would experience homelessness dramatically increases.¹⁸⁵ By showing the black housewife as the subject of an unknown man's gaze, while she is unconscious of her whereabouts and walking in her neighborhood, Cox exposes the failures of the wealthy domestic sphere to secure safety for black women. Casting the perpetrator as a shadowed silhouette, Cox invariably leaves the decision up to viewers to imagine the identity of the housewife's assailant. By leaving the shadowy figure's identity a mystery Cox as artist-photographer suggests that the man can be anyone, a known or unknown person to the housewife. Cox's decision to leave the figure's identity unknown foregrounds the housewife as the subject and highlights the instability of the neighborhood as a place of refuge and safety for black women. Narrating the scenario with an attention to the domestic realm as a place of unsafety and violence, acknowledges that black women's bodies remain vulnerable in the world, no matter their socioeconomic positionality or postfeminist-inspired representations in the dominant visual field that

¹⁸⁴ Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001.

¹⁸⁵ Adverse Health Conditions and Health Risk Behaviors Associated with Intimate Partner Violence. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. February 2008. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.; "Intimate Partner Violence in the United States 2006. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics

highlight black women's successes in the realm of education, professional employment, and socioeconomic status as proof that racism and sexism no longer exist.

Throughout her artistic oeuvre, Cox has relied on past historical events and contemporary events to chronicle black communities' experiences of violence. In addition to infamous self-portraits like *Hottentot Venus*, Cox has also created photographs such as *41 Bullets at Green River* (2001), an image depicting the artist nude and tied to a tree with forty-one bullet wounds. While *41 Bullets at Green River* is one the one hand a re-visioning of Andrea Mantegna's *St. Sebastian* (c. 1460), Cox's image also pays homage to West African immigrant Amadou Diallo who was brutally killed by New York police when he was shot forty-one times in the doorway of his apartment.¹⁸⁶ In this context, *Sleepwalking* is but one of several images in which Cox as artist-photographer uses her own body or that of other black models to critique practices of violence, many of them state sanctioned, against black communities. By enacting the persona of a vulnerable and isolated housewife, Cox makes black women's experiences of violence, regardless of their socioeconomic status, legible to twenty-first century audiences. In her *Sleepwalking* portrait, Cox uses photography and embodied performance to showcase the uninhabitable conditions of the black housewife's neighborhood and to expose her vulnerability in the domestic landscape. The home and neighborhood, once portrayed as the housewife's sanctuary of material wealth and leisured comfort now represents a place of unsafety and troubling violence.

¹⁸⁶ Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image*, 224.

Portraying the wealthy neighborhood as the locale in which the black female body is in danger, Cox challenges conceptualization of the home and neighborhood as spaces of safety and refuge for black women. Categorizing the domestic realm as a violent space, Cox like black women artists such as Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Weems, and Ayana Jackson document black women's experiences of violence.¹⁸⁷ Their artworks testify to black women's experiences of violence at state, community and interpersonal levels and in doing so, "talk back" and contribute to the black feminist project of telling their own and other black women's stories.¹⁸⁸

CONCLUSION

De-familiarizing the image of upper class black domesticity in dominant popular culture, Cox uses her troubled housewife performances to challenge images of black female identity that are scripted as "perfect" or "successful" because of material wealth. Revealing the cracks in postfeminist fantasies of limitless material consumption, hyper-groomed appearance and excessive time for leisure and idleness, Cox uses her housewife enactments to challenge the controlling myths of the black superwoman with undefeatable strength and stamina as well as the myth of the "successful" black woman, who is respectably covered, financially affluent, and blissfully content because of her

¹⁸⁷ When I think of the contributions of black women artists to discussions about the black female body, specifically violence, liminality and subject formation of black women, I see Cox's work especially in conversation with the following artists and their works: Faith Ringgold's *Slave Rape Series*; Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*; Lorna Simpson, *For The Sake of the Viewer*; Carla Williams, Self-portraits from 1990-2000; and Carrie Mae Weems' *The Hampton Project*.

¹⁸⁸ Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*; bell hooks, *Art on My Mind, Black Looks*, and "In our Glory."; Barbara Smith, *Home Girls*; Kimberly Springer, *Policing Black Women's Sexual Expression*.

wealth and beauty. Cox's serious rendering of black women's home environment as a place of instability and dissatisfaction is aligned with black writers and artists' tradition of critiquing the literal and figurative spaces of home to address sexism, homophobia, classism, and violence within black families and communities. Cox uses the stylization of her facial expression, body, and the photographic environment to locate wealthy and leisured domesticity within a discussion about black women's pain. Cox performs her upper-class body "differently" in *The Jump Off*, *Pill Popper*, and *Sleepwalking*, to distinguish her black female body from the representations of "respectable" and leisured domesticity as seen in *Housewife* and *Missy at Home* photographs as well as images in dominant popular culture. Cox specifically grapples with the condition of black women's social, economic, and cultural alterity through the themes of substance abuse, addiction, disappointment, and domestic violence. Narrating a different account of black womanhood in the domestic realm, Cox contributes to existing scholarship by black women activists, writers, and artists who have critiqued the myth of the domestic sphere as a space of tranquility and peace for black women and in doing so, importantly reveals the ways in which the home and neighborhood can be confining and toxic environments detrimental to black women's health and wellbeing.

In these photographs, the black housewife is no longer the poised and respectable employer or the desirable sex subject for a partner or admirer, but rather, the housewife appears fully human, and subject to all of the disappointments, temptations, and problems of life. Whether reflecting on a disappointing experience with her lover or frantically pulling out yesterday's trash to recover the prescription pills she previously threw away

in a moment of “strength,” the images in this part of *Bougies* address the complex and perhaps unsavory, underbelly of upper-class black domesticity. This collection of photographs from *Bougies* then, reveals how black women artists’ embodied performances, specifically Cox’s performance as a troubled upper-class housewife in crisis becomes a way of making known the continued challenges black women face in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER FOUR: In Search of Home: Reneé Cox as the Single Black Woman Traveler

People were saying, ‘Oh, she is narcissistic! She apparently likes herself too much,’ which is not a good thing because if you are black, you shouldn’t really like yourself, you should be giving them some victim... I am not about that victim [stuff]. My thing is world domination, if you want to go down that path. I am not interested in being somebodies victim, so they did not really take well to that body of work. From there, it became more challenging.¹⁸⁹

-Reneé Cox

The question of journeying in Black women’s writing [and visual art] in the United States offers a variety of possible understandings of internal migrations, historical displacement, captivity, and agency.¹⁹⁰

-Carole Boyce Davies

NOT FOR SALE

In a color photograph taken some time between 2009 and 2013, a black woman walks in profile on a gray-paved road. The photograph, a record or time stamp of something now past, catches the black woman mid-stride, eyes fixed on her intended goal. Unware of the camera or perhaps intently focused on her journey, her gaze is fixed in the direction she is moving—eyes, torso, and feet moving forward toward a destination unknown to the viewer. The profile view reveals fragments from a set of distinguishing characteristics—lips pressed together and jawline relaxed into a fixed position, one unaccommodating to a smile. She has dyed blonde hair cut short and close to her head in

¹⁸⁹ Renee Cox, interview by Adelaide Damoah, www.adelaidamoah.com 13 February 2013.

¹⁹⁰ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 130.

the shape of a small afro. Her multi-colored blouse, coupled with black pants and black sandal flip flops, moves flowingly away from her body making billowy shapes, the result of her determined speed or perhaps a gentle breeze. Wearing a few small accessories—stud earrings, a white watch, and carrying with her, what is perhaps the most interesting part of her outfit—a rectangular-shaped brown suitcase in her right hand. Her figure appears small and slight in comparison to the vast greenery and the expansive sky around her. A stretch of green grass and small knee-high plants stand between her and a body of water resembling a rice field. The murky water, peppered with small strips of green seedlings, creates a mirrored reflection of the trees located several hundreds of feet away from the black woman walking. The row of palm trees loom in the distance, forming a distinct border between the patches of green earth and the unclouded blue sky. The landscape alternates between stretches of earth resembling zigzag patterns and pools of gathered water. In the right-hand corner of the photograph, a group of white-block letters form *Not for Sale*. What is not for sale? Does the signage only apply to the specific plot where it is posted? Is all of the land included? Does this designation apply to the road where the black woman is walking?

Figure Eight: Renée Cox, *Not for Sale*, c. 2009



Not for Sale serves as a departure point to begin this chapter's discussion about Cox's persona performance in several images that can be loosely categorized as "travel photographs." Using select photographs from *Bougies*, including *Not for Sale*, "In Search of Home" analyzes Cox's performance as an upper-class black woman tourist. The chapter attends specifically to Cox's strategies of photography and performance to adopt the persona of a black woman traveler and the ways in which this persona allows her as artist and photographer to explore and create various narratives about black womanhood, socioeconomic class, and mobility. *Not for Sale*, a photograph depicting a black woman walking singularly on a paved road against a bucolic landscape in which a "not for sale" sign is posted, is an appropriate place to begin an analysis about the

cultural relevance of representations of upper-class black women as travelers in twenty-first century popular culture and the ways in which this image connects to historical and contemporary images and discourses about black women un/forced travel, migration and travel.

This chapter specifically attends to Cox's performance of black womanhood outside what I have previously identified as an explicitly upper-class, black "domestic" realm.¹⁹¹ Cox as artist-photographer relies on props, accessories, texts, and her own performances to situate the black female body in "public" a persona that is corporeally and spatially different than the upper-class black woman persona she adopted in previous photographs in which she sat on the couch, lounged by the pool, and walked on a tree-lined street, locales which were symbolic of upper-class domesticity.¹⁹² In the photographs discussed in this chapter, Cox adopts the persona of a black woman tourist.¹⁹³ I identify Cox's persona as a tourist, not solely a traveler, because of the ways she relies on the comportment of her body, that is, gestures and stance, as well as her clothing and accessories to distinguish herself as different from and oftentimes out of place with the geographic landscape.

¹⁹¹ I rely on Laura Wexler's definition of "domestic" as stated and defined in Chapters One and Two. See Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 21.

¹⁹² For a discussion about the differences between the public and private realm, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere," Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

¹⁹³ According to the International Union of Official Travel Organizations (IUOTO) a "tourist" is defined in the following manner: *temporary visitors staying at least twenty four hours in the country visited and the purpose of whose journey can be classified under one of the following headings: (a) leisure (recreation, holiday, health, study, religion and sport); (b) business (family mission, meeting)*. T. Jamal, M. Robinson, "Introduction: The Evolution and Contemporary Positioning of Tourism as a Focus of Study" T. Jamal, M. Robinson, Editors, *The SAGE Handbook of Tourism Studies* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publishing, 2010).

On the one hand, I situate the single black woman traveler as performed by Cox in relation to principles espoused in postfeminist discourses that connect women's traveling to expressions of choice, independence, and leisure, or travel scenarios of black female autonomy. On the other hand, I read her representations of black female travel in light of black women's un/forced experiences of mobility and migration during historical processes such as enslavement, Jim Crow, and the ongoing threat of sexual violence as well as situations in which black women chose to relocate or move for their own personal pleasure, in instances such as entrepreneurship, celebrity entertainment, and leisure. I take up the following questions to examine Cox's performance as a black woman tourist and the ways this persona offers a context to explore black women's historical and contemporary experiences and expressions of physical in/mobility: Is Cox's traveling single black woman an extension of the housewife or a new character persona? Can it be both? How does Cox use her persona enactment as the black woman traveler to explore black women's history of un/forced migration? In what ways does the figure of the black woman traveling persona relate to postfeminism? How does Cox compose the photographs to resemble personal snapshots or "private moments" that serve as "visual proof" of her travel experiences?¹⁹⁴ What is the significance of Cox's upper-class black

¹⁹⁴ Scholars of photography studies have importantly examined and theorized the fallacy of the "objective" photograph acknowledging that even when a photograph serves as a "trace" of what was there, the "death" or end to an actual real event, that all photographs are the subject of manipulation and intent on the part of the photographer and the participation or lack thereof of the photographed subject(s.) For discussions about photography and objectivity see the following sources: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*; Graham Clarke, *The Photograph*; Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*; Susan Sontag, *On Photography*; Alan Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays on Photography*. For a discussion about snapshots as "private moments," see Sarah Greenough, "Introduction" *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2007): 5 and Catherine Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013) 6.

woman tourist persona? Attending to the aforementioned questions and with the methodology that accounts for black women's contemporary and past experiences of travel, allows for multiple and different readings of *Not for Sale* and *Lost in Mongolia*, and situates Cox within a broader context of black women's representation and discussions of travel and movement as it relates to forcible migration and movement and circumstances which permitted them to willingly choose how, when, and why they moved. In the concluding section of the chapter, I return to *Not for Sale* to situate the image as both a point of departure, as discussed at the outset of the chapter, but also as a point of arrival, or conclusion. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Cox's persona as the black woman traveler provides an opportunity to think about the limits and opportunities in the future for black women's travel, migration, and flight. I focus specifically on the ways in which the representation of the upper class black woman as traveler provides a context to explore the complexities of black womanhood as it is identified with markers of social success such as economic solvency and global cosmopolitanism.

LOST IN MONGOLIA

In a photograph entitled *Lost in Mongolia*, a black woman stands facing towards the camera, eyes squinting. Donning a fitted black dress with capped sleeves and a patent-leather skinny belt, she pushes one hip to the side, as if to strike a pose. Her polka-dot wedge heels stand out against the small patches of greenery, purple shrubs and loose gravel. In her left hand she pulls a rectangular shaped suitcase with the signature brown

and gold lettering customarily associated with the high-fashion and expensive designer, Louis Vuitton. She clutches a purse, straw like material with beads and black trim as it rests on top of her luggage. She is all alone in what looks like an abandoned area, the remnants of a once small village or collective. In addition to the fact that she is the only person in the image, her clothing attire and accessories render her odd and out-of-place against the landscape around her. Even though she occupies the foreground in the image, her body appears small and rather insignificant against the expansive sky, mountains, and the house-like structures receding into the background. Scanning the image for clues, the eye is immediately drawn to the roof a dilapidated structure. The unfinished roof panels resemble strips of fabric or newspaper much like the leftover remnants from an incomplete paper mache project. A brown and white horse casually nibbles on the green patches of earth a short distance away, apparently unaware or unbothered by the black woman's presence. Several other wood-framed structures sit in the distance, bordering the winding gravel road leading out and beyond the photograph's boundaries. In the background and out of reach from the woman, there are multi-colored dots, small dwellings configuring a town? Who is the black woman in this photograph? Is the locale where she has taken the picture her intended destination? How did she get there and where is she going?

Figure Nine: Reneé Cox, *Lost in Mongolia*, 2008



One of the unique aspects of *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale* is the snapshot style Cox uses to compose the images.¹⁹⁵ I suggest that the “casual” appearance of the

¹⁹⁵ Snapshot photography is the genre of photo taking that references amateur photographers’ use of a “point and shoot” style that is intended to freeze and record the event taking place. Snapshots refer to photographs that are taken for the purposes of memorializing the person, place, or event and without serious regard for the style and composition of the image. Sarah Greenough explains in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978* that the term “snapshot” derived from hunting and referenced a “shot quickly fired with little or no aim.” However, the term was applied to photography styles as early as the 1890s, following the invention of the Kodak camera and have since been used by professional and amateur photographs to reference their image making processes. For the purposes of this study, I use Greenough’s definition of snapshot as “photographs casually made, usually by untrained amateurs, and intended to function as documents of personal history.” See Sarah Greenough, *The Art of the American Snapshot*, 2. I believe that Cox, although a professional photographer, composes the photographs discussed in this chapter as personal “snapshots” images to highlight the temporal and performative shift in her black woman persona character and to suggest that these set of photographs are intended to chronicle aspects of the everyday, but with a mundane casualness that gives the sentiment that

photographs and the ways in which they are titled to demarcate the black woman's various travel destinations suggests that the photographs are intended to function as "snapshots" or images that count as evidence of the black woman's movements in a particular place and time.¹⁹⁶ In each of the photographs described in this chapter, Cox addresses the camera as her black woman traveling persona, with a casual directness that is distinct from the photographic styles discussed in the previous chapters where the images were constructed in a portrait style or as surveillance photos, images taken without the photographed subject's knowledge. This style of photographic composition differs from images like *Housewife* where Cox as her persona, appears to have commissioned a photographic portrait, or in the case of photographs like *Pill Popper* in which she assumes the identity of an unsuspecting upper-class black woman unaware that she is the subject/object of surveillance. Because of Cox's posture, gaze, and attire in photographs like *Lost in Mongolia*, the images appear "casually made" and more like traces of evidence intended to document an aspect of personal history, in this case, international travel.¹⁹⁷

In the initial arrangement of *Bougies* online, Cox ends the series with her *Lost in Mongolia* photograph. *Lost in Mongolia* immediately registers as different from the other photographs in the series even though the black woman identity Cox assumes is

these are in fact images, traces, of a black woman's travels intended for personal use. For discussions about snapshot photography see the following sources: Jonas Larsen and Mette Sandbye, *Digital Snaps: The New Face of Photography*; Sarah Greenough, "Introduction." *The Art of the American Snapshot 1888-1978* (Washington National Gallery of Art, 2007), 4.; Catherine Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography*

¹⁹⁶ Catherine Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2013):2.

¹⁹⁷ Sarah Greenough, *The Art of the American Snapshot*:

strikingly similar to her persona enactments in other photographs from *Bougies*. In *Lost in Mongolia*, Cox maintains a corporeal image similar to those seen in *Housewife* and *Pill Popper* in which she dresses, accessorizes and comports her body in a way that can be identified as middle or upper-class. She wears a form fitted black dress accompanied by a skinny patent-leather belt and a few accessories: a grayish watch on her left hand, a silver ring, and a thin silver necklace that accents the dress's plunging neckline. Her bangs have been swept to the side and her hair falls past her shoulders in straight strands. The wedged-black heels and designer luggage and purse complete what appears to be a sassy yet comfortable outfit. Although her dress, shoes and accessories are appropriate attire for a woman traveling in the twenty-first century, her clothing attire appears odd, perhaps even unsuitable for the mountainous terrain surrounding her. In this scenario of isolation, unpaved road, and no signs of vehicular transportation, the black woman appears lost.

In *Not for Sale*, Cox's character is photographed in profile. The black woman's gaze is focused ahead in the direction of the paved road. She appears small against the expansive background even as her posture, stance, and facial expression convey confidence and self-assuredness. In *Not for Sale*, Cox creates a distance between the photographer and the photographed subject by presenting herself in a way that appears disengaged or unaware of the viewfinder. I believe this is one of several strategies Cox uses in this set of photographs to focus on the icon or representation of the upper-class black woman traveler as a particular identification that that can be mobilized for different meanings. I maintain that Cox emphasizes the fashionable corporeal adornment of her black woman traveling persona, particularly within bucolic settings as a way of

emphasizing her character's socioeconomic class as a traveler. Cox's clothing in *Not for Sale* similarly stands out as odd and incommensurate with the environment in which she is photographed. Although Cox has foregone the wedged heels for flip flops in this image, her dress and presence, especially with the suitcase, similarly registers as odd or incongruent with the landscape, in this case, grass plots, rice fields, and the seeming absence of other human life.

THE BLACK WOMAN POSED AS TOURIST-TRAVELER

Cox assumes the position of a black women tourist with economic means, by virtue of her dress, designer luggage and presence in landscapes that appear distant from the suburban or city home dwelling and neighborhood community. In *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale*, Cox's black woman character has stepped out of her domestic environment and into new areas, many of which are identified as outside of the United States. Decontextualizing the black female body from the domestic environment previously established but still as economically advantaged as either middle or upper class within contexts that are identified as international milieus, positions the black female body within narratives amenable to post-feminist discourses. By carrying what now feels like the black woman character's signature Louis Vuitton suitcase, and continuing to dress in attire that is easily identified as business professional or tourist-casual, Cox purposefully identifies her black woman persona with economic means. Cox's performance of black womanhood in *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale* specifically her use of accessories and props to connote the upper-class socioeconomic

status of the black woman traveling appear in step with the wealthy black female identities she created in earlier photographs such as *Housewife* and *The Jump Off* in which the black woman's wealth enabled the commissioning of portraits and status symbols such as employed wait-staff, black art, tailored clothing and leisure time to hang by the pool and play a game of pool, visual indexes intended to signal the housewife and "Missy's" economic capital. Cox as the artistic visionary behind the travel photographs, continues this trend of using props that are socially and culturally identified with middle and upper-class persons. In both photographs, the signature monogrammed brown Louis Vuitton suitcase positions the black woman photographed subject as fashionable and economically privileged. By including certain status symbols such as designer luggage, wearing attire that is incompatible with the landscape, and photographing herself in different contexts away from the domestic enclave of the home and neighborhood, Cox asserts her persona's privileged socioeconomic class position but also her status as a traveler.

In *Lost in Mongolia* Cox relies on styling techniques similar to those seen in *Missy at Home*, in which her persona exudes sassiness and directness through the posturing of her body. For example, in both images, Cox uses similar props such as the wearing of high heels, body conforming clothing, and hair style with minimal makeup to convey her persona's upper-class socioeconomic status but also her fashionableness and sexual desirability. Whether directly addressing the viewfinder or with an averted gaze, Cox's posture suggests that she is fully aware of the photographer's presence, comporting her body in such a way that it appears that she is striking a pose for the

camera. Gazing directly toward the viewfinder with an exacting stare, she conveys an assertive confidence to mark the black female body as self-possessed and assured, even while she is simultaneously rendered strange within the environment. In her left hand she pulls a suitcase and a purse. Her right leg is positioned slightly in front of the left, bending at the knee as if to show off her svelte figure and stylish black shoes. In the case of *Missy at Home*, she adopts a posture commiserate with a socialite being photographed for a magazine spread about glamour, domesticity, and celebrity, an argument I make in chapter two, where Cox taking on the persona of the trophy wife, dons a lace negligee, matching bra and panties and strappy black shoes. In the case of *Missy at Home*, Cox purposefully fashions her persona within a position that might be considered “excess flesh” so as to bring attention to the illusion of the “perfect” housewife or trophy wife commonly seen in dominant popular culture and touted as the representative ideal of twenty-first century heterosexual femininity. Wearing such attire can be seen as a satirical move that not only contrasts the respectable black housewife image as seen in *Housewife*, but also a strategic tactic by Cox as the photographer, to critique the ridiculous standards of femininity that suggest that even when no one is home, in the case of when Missy is playing a solitary game a pool, she is expected to display and willfully playing up her sexual desirability and availability. Cox does a similar performance in *Lost in Mongolia*. Although Cox’s traveling black woman persona is clothed in a fitted black dress that is less body revealing than the lace robe and matching bra and panties set seen in *Missy at Home*, the posturing of her body in *Lost in Mongolia*, hip sassily pushed to one side and legs slightly parted as if striking a pose, evokes a similar confidence and

sassiness that conveys the black woman's command over her own body. Additionally, her assured confidence toward the camera renders the absurdity of striking such a pose in the context of a rural environment. The dressy-casual attire worn in *Lost and Mongolia* seems more appropriate or fitting for a black woman arriving to or departing from a metropolitan airport, walking on a busy street in a major metropolitan city or traveling to or from her five-star hotel. The black woman's attire, shoes, and even her corporeal posturing in *Lost in Mongolia* is completely incompatible with the rugged terrain of the background environment. By clothing her body in a way that can be read as absurd or inappropriate for the geographic context or space, Cox purposely makes the black female body "excessive" as a means to draw attention to the long history in which black women's bodies have "signified beyond the spectacular," as Daphne Brooks put it, but also to underscore the identity performance she is making as an upper-class black woman traveler.¹⁹⁸

Cox relies on clothing, accessories and personal styling in this image to situate the black woman traveler within a narrative of socioeconomic privilege. Identifying her persona within this class position, Cox prompts viewers to associate her black woman character as a subject who willfully participates in leisure travel. By stopping to pose for the camera and posing in a way that portrays casual confidence or perhaps even indifference, Cox intends for viewers to see her black woman persona as a traveling subject who moves according to her own terms. In this way, Cox locates her black

¹⁹⁸ Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 5-8.

woman traveling persona within postfeminist discourses of femininity. By positioning her black female character as one who willfully travels and with the economic means to do so in “style,” Cox’s black woman traveler can be viewed as independent and autonomous. The exercising of her autonomy can be understood in capitalistic terms in which the black female body is identified as having disposable income or access to finances that afford her the pleasures of international travel and designer luggage. Thus, her ability to move as she pleases indicates her ability to make personal choices that promote her happiness and wellbeing, and therefore a tourist-traveler free to “choose” when and where she travels, unlike other identifications signaling an individual’s forced movement between borders, such as enslaved, captive, and refugee.¹⁹⁹

Situating the black female body within postfeminist discourses that locate travel within a narratives about choice and freedom requires viewers to think about the financial capability of such practices as well as the time and money needed to travel for fun. Women who are “free” to experience leisure and travel in this way, are also free from the responsibilities that hamper the majority of the world’s women, responsibilities such as employment, financial debt, and familial responsibilities—economic situations which prevent most women, living within and outside of the United States, from international travel. In addition to the clothing and corporeal cues Cox uses to mark her identity as an

¹⁹⁹ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 11, 18-21. The trope of individual choice and personal freedom to consume is a hallmark of postfeminist discourse. As McRobbie points out, “...relations of power are indeed made and remade within texts of enjoyment, and rituals of relaxation and abandonment.” Travel, I maintain, particularly international travel or travel for the purposes of leisure only can be situated within this refashioning and reiteration of power relations, particularly as it relates to socioeconomic disparities, through the language of personal choice.

upper-class black woman traveler, Cox purposefully departs from other artists' tendency to photograph their tourist persona identities at common and popular tourist landmarks such as the Empire State Building or Mt. Rushmore. Doing so, Cox focuses less on the locations her black woman traveler visits and instead prioritizes the privileged socioeconomic position of her upper-class persona identity. Unlike Tseng Kwong Chi and Nikki Lee, artists who have both adopted tourists personas by visiting and photographing themselves at places like Disneyland, The Statue of Liberty, and other destinations considered popular tourist sites.²⁰⁰ Cox presentation of her single black woman traveler persona is premised on providing viewers with visual cues such as her clothing and accessories as well as identifying her black woman persona in locales that are often unavailable to working class or aspiring middle class populations because of cost. *Not for Sale* and *Lost in Mongolia* exclude the sociocultural signs identified with tourist travel, so as to focus on her persona's socioeconomic status, the means by which she is able to consume and enjoy other geographic spaces.

I maintain that Cox provides her viewers with minimal details about her persona's identity, intentions and goals to encourage various interpretive readings about black women's socioeconomic statuses, histories and contemporary experiences of mobility. Cox plays with varying degrees of openness regarding the photographs' narratives. At times, as artist-photographer, Cox directs viewers toward an exact geographic reference point, in the case of *Lost In Mongolia*, *Housewives of Lijiang* and *Missy in Ghana*, and at

²⁰⁰ Tseng, Kwong Chi, *East Meets West* (aka *The Expeditionary Series*), 1979; Nikki Lee, *The Tourists Project*, 19

other times, like in the case of *End of Ramadhan*, she willfully elides the specific details of her persona's location, choosing instead to only reference the cultural and ethnic festivities taking place. Even when a geographic reference is part of the title and she names the specific setting or context, the single black woman's exact location is often unidentifiable, making it difficult for viewers to discern the black woman's exact location. Cox asks viewers to rely on her descriptions as the artist-photographer to make sense of the image's geographic location and narrative. Although Cox's persona enactments are specific, she offers viewers vague titles and oftentimes photographic scenes that do not offer much in the way of context or meaning. Even when Cox as artist-photographer chooses to identify the geographic location in which the photograph was taken and some of the contextual details of the photograph, the image remains ambiguous because of the title's vagueness and the lack of other visual evidence.

In the case of *Lost in Mongolia*, Cox is poised as a black woman traveling somewhere in "Mongolia," if we as viewers are to believe her title. *Not for Sale* on the other hand makes no reference to geographic locale. The viewer is left on their own to determine the black woman's location, where she is coming from and her intended destination. Much like Nikki Lee's various "*Projects*," Cox's traveling persona photographs "open the door for the viewer to relate to the images," as Cherise Smith puts it, and to read her photographs as specific and particular as it relates to her persona enactment as a black woman character, but also as general and vague so as to allow for

multiple and at times conflicting narrative readings.²⁰¹ In this way, Cox's black woman character can symbolize or "stand-in" for various identities, including a bourgeois black woman purposefully distant from a "black" community, a white-collar professional on business travel, a single black woman without "a man," or other archetypes associated with postfeminist conceptualizations of womanhood. From this vantage point, Cox's position as artist-photographer can be read as one in which she does not intend for viewing audiences to "recognize" or know the black woman persona's exact identity, the specific location in which the image is photographed or to have complete knowledge or understanding about the moment taking place.²⁰² Cox draws on the stylistic conventions used by artists such as Cindy Sherman to assume various character identifications or archetypes of identity while purposefully leaving the context, specificity of the scene and the photographed subject's "exact" identity vague so as to allow viewers to impart their own perspective when viewing the images. Therefore, Cox's persona performances as "lost" in Mongolia or walking on a paved road near rice fields, can stand in for "any" empowered, independent, and confident woman in the twenty-first century.

In addition to functioning as photographs that could support or espouse representations of black womanhood commiserate postfeminist ideologies, Cox's *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale* images can also be read as representations that challenge the individualism of postfeminist narratives. *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale* register as

²⁰¹ Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others*, 197.

²⁰² I maintain that Cox when crafting her various black women personas in this case, the upper-class black woman traveler, leaves the context and the exact action taking place within the photograph purposefully vague and ambiguous to allow viewers to create their own narratives and stories for her upper-class black woman identities.

narratives about an upper-class black woman's travel experiences away from the domestic sphere, however the photographs might also be read as scripts that chronicle a different reason or motivation for black female flight aside from tourist travel. The visual imagery in the photographs also lends itself to interpretations or occasions for travel not spurred by an ability to consume or an effort to find leisure, but rather the outcome of needing to flee an environment. From one vantage point, then, Cox's use of stylish attire, expensive accessories, and corporeal posturing in *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale* are the hallmarks of a wealthy black woman traveling for leisure purposes. On the other hand, the photographs can be read as traces or evidence of a black woman on the run. In addition to seeing Cox's black woman tourist as a separate and different persona of black womanhood intended to highlight black women's economic mobility through the lens of international travel, another way of reading the travel photographs and the black woman character identified within them is to see this upper-class black woman persona as different from and yet an extension of the black housewife and trophy wife personas discussed in the previous chapters. *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale*, then, might also be understood as visual narratives about an upper-class black women's flight from her wealthy domestic enclave to save herself from the abuses and hazards of the domestic realm.

FLEEING THE DOMESTIC REALM

Steps from a gravel road, a black woman poses directly toward the camera. Wearing black and white wedge-heels, she stands on a steep incline, surrounded by rough

patches of greenery and scattered sprigs of lilac flowers. She juts her hip to the left and aligns her feet one in front of the other to angle her body toward the camera. Even though her stance can be read as sassy and confident, her facial expression, stern and unflinching fails to register the same confident tone. Her lips are pressed together in a firm line and her eyes are set on the camera's viewfinder. With her eyes squinting, and the angled bend of her torso and legs, she appears to have stopped temporarily a traveler merely passing through on her way to a destination outside of or beyond Mongolia. Were she to smile towards the camera or to soften the lines in her cheek creases, the image might be read as a commemorative photo, one recording a black woman travel plans. Although the black woman in the photograph has paused to chronicle her journey in Mongolia, perhaps this snapshot on a long dusty road is more of a declaration to say that I am here, I have survived, I have gotten away, and now I am in search of a new place to call home.

The black woman photographed subject in *Lost in Mongolia* occupies the foreground of the image, however, she appears small and rather insignificant in comparison to the landscape around her. Her clothing and accessories identify her within an upper-class socioeconomic bracket, and thus viewers can generally agree that her clothing attire is suitable for a wealthy black woman traveler who has arrived in Mongolia for the purpose of travel. However, the black woman's apparel might also be understood within the frameworks of a narrative about an unplanned or semi-planned getaway not intended for leisure but rather a voyage embarked upon for the purposes of finding rest, safety, and perhaps a new home? As the black woman faces the camera's

viewfinder, how is it that she is lost and simultaneously so confident and assertive as she meets the viewer's gaze?

Cox's enactment of the black woman tourist in the *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale* photographs might also be understood as the continuation of a storyline involving the black housewife. In *Lost in Mongolia*, Cox configures her tourist persona, particularly her corporeal presentation, in much the same way as seen previously in her housewife enactments. Wearing a fitted black dress with a plunging neckline and signature high-heel shoes, the black woman in the photograph appears fashionably stylish. Cox as artist-photographer situates her single black woman persona in conversation with her previous upper-class black woman enactments by wearing clothing similar to the attire worn in her housewife performances, incorporating props, in this scenario, designer luggage to symbolize her affluent socioeconomic status, and using similar hairstyling techniques. Although Cox no longer appears with the housewife's signature body conforming clothing as part of her travel performance in *Not for Sale*, this image too, suggests an association between the housewife and the black woman traveler. In particular, the black woman's clothing and the placement of the Louis Vuitton suitcase in *Not for Sale*. Reading the images in this way suggests that Cox intends for her travel photographs to simultaneously distance the upper-class black female body from the domestic environment of the home and neighborhood, as visualized in photographs such as *Missy at Home* and *Sleepwalking*, while conveying a relationship between these two performances of upper-class black womanhood. Taking into consideration the ways that both photographs carry over corporeal and material examples associated with Cox's

scenarios of domesticity and troubled housewife scenarios, the black woman featured in *Lost in Mongolia* and *Not for Sale* can be understood as the black housewife who once inhabited the domestic sphere. Visualized outside the confines of the home and neighborhood, the same persona appearance references a different affluent black woman identity. Situating Cox's travel photographs as a continuation of the black housewife's journey as well as Cox's autobiographical commentary and reflections about the limits of domesticity, allows for a reading of the single black woman tourist figure to explore the theme of black women's journeying and purposed travel.

The motif of the journey has been a central feature in representations of blackness, particularly in Black literature.²⁰³ Black women writers and artists theorization of the process of journeying is often expressed and experienced differently from black male expressions of journey or travel. Cox identifies her black woman tourist persona as "lost" and "in Mongolia," to portray the upper-class black female body as occupying a subject position in which she is in the midst of a journey, a physical manifestation of the literal and perhaps psychological move to identify a new space of wellbeing outside of the domestic sphere and her previous identity as the housewife. Black feminist authors Deborah McDowell and Claudia Tate argue that black women writers' discussion of journeying is at times political and social but basically a personal and psychological journey.²⁰⁴ Tate and authors such as Katherine McKittrick theorize that black women writers' creation of characters whose physical movements are minimal in comparison to

²⁰³ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*; Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*.

²⁰⁴ Claudia McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism"

black male protagonists is in fact a method of historicizing black women's experiences of racism and sexism and the ways in which race and gender specific experiences of enslavement, Jim Crow as well as other "restrictions" or limitations such as pregnancy, motherhood, economic dependence, and fear of sexual assault result in black women having a more limited sphere of movement available to them.²⁰⁵ However, as McKittrick acknowledges in her discussion of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and is evident in the fictional works of Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, Paule Marshall's, *Praisesong for the Widow*, among others, and the real lives of black women activists such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Claudia Jones, and Ella Baker, black women have also developed creative and innovative paths of resistance through the modality of physical travel.²⁰⁶ The real and fictional black women referenced above engage in a variety of border crossings that document their travel and movement as single black women, instances in which black women fictional characters and historical subjects challenge and deviate from representations of black womanhood as spatially stagnant or physically limited. From this perspective, Cox's performance as the black woman traveler can be read as a visual example of black women's physical and psychic movements undertaken for the purposes of pursuing various freedoms. Cox's persona performance as a black woman lost in Mongolia can be situated as a symbolic reading of

²⁰⁵ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (

²⁰⁶ Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*; Octavia Butler, *Kindred*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* and the following sources for discussions about black woman subjects who negotiated various instances of travel: Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*; Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth*; Carla Peterson, *Doers of the Word*; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and The Black Freedom Movement*.

black female agency. The black woman traveler is in process, engaged in the necessary movement and migration intended to secure her freedom. Situating Cox's single black woman tourist as a traveler engaged in the physical and psychic processes of becoming, in this case, shedding her housewife identity for a new image of black womanhood, Cox's imaging of black womanhood can be understood not solely as another travel narrative in which a black woman stars as lead, but also as visual testimony and documentation of a black woman's efforts to locate new spaces conducive to black-woman wellbeing. This reading of the travel photographs challenges the tendency in past for art critics and viewers to interpret Cox's photographs as one-dimensional, narcissistic displays in which the artist simply adopts and exploits "the codes of ideal female beauty and deportment."²⁰⁷ Situating *Lost in Mongolia* within a tradition of black women's textual references to journeying and spatial movements highlights the ways in which narcissism can work, as Amelia Jones puts it, and illuminates and "confuses in fascinating ways [Cox's] identities as the subject and object of her photographic narratives."²⁰⁸ In addition to *Lost in Mongolia* functioning as a narrative about black female movement and varying expressions of agency this image might also be understood as context to explore black women's experiences of isolation and marginality because of their race and gender.

Cox's situating of her performance as the black woman traveler in environmental contexts that are identified as geographically and spatially different and distant from

²⁰⁷ A. Jones, *Body Art*, 174.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 176.

scenes in the domestic realm, offers viewers an avenue to explore the ways in which the upper-class black female body can signal cultural and social strangeness and difference.²⁰⁹ The black woman portrayed as wandering traveler is a method of rendering the black female body as unfamiliar and strange, a representation estranges the black female subject from its frequent characterization of black womanhood in the dominant field of vision as overdetermined, excessive, and deviance. Figured as a type of black “lady,” Cox’s housewife personas signal “black cultural strangeness” as she is represented as a woman whose financial affluence is rendered excessive by virtue of her engagement in leisure an image that can be read in connection with dominant narratives that maintain the black women are excessive by virtue of their attitudes, comportment, clothing attire—the very act of their being. Additionally, the image of the housewife as “troubled” because of her dependence on alcohol and prescription pills serves as a metaphor for black women’s behaviors which are commonly understood in dominant popular culture as “out of control” and relentlessly threatening to the stability of black communities.²¹⁰ The black lady, much like her counterparts in the controlling image

²⁰⁹ For discussions about black women’s socio-political and cultural strangeness or alterity see the following sources: Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*; Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” and “Insterstices: A Small Drama of Words”; Lisa Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady*.

²¹⁰ Lubiano, “Black Ladies.” See Raquel Gates’ essay, “Keeping It Real(ity) Television” for a discussion about the demeaning and stereotypical language used to describe the cast members from the *Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Gates points out that even though the housewives living in Atlanta resorted to much of the same housewife performances (frequent shopping excursions, in-group fighting and gossip, and incessant (as portrayed) social activities), the black housewives’ performances of their princess lifestyles was interpreted by audience viewers as excessive, “ghetto” and uncultured, in general and definitely in comparison to their white counterparts. See Gates, “Keeping it Reality Television: in *Watching While Black: Centering The Television of Black Audiences* ed. Beretta Shomade (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012); 141-156; A. Goldman, “Playing the Blame Game: Examining How Cast Biographies and Show Presentations Construct African American Women’s Identities in Reality TV

pantheon—jezebel, sapphire, the tragic mulatto, etc.—is scripted in the field of no signification and therefore occupies a troubled presence in the dominant visual field.²¹¹ This “troubled” presence is also evident in Pamela Z’s mixed media performances in which she explores her own experiences as a black woman traveler negotiating the surveillance of airport security. In her *Baggage Allowance* series, Z, a Canadian black woman artist, uses her own body to document the disorienting and oftentimes dehumanizing condition of airport travel. I contend that Cox’s travel photographs, much like *Baggage Allowance*, explore various aspects of “travel and security theatre” to illuminate the surveillance of black women’s bodies that come with geographical movement as well as “the memories, anxieties, and psychic baggage...that weigh [black women] down.”²¹²

CONCLUSION

This chapter calls attention to the significance of black women’s experiences of varying forms of travel. It focuses specifically on select photographs from *Bougies* in which Cox adopts the persona of a black woman traveler and the ways that the images—depicting a single black woman’s movement and experience in various geographic regions outside the locale of the home and neighborhood—opens up a context to examine

Programming” *Media Report to Women* 41, no. 4 (2013): 12-23; and A. Goldman, *Black Women in Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues* (London: Lexington Books, 2014) and Gates, “You Can’t Turn a Ho into a Housewife: Basketball Wives and the Politics of Wifedom.” In *Media Res.* 2011.

²¹¹ Lubiano, “Black Ladies,” 333; Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 203. Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*.

²¹² Simone Browne, *Dark Matters*, 153.

black women's histories of travel. Cox's travel images also open up a context to examine the ways black women participate in and are implicated in postfeminist discourses of "choice" and "freedom," specifically the ways in which photographs of black women as tourists can be linked to ideas of economic affluence and social autonomy. Moreover, this chapter acknowledges the ways that black women photographers like Cox contribute to the black feminist practice of documenting black women's experiences and negotiation of un/voluntary movements and the ways that we might take more seriously black women's expressions of physical and psychic forms of flight, migration, and travel in the past and in the twenty-first century. Cox's chronicling of her black woman persona's traveling adventures bring to light the history of black women's un/forced travel and migration, specifically, the "shape" and contours of black women's movement, that is their ability to physically move—runway, escape, hide, relocate—as well as the ways in which their flight movements were stifled by interpersonal, familial, and state-sanctioned practices.²¹³ Cox's characterization of black womanhood in the persona of the traveler foregrounds black women artists' significant contributions to discussions related to black women's experiences of physical and psychic departures, layovers, and arrivals. Such a perspective highlights Cox's contributions to an ongoing conversation about the ways that black women, in historical, contemporary and fictional accounts, have used travel and migration as a means of locating/reuniting their families, fleeing interpersonal and

²¹³ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity* and Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*; Valerie Smith, *Loopholes of Retreat*.

structural forms of violence, moving to areas of safety, and forging personally fulfilling pathways.²¹⁴

Not for Sale inaugurated an analysis about the ways in which contemporary visual expressions of the single, upper-class black woman traveler registers black women's disorienting condition of being black and woman, along with other identifications, and the ways in which the black female body—as migrating subject—is linked to the transnational in/voluntary movement to and from and between various countries. Situating this photograph as place to pinpoint, root, and also scramble time, *Not for Sale* has also served as a catalyst for exploring black women's willful and purposeful missions of flight, as they engaged in entrepreneurial work, sought new forms of employment, left home and established new residences, and at times, traveled to distant locales solely for their personal pleasure and enjoyment. As we view Cox walking towards the outer regions of the frame, eyes focused on the road ahead—a road in which the viewer cannot see—we can think about the ways that *Not For Sale* asks viewers to pause in the present and take inventory of black women's flight patterns and itineraries in the twenty-first century and to ask, what's next for her on this journey?

²¹⁴ Black feminists have importantly examined and theorized black women writers' strategies of using travel—the migrating black female subject—to explore black women's historical and contemporary travel and movement strategies to circumvent social, political, and economic disenfranchisement. See the following sources for discussions about black women's flight, migration, and sojourns as a source of identity formation, redress, subjectivity, independence, and ideas of freedom. See M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*; Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*; Octavia Butler, *Kindred*; Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Kara Keeling, *The Witches' Flight*, Ann Petry, *The Street*, Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.

CONCLUSION

As far as I am concerned. We [black women] should be exalted. We should be like on pedestals. We should walk on higher bridges.²¹⁵

-Renee Cox

I still have things to say and as long as I still have things to say, then I am going to say them.²¹⁶

-Renée Cox

Scenario forces us to situate ourselves in relation to it; as participants, spectators, or witnesses, we need to “be there,” part of the act of transfer.²¹⁷

-Diana Taylor

MISSY’S ENLIGHTENMENT

In her online exhibition of *Bougies*, Renée Cox concludes the visual exhibition of her various wealthy black woman personae-enactments with a final image entitled *Missy’s Enlightenment*.²¹⁸ In the photograph, a black woman stands in the middle of a paved road. Wearing a cream colored dress that is made more radiant because of the light cast at a distance, the woman appears as if she is floating. She appears ethereal as if she has transcended the mundanity of human existence and all of the limits placed on the body and spirit that come with earthly habitation.

²¹⁵ Renée Cox, interview by Adelaide Damoah, www.adelaidedamoah.com, 13 February 2013.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and The Repertoire*, 32.

²¹⁸ Cox later renames *Missy’s Enlightenment* to the current title, *The Enlightenment of Missy*.

Figure Ten: Reneé Cox, *Missy's Enlightenment*, c. 2009



Missy's Enlightenment is an apt image to conclude the dissertation project and to summarize my reflections and assessments about Cox's personae enactments in *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* photography series, as well as the implications of her work, and my motivations for embarking on this project. *Missy's Enlightenment* is a visual text that simultaneously grounds and reiterates the aims of the dissertation and offers a space for reflection to consider what I found when tracing the contours of Cox's performances in *Bougies* as well as reflect on what I had initially hoped to find between the connotative and denotative layers of each photograph's surface.

The dissertation analyzes select photographs from Renée Cox's *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* photography series to explore the ways in which one black woman artist adopts various wealthy black woman personae to examine the socio-historical and cultural significance of representations of black womanhood, particularly images of wealthy black women in dominant popular culture. It argues that Cox's photographic and performance inventions as the wealthy black housewife and single black woman traveler contribute to practices of artistic and intellectual development that illuminate as Daphne Brooks puts it, "the integrity of black female bodies as sites of intellectual knowledge, philosophical vision and aesthetic worth."²¹⁹

Using an interpretative feminist framework, I categorize select photographs from *Bougies* as scenarios in which Cox creates storylines for her wealthy black woman persona. I maintain that these scenarios are important narratives that simultaneously capture representations of black women in twenty-first century popular culture, particularly images of wealthy black women. In addition to analyzing the composition of the photograph and Cox's persona enactments, I situate my analysis in conversation with interviews with the artist, and the contemporary context in which the photographs were produced. In doing so, I examine the ways in which Cox's performances as the affluent black housewife and single black woman traveler simultaneously mirror postfeminist representations of womanhood through narratives about the black woman's economic wealth, individualism, and "choice" while also providing examples of the ways that Cox,

²¹⁹ Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 8. See also Michael Bennett and Vanessa Dickerson, eds. *Recovering the black Female Body*, Kimberly Wallace-Sauders, ed. *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, Willis and Williams, *The Black Female Body*.

like other black woman artists, “does” her body for her own empowering ends and personal satisfaction. I maintain that Cox’s nuanced rendering of upper-class black womanhood using various character personae situates her within a black women’s artistic tradition in which one’s own body is used as a vehicle to explore the personal and the ways that the personal testimony or experience relates to black women’s collective identities and positionalities.

Cox *Bougies* showcases the integrity of black women, herself included, as valuable sites of knowledge, vision, self-worth, and power by exploring the privileges and limitations placed on black women, even when they have wealth and access to consumerist lifestyles identified as the pinnacle of U.S. achievement and success. Merging photography and performance as a medium for self and community exploration and affirmation, Cox contributes to the creation of new spatial geographies by which black women can be seen, heard and valued. This project identifies Reneé Cox as an important pioneer in the field of black women’s visual studies and asserts that her exploration of black woman identity and subject formation in her *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* is an important contribution to Black women’s visual studies.

This project was inspired by my interest and investment in black women’s art work and the means by which black women have used visual art, specifically the mediums of their own bodies and photography, to engage, contribute to, and critique dominant visual representations of black womanhood but also to put forth their own ideas and interpretations about their own and other black women’s lives.

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