

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: “HUNGRY TO SEE OURSELVES REFLECTED”:  
IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION AND BLACK  
FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP

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While much has been written about the portrayals of Black women in popular culture, scholars have observed that little attention is paid to the experiences of Black women as cultural consumers. This analysis of Black female spectatorship examines theories related to this experience and the various relationships individuals may have with media. This study sheds light on the ways Black women’s spectatorship is shaped by gender, race, class and sexual orientation. Through qualitative methods, we hear the voices of Black women in the Washington, D.C. area reflecting on various forms of popular culture, particularly film. Some of the media women responded to in this study include Waiting to Exhale, The Best Man, Jungle Fever, among others. Responses from a focus group, on-on-one interviews and questionnaires provide evidence of the ways in which Black women engage in multiple relationships with images they see in the media. Ultimately, many of the African American women in this study disregard negative images of Black women and purposely choose types of media that sustain their sense of self and help them maintain a positive identity.

“HUNGRY TO SEE OURSELVES REFLECTED”:  
IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION AND BLACK FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP

by

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DEDICATION

To Janet D. George

My mother, my sister, and my friend. A woman who taught me about the beauty and strength of Black women, the importance of womanism and sisterhood, and the value of lifelong learning. Everyday.

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## CHAPTER 1: BLACK POPULAR CULTURE AND THE INNER LIVES OF BLACK WOMEN

### Introduction: Black Women, Spectatorship and Mass Media

In a revolutionary manner, Black women have utilized mass media (writing, film, video, art, etc.) to offer radically different images of ourselves. These actions have been an intervention.

bell hooks, Sisters of the Yam.<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation examines Black women's spectatorship, or the ways in which Black women utilize media as a means of negotiating personal politics, identity, and their roles as members of larger Black communities. Visual images hold considerable meaning in our culture; they can evoke a range of emotions, feelings and associations. In Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern, Douglas Kellner confirms that in today's postmodern, post-colonial nation, media work as cultural agents, as provocateurs and disseminators of meanings.<sup>2</sup> For African Americans, the meaning attached to their images has wide range and long lasting effects. Born during the antebellum period, stereotypes of the Mammy, Sambo, and Uncle Tom (among others) have shaped everything from U.S. public policy to choices in advertising icons (Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben). Consequently, representation has been and remains a critical issue for African Americans today.

Given the distorted, stereotypical images that have circulated since the antebellum period, Blacks have hungered to see more accurate depictions of themselves in popular culture. And Black women, being a minority group within a minority group, have had to deal with multiple levels of distortion and stereotyping.

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<sup>1</sup> Bell hooks, Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery (Boston: South End Press, 1993) 2.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Kellner, Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 1-5.



While much has been written about the portrayals of Black women in popular culture, Black media scholars have observed that little attention is paid to the experiences of Black women as cultural consumers. In other words, how do we uncover the various ways Black women consider their own image along side media representation? What are their media choices in daily life for pleasure, entertainment, and information? How do images of Blackness in media bring about larger concerns for Black communities, women's issues, and political culture? The general goals of this study are to examine how Black women feel about the images that supposedly represent them; discover how the representations of Black women in African American popular culture affect the larger Black community; and, when considering spectatorship, explore how race, class, gender and sexual orientation play into the ways Black women consume media.

Through the use of spectatorship theory, I delve into the complex relationship Black women have with images that are intended to represent them and their communities. Film scholar Judith Mayne says that “[t]he study of spectatorship involves an engagement with modes of seeing and telling, hearing and listening, not only in terms of how films are structured, but in terms of how audiences imagine themselves.”<sup>3</sup> So then, how do Black women imagine themselves within (and outside) the landscape of representation? How does this in turn inform their sense of self and their lives as Black women?

Focusing on Black women in this study sets up a dynamic of race and gender—at the very least. But, in addition to examining race and gender, I want to pay special attention to sexual orientation. Examining sexual orientation is critical because African American film scholars and feminist film critics “ha[ve], on the whole, failed to address

the possible homoerotic pleasure for the female spectator”<sup>4</sup> and, more specifically, the Black female spectator.

In the epigraph heading this chapter, Black cultural critic bell hooks declares that the way in which Black women have utilized mass media has been an intervention,<sup>5</sup> into distorted images of themselves. In these instances, interventions serve to unravel the tightly wound stereotypical images and narratives that surround Black women and Black sexuality, in general, by creating alternative images. An intervention is necessary in order to create alternative narratives and to reconcile Black women’s reality—their lived experiences—with their portrayal in media.

To uncover African American women’s lived experiences vis-à-vis popular images of them, it is important to determine the ways in which they utilize media. Black cultural critic Jacqueline Bobo states that “[w]orking together...women utilize representations of Black women that they deem valuable, in productive and politically useful ways.”<sup>6</sup> My focus is on the ways in which Black women utilize media as a means of negotiating personal politics and identity. The primary way of examining this is by using qualitative methods to acquire information on the women’s media consumption. By using qualitative approaches to Black female spectatorship and allowing women to speak for themselves, readers receive a more comprehensive look at the ways in which

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 32.

<sup>4</sup> Jackie Stacey, *Star-Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) 27. Stacey goes on to say that “female homoeroticism is thus seen in terms of masculinity since it can only be conceptualized within the binarism of masculinity and femininity, ignoring and specificity to such forms of pleasure and desire between women.” (28) “My concern with the possibility of homoeroticism in the forms of fascination between women available to all women in the cinema audience assumes that pleasure of spectatorship work on unconscious as well as conscious, levels.” (29) These concerns have been addressed often in the scholarship and literature on pornography.

<sup>5</sup> hooks gives no evidence for this claim. She had not completed any qualitative work that supports her assertions. hooks relies on recollections of conversations she had with Black women she has known, and she also uses herself as a spectator. See chapter 2 for a fuller discussion.

groups of Black women grapple with media images. The results from the qualitative approaches also offer insight into the relationship between identity and representation, or how these images affect the women's sense of self.

### **History of Racialized Images**

The way a group of people is represented can play a determining role in how they are treated in American culture socially and politically.<sup>7</sup> From the initial days of the transatlantic slave trade, African people have had to paradoxically exist inside and in opposition to racist and stereotypical representations of themselves. Since the beginning of the slave trade, Black images have been used to entertain and advertise. They were also used by design to promote the idea of Africans as an inferior race and to maintain social apartheid in American society. Therefore, before and since the antebellum period, representation, especially Black representation, has been and is a political act.

Today, varied representations of Black people are found on the Internet, in music, television and film, novels, artwork and more. People of African descent in colonized lands have had to confront a history of representations that affected their ancestors and that still haunt them today. One of the most pressing and widely discussed issues in Black America remains their portrayal in various forms of visual media, particularly film and television. Although variations on past stereotypes in media today are easily identifiable, we can also say that there always has been a concerted effort on the part of some filmmakers and artists to complicate the narratives and discourse around African American lives and offer alternative stories that they deem more accurate.

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<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> See Stuart Hall's "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" and Jacqueline Bobo's "The Politics of Interpretation" both in Black Popular Culture, ed. Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992). Both scholars

In order to understand Black women's relationships to their images in media, we must first examine the stereotypes that have been constructed around them. Since slavery, stereotypes particular to African American women have continued to circulate in American culture. The most pervasive stereotypes include the Mammy, Sapphire, Tragic Mulatto and Jezebel. The Mammy is always depicted as dark-skinned, heavy set and domestic.

When the physical and emotional make-up of Mammy is examined it is clear that she is the antithesis of the white American woman... [she is] of dark complexion, with extremely large breasts and buttocks and shining white teeth visibly displayed in a grin.<sup>8</sup>

The Mammy's outfit is important to her image as a quintessential domestic. She is always dressed in a headscarf, dress, and apron. The role played by actress Hattie McDaniel in the film Gone with the Wind is a clear example of the Mammy. Sometimes dubbed the "Aunt Jemima," the Mammy is a mother to all, especially white folk. K. Sue Jewell, who examines stereotypes of Black women in-depth in her book From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond, says that "Mammy's large bosom has been described as a haven or safe comfortable place for men to lay their heads."<sup>9</sup> To this day, Mammy is still a comforting image for many.

Another stereotype of the Black woman is Sapphire. Although not as popularly known by name, many Blacks (as well as whites and others) know this woman. Sapphire is the stereotype of the dominating, emasculating Black woman. A popular example is Florence, the maid from the 1970s sit-com, *The Jeffersons*. Also known as a "Black

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examine the ways in which popular culture images in American media impact the social, cultural, and economic lives of African Americans.

<sup>8</sup> K. Sue Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy (London & New York: Routledge, 1993) 39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 41.

bitch,” this image of the Black woman is characterized by her dominance over the Black man:

When the Sapphire image is portrayed it is the African American male who represents the point of contention, in an ongoing verbal duel between Sapphire and the African American male. Her sheer existence is predicated upon the presence of the corrupt African American male whose lack of integrity, and use of cunning and trickery provides her with an opportunity to emasculate him through her use of verbal put-downs.<sup>10</sup>

Opposed to the Mammy and the Sapphire, there is a sexualized image of the Black woman. Mammy is asexual and the Sapphire is too emasculating to be sexual; however, Jezebel is highly sexualized—always ready for sex. This stereotype emerged out of the white man’s need to justify his rape of Black women both during and after slavery.

Similar to the Jezebel, the tragic mulatto woman is also a sexual character, however, what is specific about the Tragic Mulatto is that she is biracial. Popular stories of the Tragic Mulatto suggest that her life of utter turmoil is the result of miscegenation. A beautiful and sexually desirable character, the Tragic Mulatto is tragic because she cannot find a place in either white or Black society. Good examples of the Tragic Mulatto in film are *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) (among a series of other films during the 1950s and 1960s). K. Sue Jewell finds that the Jezebel and the Tragic Mulatto share the characteristic of being a “bad-Black girl.” She says, “The bad-Black girl reinforces cultural stereotypes regarding the hyper-sexuality of the African American female, who yearns for sexual encounters.”<sup>11</sup> These images of the past, and present variations of them, have affected Black women in the way that they have yearned for different, more complex representations of Black womanhood.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 46.

## Identity and Representation

Media images provide cues to understanding the ways in which women of color are imagined in our society.

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew."<sup>12</sup>

How we see ourselves in media culture directly and indirectly affects our sense of self and our identities. For this reason, spectatorship theory is useful in explaining the production (and reproduction) of identities through media consumption. Utilizing spectatorship theory in this project places the viewer at the center of our analysis, looking at the interplay between subject and object, text and viewer. Another use of spectatorship theory lies in its ability to facilitate understanding of the process of viewing media. In exploring Black women's spectatorship, it is first essential to examine the importance of representation, and then look at the process of identification.

This dissertation uses film primarily to get at the ways in which African American women respond to media imagery. However, a range of media forms are used, discussed and reflected upon in this study. Regardless of the media form, the importance of Black images in popular culture cannot be underestimated. As stated previously, Black Americans have long yearned for something beyond stereotypical representation. The importance of Black visibility is evident in Patricia Turner's commentary heard in Marlon T. Riggs' documentary Color Adjustment<sup>13</sup>:

I can remember my mother and my aunts and my neighbors, if they heard that a Black person was going to be on television or if they saw

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<sup>12</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew," Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment, eds. Mari J. Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993) 117.

<sup>13</sup> Color Adjustment (1991) chronicles the images in television of Black Americans from 1948-1988. Shows ranging from *Amos 'n Andy* to *Good Times* to *The Cosby Show* are discussed in this film.

one come on the screen, they would dash to the phone and start calling each other so that the neighbors and the aunts wouldn't miss it. My mother wouldn't call long distance on the phone if there was a death in the family, but she would call my sister far away to tell her that she's heard that Cicely Tyson was going to be on a program, for example. Because it was such a source of pride for them. For that generation, for my mother's generation, someone who grew up in the '30s and '40s there was such a void in the magazines and on the radio. So rare to see African American people depicted anywhere. That was a treat for them.

Later in the documentary, actor Tim Reed echoes Turner's sentiments:

Somebody would yell or we would know through the grapevine that some Black person was going to be on television that night and we watched it. The rest of it we didn't watch. We couldn't relate to it. There was nothing that related to us, that we could relate to, so we didn't watch it.

When more African American characters were portrayed on television, a dichotomy within the representation emerges—images are categorized as “positive” or “negative.” Positive images affirmed African Americans’ existence, portraying them, for example, as kind, educated, and employed. On the other hand, negative images depicted Blacks as lazy, unemployed, oversexualized, servile, criminal or brutish. In a sense, every image that graced the television screen was up for scrutiny, dichotomized and deemed as either positive or negative.

The historical importance of images for Blacks in the United States cannot be denied. There was definitely much more at stake when an African American man, for instance, is portrayed as a rapist (Birth of a Nation) or a woman is portrayed as a Mammy (Gone with the Wind). Yet, to be more comprehensive in the assessment of Black images, we must look at spectatorship as well as representation. James Snead calls this approach “indispensable.” In his essay “Spectatorship and Capture in King Kong: The Guilty Look,” he says that the method of “hunting down either 'negative' or 'positive'

images... could not grasp what closer rhetorical and discursive analysis of racial imagery can.”<sup>14</sup> Arguing that few books investigate film text and its implied audience Snead states, “[w]hen Black images and spectatorship are the issues, then such an approach seems indispensable.”<sup>15</sup>

It is not enough to characterize media images as positive and negative without any analysis on behalf of the viewer. Thus, this study goes beyond simple textual analyses to offer audience analyses as well. But, before examining audience analyses in Black popular studies’ texts, a look at the growth in the literature on both representation and spectatorship must be undertaken.

Black representation has been well explored. The Black identity/ representation dialectic<sup>16</sup> has been on the minds of intellectuals like W.E. B. DuBois’ The Souls of Black Folk (1905), Alain Locke’s New Negro (1925), Franz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks (1963) and others for a long time. Recent decades have seen even more prolific work on Black representation. Volumes produced in the latter half of the twentieth-century (1990-2000) that grapple with Black representation and imagery in popular media, include Thomas Bogle’s Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film (1991), Gina Dent’s Black Popular Culture (1992), bell hooks’ Black Looks: Race and Representation (1992), and Reel to Real: Race, Sex, Class in Movies (1996), and Manthia Diawara’s Black American Cinema (1993).

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<sup>14</sup> James Snead, “Spectatorship and Capture in King Kong: The Guilty Look,” Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 25.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 25.

<sup>16</sup> I use dialectic to express the complex and contradictory ways in which African Americans have viewed media images of “themselves.” Dialectic characterizes the long history of the relationship and tension surrounding this process of interaction between identity and representation.



From 1995 to 2003, scholarship continued to be produced on Black representation but with a slightly different focus. In these years, scholarship examined visual art, artists, postmodernity, as well as various texts that stress the reclamation of the Black body. An example of this includes The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book (1995), which provides an examination of critical memory and the Black public sphere. Contributors question previous frameworks of ideas on objectified bodies or embodied subjects, the postcolonial and visual culture. Similarly, Gen Doy's Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity (2000) focuses on various forms of visual art and postmodern Black identity. Phillip Brian Harper's Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity (1996) and Tommy L. Lott's The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation (1999) examine notions of masculinity, homophobia, nationalism, cultural “authenticity,” and popular music.

Several volumes have focused on Black women's representation and presented new frameworks for analyzing it. For example, Valerie Smith's Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings uses the concept of intersectionality to highlight the coexistence of race and gender in popular culture. The new millennium witnessed the emergence of studies on the Black female body, Black women's subjectivity and feminist theory. Among these new studies are Michael Bennett's and Vanessa Dickerson's Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women and Joy James' and T. Dean Sharpley-Whiting's The Black Feminist Reader. Finally, Baretta E. Smith-Shomade's Shaded Lives: African-American Women and Television addresses popular television and music while advocating for media literacy. These texts, in various ways, address Black female representation in American media culture.

Yet, despite the contributions made by scholars in the last decade, few volumes have addressed Black women's concerns ethnographically. There are exceptions, however. Trevy McDonald and T. Ford-Ahmed's Nature of a Sistuh: Black Women's Lived Experiences in Contemporary Culture is a collection that includes various women's studies topics (such as being a Black academic in a majority white faculty system). In African-American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy, Robin Means Coleman explores Black viewers' reactions to comedic performances. Apart from Jacqueline Bobo's Black Women as Cultural Readers, these two are the only texts in the last ten years about Black women and popular culture that incorporate ethnography (or use ethnography as a method of obtaining information).

Coleman's other study, Say it Loud: African American Audiences, Media and Identity takes a qualitative approach to examining media, using a range of sources from email posts reacting to the *Boondocks* cartoon strip to reader evaluations of magazine coverage of the Million Man March. While texts such as Coleman's Say it Loud does not specifically address the ways in which Black women identify with media, Jacqueline Bobo's work concerns herself almost exclusively with these issues. Black Women as Cultural Readers is the only book-length discussion solely concerned with Black female spectatorship and audience response. Since then, there have been no other ethnographic explorations committed to examining Black women's spectatorship.

Adding to this body of scholarship is my own intervention where the dual problematic Black identity and Black representation is read as more complex. Instead of falling into the trap of “negative image/ positive image” or joining the debate on the persistence of stereotypical images, this study aims to know what Black women think and

how they feel about images of themselves in contemporary Black popular culture. Furthermore, this study explores their readings of texts vis-à-vis the current scholarship on Black (female) spectatorship. But prior to grappling with these informants' interpretations of their lives, a body of key terms might aid the reader.

### **Terms and Concepts**

The major theorists' works informing this dissertation include Manthia Diawara's contribution to spectatorship and Black media culture as well as bell hooks' essay "The Oppositional Black Female Spectators." I also rely on Jacqueline Bobo's studies on Black women as cultural readers and Jackie Stacey's focus on cultural analyses in spectatorship theory. Added to this theoretical framework are key terms that are used throughout the dissertation: Bonnie Zimmerman's concept of "perverse reading;" the term "oppositional reading" (used by Hall, hooks, and others); and Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality." Other terms used in this dissertation include "Blackness" (interchanging with African American), "Black popular culture studies," "sexualities," "Black women and feminism," "essentialism," and "identity"—all of which are explained below.

### **Blackness and Black Popular Culture**

"By definition," Stuart Hall writes, "Black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation."<sup>17</sup> Hall says that Black popular culture cannot be simplified or explained in binary terms. Examples of these binaries are "high and low, resistance versus incorporation, authentic versus inauthentic, experiential versus formal,

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<sup>17</sup> Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" Black Popular Culture, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992) 26.

and opposition versus homogenization.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, “Blackness” is a term that has been the site of contestation. Some African Americans reject the label, stating that it refers to their color (“I’m not Black!”). In this study, I use Black and African American interchangeably to recognize the various labels desired by people of African descent.

“Race,” firmly rooted in the fabric of American culture, is still a debated term. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in “African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race,” provides a constructive discussion of race. Higginbotham’s thesis on race is useful for this study because she addresses how race can, at times, affect other identities of gender, class, and sexuality:

The explication of race entails three interrelated strategies...First... we must define the construction and 'technologies' of race as well of those of gender and sexuality. Second, we must expose [the] role of race as a metalanguage by calling attention to its powerful, all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class and sexuality. Third, we must recognize race as providing sites of dialogic exchange and contestation, since race has constituted a discursive tool for both oppression and liberation.<sup>19</sup>

Higginbotham's use of race as a metalanguage verifies the notion that the “metalanguage of race” at times obscures other social locations. In this study, I would like to help remedy this eclipse by acknowledging the role and shifting identities of class and sexuality as well as those of gender and race.

It is important to understand that in this study, Blackness is examined primarily in an American context;<sup>20</sup> although I do draw on Diasporic influences and writings on the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 17: 2 (1992); 15.

<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, at times this Diasporic idea of Blackness can be political. Many of the women I interviewed have traveled to the Caribbean and African countries, and at least half of them do political work around race. Several, for example, work in public policy or policy development and several have presented in the

subject, namely Black American and Black British analyses. Scholars such as Stuart Hall, Hazel V. Carby, Paul Gilroy, Isaac Julien, Coco Fusco and Manthia Diawara are Black British cultural studies theorists who analyze Diasporic British and American Blackness. Many of these key theorists have dismantled essentialist notions of Blackness. Coco Fusco calls for a “pan-American dialogue.” This Black British-Black American tie will help highlight contradictions:

The Black British-Black American dialogue has helped to highlight the historical contradictions that forged an oppositional relationship between race and nationality in the Anglophone contexts. It has extended a debate on Black hybridity, both racial and cultural, that had already been broadened by the feminism of such writers as Michele Wallace and Angela Davis. I firmly believe that this debate can only be enhanced if recast as a pan-American dialogue, taking into account the complementary discourses on race and nation in Latin America that began five hundred years ago and have informed redemptive political movements and cultural syncretism in the regions' multi-racial societies.<sup>21</sup>

Fusco speaks to the type of pan-American dialogue that the women throughout this dissertation engage. They find themselves in a dialogue that seeks to understand the ways in which identities shift and move, creating varied experiences in American culture.

### **Intersectionality and Fluid Identities**

Intersectionality helps us make sense of the multiple experiences of Black women in American culture. In both “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” and “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: The Case of 2 Live Crew,” law professor and critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw outlines the ways in

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2000 World Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa. Their commitment to Black people in the U.S. and beyond is evident in the following chapters.

<sup>21</sup> Coco Fusco, “Pan-American Postnationalism: Another World Order,” English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas (New York: The New York Press, 1995) 24.

which “discursive and political practices...separate race from gender and gender from race. Crenshaw states that this separation “creates complex problems of exclusion and distortion for women of color.” Crenshaw, in both essays, focuses on the ways in which the “double jeopardy” of race and gender for Black women creates difficulty in legal matters when violence against women is at play:

On the simplest level, an intersectional framework uncovers how the dual positioning of women of color as women and as members of a subordinated racial group bears upon violence committed against us. This dual positioning, or as some scholars have labeled it, double jeopardy, renders women of color vulnerable to the structural, political and representational dynamics of both race and gender subordination. A framework attuned to the various ways that these dynamics intersect is a necessary prerequisite to exploring how this double vulnerability influences the way that violence against women of color is experienced and best addressed.<sup>22</sup>

Intersectionality is a framework that understands that (Black) women experience the world on both axes of race and gender (at minimum). But it also allows for the axes to be expanded—inserting sexuality and other variables that affect Black women’s lives.

Attention to diverse sexual orientations is part of the larger project of opening up notions of Blackness and fitting the previously ignored subject positions of bisexuality and lesbianism into an exploration of Black female spectatorship.

### **Sexualities**

This study privileges the category of sexuality. When including sexuality as a frame of reference, I often use the phrase “across sexualities” in order to acknowledge the multiple ways individuals can express their sexuality. This includes, but is not limited to, heterosexuality, bisexuality and lesbianism. The phrase “across sexualities” signifies the shifting tendencies in both identity and personal behavior.

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<sup>22</sup> Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew,” 117.

## **Black Women and Feminism**

This project is informed by a Black feminist critique. Although “feminism” is still considered a slippery term, much of the scholarship that informs this study is by self-proclaimed feminist scholars. As well, the researcher claims a Black feminist standpoint. Although many Black women in this study refer to themselves as “feminist” or “womanist,” I am hesitant to label any of the informants or their acts “feminist” if they themselves do not term them as such. Although the terms holds meaning for many, including myself, it reflects a long history and a impassioned struggle for women. A purporter of self-definition, Patricia Hill Collins, author of the seminal work Black Feminist Thought, explains that the suppression of Black women’s efforts to achieve self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge production led African-American women to use alternative sites for this form of self-expression. Music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior are considered among sites of importance for the articulation of a Black feminist consciousness.

## **Qualitative Methods, Ethnography and Membership Status**

Studies of audiences in cultural studies have traditionally given a voice to what particular groups of people have to say about the media and what they mean in their lives.

Jackie Stacey, StarGazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship.<sup>23</sup>

Many scholars have recognized the importance of ethnography and other qualitative techniques as a methodological tool for ascertaining media identification. A growing number of researchers “forcefully assert that to capture the multidimensionality

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<sup>23</sup> Jackie Stacey, StarGazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship (New York: Routledge, 1994) 11.

and complexity of audience activity the use of qualitative methods”<sup>24</sup> is essential. This study makes use of this point of view in that some chapters are based on one-on-one interviews. Other chapters are based on information derived from surveys or focus groups.

Although the study makes ample use of qualitative methods as a whole, as an ethnographer, I am aware that the traditional method of ethnographic research helps to uncover multiple layers of information. To this end, chapter five uses more of a traditional ethnographic technique because “[o]f all disciplines, ethnography perhaps is situated best to provide the tools for digging below mundane surface appearances and revealing a multiplicity of alternate meanings.”<sup>25</sup> Ethnography allows the scholar to unveil the various ways that people consume cultural media. Additionally, ethnographic research allows the researcher to explore the “inner world of one’s subject, to discover and describe the perspective from which they experience their world.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the use of ethnography reveals important aspects for understanding levels of identification.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ian Ang, “Wanted: Audiences. On The Politics of Empirical Audience Studies,” Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power, eds. E. Seiter, H. Borchers, G. Kreutzner and E. Warth (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 103.

<sup>25</sup> Jim Thomas, Doing Critical Ethnography (Newbury Park, C.A: Sage, 1993) 6.

<sup>26</sup> John L. Caughey, Imaginary Social Worlds (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 10.

<sup>27</sup> The term “levels of identification” is not intended as a hierarchy of social locations, rather it should explain the various ways in which individuals connect to media. See John L. Caughey’s “Gina as Steven: The Social and Cultural Dimensions of a Media Relationship,” Visual Anthropology Review 10.1 (1994). For example, Caughey examines levels of identification in “Gina as Steven,” whereas Gina’s social locations as Catholic, a therapist, a victim and so on reveal how she connects to actor Steven Segal. See also John Fiske, “British Cultural Studies and Television.” Channels of Discourse, Reassembled, ed. Robert C. Allen. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press) 1992. John Fiske notes that, “recognition derives from signs, carried in our language, of whom we think they are.” He contends that “in communicate with people, our first job is to “hail” them, almost as if hailing a cab. To answer, they have to recognize that it is to them, and not to someone else, that we are talking.” (288)



There are multiple ways in which individuals relate to media, and ethnographic means are a good way to get at the intricacies.<sup>28</sup> In the epigraph opening this section of discussion, Stacey reminds us that “studies of audiences have traditionally given a voice to particular groups of people and what they say about media’s role in their everyday lives.”<sup>29</sup> This study complements Stacey’s argument in that it privileges the voices of the informants whose lives are reflected in everyday media. In a similar vein, Janice Radway’s study of women's romance novels, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature, gives preference to ethnography as a method, highlighting the complicated and contradictory ways in which the romance novel detects and protests the weaknesses of patriarchy and the failure of traditional marriage. Moreover, Radway investigates “reading as act” and suggests that real people can use the romance (novel) to address their unmet needs.<sup>30</sup>

With the use of qualitative research, readers are given a deeper understanding of the complexity of Black women and their relationship to Black images. Indeed, the value and recognition of that complexity leads to a better insight into the process of Black spectatorship. Through this process the reader glimpses some of the ramifications of media culture. In other words, the wide-range effects these images have, on both an individual level and an institutional level, emerge in bold relief.

I have used three forms of qualitative techniques to collect the voices of Black women: focus groups, individual interviews, and questionnaires. Each technique allows

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<sup>28</sup> John Caughey discusses the importance of social/location and multiple frames of reference in the examination of imagination and connection to media figures and other social worlds.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Ang, “Wanted: Audiences” (1991) 107; Jackie Stacey, StarGazing (1994) 11.

<sup>30</sup> Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1991) 221.

women both to speak privately for themselves (one-on-one interviews and surveys) and to exchange ideas publicly, in a group setting (focus group). Additionally, references to print material, texts and film reviews, and radio/ television dialogue, included are to reinforce the information gathered from informants. Using these resources in tandem with the ethnographic data offers a holistic understanding of Black women's spectatorship.

### **Methodology**

As an ethnographer, I initially felt inclined toward one-on-one interviews and focus groups, for these formats provide the researcher with rich information and allows informants the opportunity to discuss as much or as little as they would like. However, after completing many one-on-one interviews, it was revealed that some of the informants were either reluctant to answer some questions or seemed to give an “ideal” answer when face to face with me or others in a focus group. It was then decided to include questionnaires as a form of information gathering, to see what type of information would be obtained when the informant feels entirely anonymous. Because previous experiences (seven years of data collecting) revealed that writing allow people to express themselves in a way that one-on-one questioning did not, this approach was also implemented. Some informants felt more comfortable with complete anonymity, or the ability to reflect on questions in their own way and in their own time.<sup>31</sup>

The format of the focus group and the one-on-one interviews will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 5 respectively, but the questionnaire format will be outlined here (see Appendix for questionnaire). The anonymous questionnaire was submitted via email to a

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<sup>31</sup> I even received unsolicited follow-up emails from women who said that this project helped them consider on their own lives and think about media differently.

listserv that primarily serves the Black lesbian community (SistaINFO). An explanation of the project was given to be sure the informants had a clear idea of what was being asked and sought. But, in order to ensure the integrity of their responses a personal standpoint was not revealed. It was explained to respondents that they would be contributing to a doctoral thesis that explored the role of media in African American women's lives. Necessarily, the definition of media was provided: “music, television, film/movies, Internet, books (fiction and non-fiction), affirmations, spiritual materials, [and] magazines.” Lastly, informants were made aware that the researcher would be available to respond to questions. They were encouraged to provide full responses with a note reading, “The more info, the better!”

The following demographic information was requested on the questionnaire: name,<sup>32</sup> date of birth/ age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation/identity, where raised (city/state), and where presently living (city/state). Informants were also asked to reveal their socio-economic/class status growing up and their present socio-economic/class status. Current occupation and education level were also solicited. Because class can be problematic and difficult to pinpoint, examples were provided with the clarification that “[s]ocio-economic/class status = (equals) general classifications including working-class, middle-class and upper-class with distinctions of upper-middle and lower, for example: upper-middle class and lower-working class.”

The body of the questionnaire includes twenty-one questions. First, to get a sense of how they see themselves and their goals, they were asked to briefly explain: (1) what

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<sup>32</sup> All informants are under pseudonyms to respect confidentiality. I advised them that the name on the questionnaire was “for my purpose only,” that it “will not be used in study.” See appendix for copy of questionnaire.

are five characteristics that describe you? (add brief explanation), (2) What are the most important areas in your life right now? (add brief explanation), and (3) Give a brief statement about your personal goals and aspirations for the future. The goal of the first question was to get a sense of how they view themselves and to obtain adjectives that they used to characterize themselves. Question 2 allowed for the gathering of information on what presently frames their lives—what they consider priorities. Question 3 is designed to understand their future aspirations.

The media inquiries begin with the fourth question that asks: How much of a part of your life are television, film/movies, novels/fiction/poetry, spiritual readings, non-fiction books, music, magazines and newspapers? This question tries to run the gamut on the forms of media experienced by these informants. A section was left open for any additions that they wanted to include. Question 5 asks: What is your favorite form of media for entertainment? Sub-questions include: How often do you engage in these types of media? Explain why you choose this type of media over other types? At what times do you find yourself using this type of media most? Question 6 asks: How much a part of your life are the items below (television, film, novels and the like). Both question 5 and 6 require more detailed information about frequency and use of media.

In question 7 and those remaining, my informants were asked the reasons for using certain types of media.<sup>33</sup> In keeping with this theme, question 7 asks: What types of entertainment do you seek out that makes you feel good about yourself? Give a few examples and explain. Question 8 reads: What in media makes you feel best about

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<sup>33</sup>This question revealed several interesting responses in that the informants' concept of role models differed greatly from what I expected. I tried to be as clear as possible to get answers about idols or role models in media. Many seemed to think in terms of entertainers—struck with a sense of “fandom.” But, my reference points for this question were more broad.

yourself or helps you reach your personal goals? Question 9 asks: What role models or idols do you have in media? These series of questions are intended to reveal the reasons why the informants choose particular media.

Questions dealing with being “Black and female” probably seemed difficult to answer. For example, question 10 asks: What does it mean to you to be a Black woman? By using follow-up questions, the goal was to make the response less daunting and to gather information that its counterpart, question 10, did not yield. An example of a follow-up question is number 11, which asks: What images of Black women do you most remember when you were growing up? Similarly, question 12 asks: When you think of Black women in media, what images/people come to mind? List.

Getting closer to the heart of the matter, questions 13 through 17 ask: (13) how do you feel about the ways that Black women are represented in media? (14) What images of Black women in media do you avoid or dislike? (15) Tell me about a time when you really felt proud of a Black woman in media. Explain the feeling it gives you. (16) Tell me about a time when you saw a very stereotypical or unflattering image of a Black woman or Black women. Describe how you felt/thought/reacted. (17) How does your sexual orientation or identity influence your choice of media or views on how Black women are portrayed in the media? The phrase “tell me about a time” is used in questions to get at feelings and emotions of a particular moment when they “saw a very stereotypical or unflattering image of a Black woman or Black women.” Thus, using “tell me about a time” was designed to allow the informant to easily recall specifics.

Questions on “Blackness and Black Community” are included in Questions 18 through 21: (18) what does it mean for you to be Black? (19) What are the top 5 issues

plaguing the Black community in the U.S.? (20) What do you think of the concept of “unity” in the Black community? (21) How has your sexual orientation or identity influenced your sense of community or inclusion in the Black community? It was important to gather their general feelings about their relationship to or perspective on the Black community, because their answers would give context for discussions on how race shapes the experience of gender, sexuality among other locations. Question 21 was a delicate one because it was necessary not to solely address those who are lesbian. For this reason, the question is openly phrased so as not to specify “for those who are lesbian...” The questionnaire format allowed me to get a sense of the women and their personal plights and well aspirations; it also allowed me to explore particular opinions regarding media, Blackness and the Black community. Although questionnaires may seem limiting, this one was designed to obtain as much of a holistic view of each woman as possible, within the scope of this type of qualitative research.

### **The Women**

The women are between the ages of 27 and 37.<sup>34</sup> They live in the Washington, D.C. metro area (Northern Virginia, D.C. and Maryland suburbs) and are a part of a network of women in similar social circles. They also communicate via an email listserv. The women in this age group were born during a particular time in history, between 1960 and 1975, at the crossroads of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power era. These years mark one of the most significant times in African American history in terms of national and international gains and mobilization for civil rights. Additionally, this time

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<sup>34</sup> I chose women of this time period primarily due to the fact that I heard other women around me, in my cohort reacting and responding to films, videos and other types of visual media. I believe that individuals growing up during the 1970s and 1980s have a point of view that may be very different from those born

in African American history is marked by increased self-determination, the reclamation of the term Black (“Black is Beautiful”) and the revival and recognition of an African heritage. It was a monumental era for African Americans and shaped the lives of those born in this time period.

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, this generation felt the impact of the Reagan/Bush years, with its “color blind” politics and trickle-down economics. Compared to Black women born just a decade earlier, between 1950 and 1960, Black women born between 1960 and 1975 have had a very different experience with Black popular culture in the form of television, film and magazines. In other words, for the women born during this time period, there were more opportunities for exposure to popular culture. Color television enables Black women to see themselves represented in “full color” and various shades of Blackness. Cable television, with its hundreds of channels and around-the-clock availability, has provided opportunities for minority groups to make their own voices heard. For these women, coming of age at this time ushered in the opportunity to engage in new technologies of media: Multiplex cinemas, home video, as well as the Internet. Along with growth in these areas came growth in Black popular culture and film. Popular films included the 1970s Blaxploitation and the 1980s “New Jack Cinema” (discussed in chapter 5). The participants in this study discuss the various elements of popular culture and its significance on their lives. The women interviewed in this work are described individually in each chapter; however, a brief description of each group involved is outlined below.

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one decade earlier or one decade later. As mentioned in the text, I believe this is primarily due to the vast changes in technology and media during the years between 1980 and 1990 into the new millennium.

## The Women: Description of Cohorts

The three groups of women involved in this dissertation are: the DC Focus Group<sup>35</sup> (Chapter 3), the SistaINFO Questionnaire group<sup>36</sup> (chapter 4) and the Waiting to Exhale Group<sup>37</sup> (chapter 5). In terms of racial identity, all women strongly identify as being of African descent. From the standpoint of sexual orientation, a deliberate attempt was made to include a good cross-section of heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women. All the women can be considered upwardly mobile; many have working-class origins but now consider themselves middle-class. All have a college education and more than two-thirds have post-baccalaureate degrees. Finally, in their professional and personal lives, many are very concerned with the plight of Black Americans and work in fields that advocate for the betterment of Blacks and women.

The DC Focus Group is comprised of 14 women who were asked to participate in a discussion about Black popular culture: Akilah, Cheryl, Maria, Catalina, Nadia, Nia, Madison, Kiana, Yvonne, Kathy, Jocelyn, Annette, Gwen, Barbara, and Kyra.<sup>38</sup> Unlike the DC Focus Group, eight women make up the SistaINFO cohort: Alex, Deborah, Monique, Heather, Sasha, Mikki, Deloris and Ayah. This group's task was quite different from the focus group because they participated via the Internet listserv.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Research completed in the year 2000.

<sup>36</sup> Research completed during the years 2001-2002.

<sup>37</sup> Research completed in the year 1996.

<sup>38</sup> Many of these women are part of the same social groups and therefore they were easily contacted. For example, in early 2002, I submitted an email to SistaINFO asking people to email me if they were interested in answering my questionnaire about Blackness, sexuality and popular culture. The qualifications were that they must have been born between 1960 and 1975 and be of African descent. Eight women responded to my email. The women interviewed in 1996, the Waiting to Exhale Group, were contacted through the same people, but through phone contact, email was not a primary way to set up the interviews.

<sup>39</sup> Not the real name of the group. Informants did not respond to the entire listserv but only to the researcher in confidence. This listserv distributes information mainly for the African American lesbian and Black queer communities in the Washington, D.C. area. They also communicate with the African American community in general by sending information about little known scholarships for Blacks, or notices about



Finally, the Waiting to Exhale Group is composed of four women: Sasha, Hayden, Petra, and Ami. Their primary responsibility was to participate in one-on-one interviews regarding the 1995 film Waiting to Exhale. Not surprisingly, these groups share many of the same characteristics because their participation sometimes overlapped between groups.

### **My Role**

Researchers within the field of ethnography have realized that the ethnographer is a positioned subject, that is, a person who may grasp certain human phenomena better than others,<sup>40</sup> yet remains a subject who comes to all projects with a history, a culture, and numerous biases. The researcher is no longer considered an “objective” social analyst, and thus it is vital for her to locate her subject position in a practical study.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the role I take in this project is that of a complete participant researcher due to my status as one who meets the criteria for membership of the group.<sup>42</sup> As a Black woman, I was born into this group. As a Black woman who identifies as lesbian, I have certain inside membership privileges, and with this knowledge am cognizant of the advantages and disadvantages of this position. The position of the researcher influences the type of information he or she will ascertain; at times, complete participant researchers (natives, as some scholars call them) may be able to receive more information than an outsider.<sup>43</sup>

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independent films being shown at local African American venues. Many of those involved in the groups who are not gay or lesbian are allies of those who are gay, bisexual, lesbian and transsexual.

<sup>40</sup> Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth (Boston: Beacon, 1989) 19.

<sup>41</sup> Questions that I (as a researcher) must ask myself are: What relationship do I have to the community I am studying? What cultural backgrounds do I share or not share with the group studied? What are my goals and intentions as a researcher? Who am I coming to this study? What assumptions do I have as an inside member? These questions will be addressed in chapter 6.

<sup>42</sup> Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth (1989) 19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

Yet, “by the same token, so-called natives are also positioned subjects who have a distinctive mix of insight and blindness.”<sup>44</sup>

Given that the idea of the objective researcher is antiquated, it is essential to examine the vital aspect of position. It must be recognized that researchers come with particular cultural backgrounds as well as biases, regardless of membership status. Therefore, my positionality and self-reflexive moments inevitably find their way into this project,<sup>45</sup> primarily in the final chapter. With each chapter’s exploration of the above-mentioned groups, I come to understand as much about myself as a researcher as I do about the women in this study. This becomes evident as the chapters evolve and unfold to reveal the ways in which the informants as well as the researcher interpret various media forms and in doing so come to understand themselves and simultaneously critically examine the worlds around them.

### **Chapter Overview**

Chapter 2, “Fascinated by the Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship” introduces the main tenets and the evolution of spectatorship theory. As it relates to feminist film theory, scholars who define identification and the process of reading a visual text are discussed. The contributions of African American scholars to this field of study are central to understanding race and gender as frames of reference. Consequently, this chapter discusses the scholarship that has illustrated the various ways in which sexuality,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 19. Rosaldo convinces the ethnographer to “consider for example, how age, gender, being an outsider, and association with a neo-colonial regime influence what the ethnographer learns. The notion of position also refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight...thus, the ethnographer occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Self-reflexivity in my study as outlined by the following scholars: Jim Thomas ([Doing Critical Ethnography](#)), James Clifford (“On Ethnographic Authority and [Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography](#)), John L. Caughey (“Ethnography, Introspection, and Reflexive Culture Studies” and “The Ethnography of Everyday Life: Theories and Methods for American Culture Studies”), and Michael Agar ([The Professional Stranger](#)).

as well as race and gender, play a role in spectatorship. Finally, this exploration leads to a framework that allows the narratives of the Black women in the study to illustrate the relationships they have with media.

Chapter 3, “A [Black] Woman’s Worth: Jungle Fever, The Best Man and Conversations on Representation,” allows the voices of the women in the DC Focus Group to express the impact of Black cultural representations in discussions of race, gender and sexuality. Using film representations of “gendered conversations” as seen in The Best Man and Jungle Fever, the women deconstruct Black women's representation in popular culture as well as gender roles and the myth of “the strong Black woman.”

Chapter 4, “Centering Black Women: On Essentialism and De-Masculinizing Blackness,” attends to the issue of simplifying Blackness and focuses on the problem of Black participation in essentializing African American popular culture. To accomplish this, popular notions of “realism” and “imagined community,” the very notions that keep essentialism alive, are examined. In this chapter, the voices of the SistaINFO group are brought to the fore to help de-masculinize popular notions of Blackness.

Chapter 5, “Beyond Oppositional: Black Women Watching Waiting to Exhale,” explores the responses of the women in one-on-one interviews (the Waiting to Exhale Group). I delve into the ways women create alternative narratives when viewing the film. The theoretical underpinnings (outlined in chapter 2) are utilized to consider what happens when the common dominant/oppositional/negotiated paradigm is challenged; a necessary strategy when assessing how audiences read media. Due to the fact that Waiting to Exhale focuses heavily on heterosexuality, this chapter gives special attention to multiple expressions of sexuality. In particular, I privilege the ways in which Black

lesbians view a film that is defined by heterosexuality—about women “finding a man.” Lastly, this chapter raises two critical questions: what happens when Black women (who sexually express themselves beyond the heterosexual norm) do not see their own image in a visual text, yet appropriate the text to control the images they see? How does this appropriation take place and to what end?

Chapter 6, “‘Can I Get a Witness?’ Black Female Representation, Agency, and Spectatorship,” concludes the study by revisiting the discussion on oppositional or perverse readings. Jacqueline Bobo challenges us by beginning this process when she states that Black women “utilize representations of Black women that they deem valuable, in productive and politically useful ways.”<sup>46</sup> By the end of this project, we will have traveled through the popular ideas of Blackness as shaped by media culture and gained a better understanding of Bobo’s argument. But perhaps more importantly, the reader will have a testimony to the ways in which a more complex paradigm of spectatorship theory and application can be achieved—one that truly encompasses a multicultural frames of reference.

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<sup>46</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 22-23.

## CHAPTER 2: “FASCINATED BY THE GAZE”: BLACK FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP

Examining Black female spectatorship—within the framework of spectatorship theory<sup>47</sup>—is a relatively new area of inquiry. Since the early 1990s, African American Studies scholars like bell hooks, Jacqueline Bobo and Manthia Diawara have studied ways in which women of color view film and other visual media within the larger fields of African American studies and gender studies. The goal of this chapter is to explore aspects of existing theoretical frameworks on spectatorship and use components of those theories to draw out a more intricate paradigm—one that considers multiple subject positions of gender, class, and sexuality. Through a chronological discussion of spectatorship from 1975 to 2003, this chapter maps the evolution of spectatorship theory from one that placed white, male and heterosexual subjectivity at the center to one that accounts for multiple subject positions.

Let it be acknowledged here that there are many approaches to spectatorship theory. The scholarship produced on this topic is plentiful. From a psychoanalytic to poststructuralist and cognitive approach, spectatorship theory has been explained in myriad ways.<sup>48</sup> As a result, this survey of the literature on spectatorship theory is by no means exhaustive. Rather, it is necessarily limited to texts that characterize the theory’s

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<sup>47</sup> In this discussion of spectatorship theory, I must limit my review of the literature to one congruent with the fields of African American Studies, women’s studies, queer studies and the like. Laura Mulvey is included in this discussion because of her impact on feminist film theory, otherwise, psychoanalytic and like approaches are not included in this study.

<sup>48</sup> For popular publications on spectatorship, see Richard Allen’s “Film Spectatorship: A Reply to Murray Smith,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art*, Winter (1998) and *Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality* (1997); Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Murray Smith, *Engaging Character: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

major developmental shifts vis-à-vis the fields of African American studies, feminist/gender studies, and queer studies.

Outlined in this chapter are three major transformations in the literature on spectatorship. The first is characterized by Laura Mulvey's pivotal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Writing in the mid-1970s, Mulvey is responding to the dominant ideology of the psychoanalytic theories on cinema of the time—Lacanian theory. She explores the possibility of a female gaze within the psychoanalytic (and masculine) context. The second shift occurred almost a decade later as feminist film critics produced a number of texts, rejecting the totality of the Lacanian position in favor of creating a space to consider race and gender analyses. Women's studies literature is reflective of this incarnation of spectatorship theory. The movement toward multiple subject positions is most evident in the last decade where the literature produced by scholars includes research on very specific groups, like queer individuals and Black women. This final shift in the literature allows for deeper examination of spectatorship because of the analytical perspectives brought by race, gender, and sexuality or sexual orientation.

A more in-depth consideration of these paradigm shifts reflects their usefulness in reading the ways Black women of diverse sexual identities interpret popular images of Black life. Furthermore, this examination makes it possible to consider how and why multiple qualitative frameworks are necessary for understanding Black women's spectatorship.

## **Introducing Spectatorship: The Mirror Stage**

Seeing or identifying a mirror image of oneself is central to the concept of spectatorship. The foundation of cultural approaches to spectatorship theory relies heavily on psychoanalytic principles, specifically those that outline the aspects of human development and recognition of one's own image. Psychoanalytic theory is useful in its ability to outline the production of identity and process of identification. Most notably, scholars have used Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mirror phase" to explain spectatorship; the point of recognizing an image similar to ourselves and reveling in that state. One perspective on Lacan puts it this way:

The position of the spectator in cinematic apparatus has been described by recourse to the psychoanalytic account of the mirror phase, suggesting that the metapsychology of identification (with the camera or point of enunciation) entails a narcissistic form of regression which leads to a state similar to the infant's illusion of a unified ego.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the process of identification maintains that from birth humans are not complete, there is an illusion of wholeness that is obtained from the mirror. The mirror-phase model of identification suggests that when viewing a film, individuals sometimes do not recognize the difference between themselves and the object of their gaze. This very strong relationship with one's own image is the foundation of the spectatorship theory examined here.

An amazing thing happens when we view narrative film—we are drawn into the lives of the protagonist and into the world shown to us on screen. According to Graeme Turner "[t]he very apparatus of the cinema invites us to identify with it. ... When the camera is received as the viewing perspective on a series of projected images, it becomes

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<sup>49</sup> Manthia Diawara, ed., "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," Black American Cinema (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 112.

a proxy for our eyes.”<sup>50</sup> When the camera serves as a proxy for our eyes, we can forget who we are and that we exist in our own bodies, and we venture on a journey into the world of another. In order to embark on this journey we must identify with the character/s in the film. This aspect of the mirror phase involves connecting to media figures that we perceive as similar to ourselves. It commands the subject to be displaced by another,<sup>51</sup> and offers a “second-order mirror” to help us reflect what already exists.<sup>52</sup> These arguments of psychoanalytic theory have been used to outline the process of recognition as well as uncovering the pleasures found in viewing one’s own or a desired image. While this theory is useful, it is limited in its application primarily to white, male heterosexuals. By the 1970s, it is evident that a more inclusive paradigm is needed.

A vast amount of scholarship written between the mid-1970s to the present considered the subject of spectatorship in various disciplinary contexts. These scholarly contributions ranged from sociological explorations of media as a socializing agent to explorations in American studies of the symbolic nature of media images and the responses of the public to them.<sup>53</sup> One particular scholar problematized the process of identification within a psychoanalytic context. Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay “Visual

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<sup>50</sup> Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 1993) 116. Turner makes it clear that “film theory has become greatly interested in psychoanalysis” due to the fact that psychoanalysis concerns itself with dreams.

<sup>51</sup> Jill Dolan, “The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation,” *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, eds. Jill Dolan and Oscar Gross Brockett (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988) 13.

<sup>52</sup> Bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) 131.

<sup>53</sup> Similarly, as scholarship on media and spectatorship grew from the 1970s to the 1980s and 1990s, media technology grew as well. By way of new techniques in cinematography, new camera angles, sets and movements, directors, audience members are seduced into coming even closer to identifying with the main characters and their story. Parallel to the growth in technology and camera techniques came the increased ability for groups previously absent from central roles were being represented in films available to the masses. Films including gay and lesbian themes (*Desert Hearts*, *Go Fish*), interracial relationships and African American life (Blaxploitation films like *Coffy*, *Dolomite*, *Shaft*) were providing not only new themes of black power, love, race and gender, but also audience members were now able to see themselves represented in film, thus increasing their ability to identify with the films’ characters and story line.



Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” inspired film critics in general and feminist critics in particular to further the study of spectatorship, identification and gender.

### **Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema**

In her pivotal essay, Mulvey takes on the shortsightedness of psychoanalytic theory from a gendered perspective. She scrutinizes the supposition that men were “lookers” in viewing cinema and women on screen only served as recipients of those gazes.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy [sic] on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.<sup>54</sup>

What is considered unique about Mulvey’s critique is that even though she participates in using psychoanalytic theory, she scrutinizes the assumption that women will assume the same gaze as a man. This assumes that men are the dominant power and that women must be subjected to this power at all times—even as spectators. Mulvey’s contribution to the literature is to argue that in order to facilitate a feminist cinema which allows women to gain pleasure, the male standpoint must be disrupted.

In order to facilitate this disruption, Mulvey appropriates the main assumptions found in psychoanalytic theory. She feels that psychoanalytic theory can be appropriated as a political weapon, “demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.”<sup>55</sup> She asserts that examining the woman in psychoanalysis gets “us nearer to the roots of our oppression.” Mulvey says: “There is no way in which we can

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<sup>54</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16:3. (1975); 11.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one.”<sup>56</sup>

Mulvey works within the framework of psychoanalytic theory to subvert the discipline and create a space for women. Her “political psychoanalysis” brings to mind the often-quoted Audre Lorde phrase, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”<sup>57</sup> Can a theory built on the assumption of a (white) male standpoint really be used to examine a woman’s point of view, or a Black woman’s point of view, for that matter?

Mulvey noted that a female gaze (and a feminist voice) free of male constructs can only be found in counter-culture cinema.<sup>58</sup> With these arguments, Mulvey’s work set the groundwork for many feminist film theorists to explain the complex process of interpreting visual media. Scholars of feminist theory began to grow more and more reliant upon these kinds of social and cultural analyses of gender and power and less reliant on psychoanalytic theories alone. The need to work within the confines of the male-dominated theories (like psychoanalytic theory) became less appealing, but not a moot point. The decision of whether or not to work with male-centered theories of human behavior is still an issue for many scholars of feminist theory. And while many of Mulvey’s scholarly descendents consider her work a critical beginning for feminist approaches to film theory, there is still the need to supplement her theory with entirely different approaches altogether.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984) 112.

<sup>58</sup> Brenda Cooper, “ ‘Chicks flicks’ as Feminist Texts: The Appropriation of the Male Gaze in *Thelma & Louise*” *Women's Studies in Communication* Fall (2000); 3.

### Since Mulvey: Feminist Film Theory

Scholars since Mulvey have argued the limitations of her approach as well. Yet, feminist film theorists have used her theoretical framework as a basis for discussing women's subjectivity in spectatorship, if only to give homage to her as an early writer on the topic. According to feminist film scholar Jill Dolan, Laura Mulvey's work has been criticized for assuming a heterosexual male protagonist and a heterosexual male spectator:

[Mulvey] proposes a way of looking at the classical cinema as a representation whose apparatus encodes ideologically gender-marked meanings by controlling the relationship between image and spectator. Using both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as a framework, she suggests that the cinematic apparatus mimics the identification processes that inform the male child's progress away from the mother toward the father and into the male realm of language.<sup>59</sup>

This criticism follows the earlier question raised by this study of whether it is possible for a theory based on white, heterosexual males to encompass the thoughts and perceptions of Black female spectators. If we believe Mulvey then it is possible; reproducing the same power dynamic inherent in psychoanalytic theory. So then, while feminist film critics have given credit to Mulvey as one who brought the woman question to theoretical conceptions of spectatorship theory, they also made revisions to her theory of the female gaze.

In the years following Mulvey's landmark research and other publications<sup>60</sup> feminists revisited Mulvey's "political psychoanaly[tic]" take on spectatorship theory and

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<sup>59</sup> Jill Dolan, "The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation," The Feminist Spectator as Critic (1988) 13.

<sup>60</sup> Subsequent to Mulvey's article was her book Visual and Other Pleasures: Theories of Representation and Difference (Indiana University Press, 1989).

began to direct their attention to culturally situated analyses.<sup>61</sup> By the late 1980s, feminist critics began problematizing the use of psychoanalysis in spectatorship theory. Several texts specifically probe the female gaze, including Deidre Pribram's edited collection Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television (1988), Jill Dolan's The Feminist Spectator as Critic (1988), and Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment's The Female Gaze (1989).

These scholars, in particular, offer new arguments and debate the usefulness of Mulvey's approach. They have doubts about Mulvey's contentions that Hollywood's cinematic form has universal validity.<sup>62</sup> To this end, they raise fundamental questions against Mulvey's thesis: Is the gaze always male? And, if the gaze is not always male what are the exceptions and how do we evaluate those exceptions? What happens when the protagonist is a woman or when there is a range of "female looks"? What about spectators who are not heterosexual or male? What about the representation of gay relationships?<sup>63</sup>

According to Dolan in "The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation," a feminist perspective on spectatorship theory seeks to "steal the seat of the white, middle class, heterosexual male spectator." She asks that scholars:

deconstruct the privileged position of the ideal white, middle-class, heterosexual male spectator from a feminist perspective. By

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<sup>61</sup> Examples of these texts are: Teresa de Lauretis' Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fictions (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) and her edited collection, The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987); Mary Anna Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, eds., Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism. (University Publications of America, Inc., 1984); Molly Haskell, From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987); Laura Mulvey, Visual and Other Pleasures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and E. Deidre Pribram's Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television (New York: Verso, 1988).

<sup>62</sup> Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, eds. The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1989) 5-6.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 5-6.

displacing his hegemonic position and stealing his seat, as it were, for a feminist spectator who can cast an eye critical of dominant ideology, representation can be analyzed more precisely for the meanings it produces and how those meanings can be changed.<sup>64</sup>

Feminist critics uncomfortable with such a totalizing concept of the sadistic-voyeuristic male gaze began to seek exceptions to the dominance of the gaze.<sup>65</sup>

Psychoanalytic theory dominated spectatorship discourse for years. Even after Mulvey's study on visual pleasure, some feminist scholars used it as a way to discuss women's subjectivity as spectators. Freudian and Lacanian theories were attractive for their abilities to highlight unconscious reactions to visual images. However, when the cohort of feminist film theorists shifted away from these theories they offered new ones: "While psychoanalytic theory [may] be useful and perhaps even essential for highlighting gender and unconscious processes for some theorists or feminist film critics, it does so at the expense of theorizing the subject in terms of class, race, generation—or feminism."<sup>66</sup> Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, among others, maintained that Freudian-based theories provided an insufficient framework. With these kinds of arguments, a new focus on behalf of feminist scholars of media shifted the attention from a strict gender analysis to a consideration of other social locations as well—class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

This widening of spectatorship theory to allow for a variety of social locations created an entirely new set of questions: How do we theorize spectatorship from an integrated perspective, or one that considers race, gender, class and sexual orientation?

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<sup>64</sup> Jill Dolan, "The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation" (1988) 18. For a quick, succinct historical outline of the history of feminist film criticism see the Introduction to, E. Deidre Pribram, ed. *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (London and New York: Verso, 1988).

<sup>65</sup> Linda Williams, "Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film," *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 2.

<sup>66</sup> Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, *The Female Gaze* (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1989) 7.

Can we assume that individuals identify on the basis of gender over and above the other categories that contribute to the construction of our identities? Where do Blacks and other people of color fit into this paradigm? Regardless of the question(s) asked, it was clear to many scholars in media that the answers were going to come from cultural analyses rather than those based in psychoanalytic theory.

### **Moving from Psychoanalytic to Cultural Analyses**

Given the paradigmatic shifts in spectatorship theory, the majority of texts referenced here can be placed into two particular camps: those that privilege psychoanalytic theory as a basis of analysis and those that privilege a cultural and historical approach. As delineated above, the psychoanalytic approach proved very useful to spectatorship theory due to its focus on how identities and identification are produced (and reproduced). Furthermore, theorists who maintain that cultural analyses provide a better way to explore spectatorship still give homage to the Freudian and Lacanian-based theory upon which it stands. A good example of this is found in Jackie Stacey's book StarGazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship (1994). In her full-length ethnographic exploration of women's identification with female movie stars, she acknowledges the psychoanalytic basis of spectatorship theory, yet makes clear her focus on cultural analysis. She states: "My approach could be summed up as follows: holding on to some crucial questions from the psychoanalytically informed feminist film theory, I move beyond the confines of its textual methodology in order to answer

them.”<sup>67</sup> Although many in the cultural analysis camp still rely upon psychoanalytic theories, others make a total departure.

### **Colorblind No More: The Move to Cultural Analyses of Race**

Although credited with the move toward a more inclusive framework on spectatorship, African American studies scholars, in particular, criticize early feminist film criticism for its lack of attention to race. It comes as no surprise then, that the decade of the 1990s saw a significant growth in the area of Black spectatorship.<sup>68</sup> One of the most important works that advances the agenda of Black spectatorship is Stuart Hall's “Encoding/ Decoding.” This article marked the beginning of more original scholarship that intends on remedying the “colorblind” approach to media studies. In “Encoding/Decoding,” he introduces various reading positions or hypothetical positions from which decoding of visual media may be constructed. The first position Hall outlines is the “dominant-hegemonic position.” This is when the viewer takes the connoted meaning from the media that is viewed and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded. In other words, the viewer is “operating inside the dominant code” and consents to the media’s ideological narrative fully.

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<sup>67</sup> Jackie Stacey, StarGazing (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 48.

<sup>68</sup> The 1990s was a watershed moment for Black spectatorship theory. Significant works include Gina Dent's 1992 edited collection Black Popular Culture, is a prime example of this scholarship. Including only a few reprinted articles like Stuart Hall's “What is this Black in Black Popular Culture,” Black Popular Culture was a Who's Who of African American studies scholars writing on the vast and varied impact of media culture. This text includes writings by such prominent Black scholars as Stuart Hall, Angela Davis, Cornel West, Michele Wallace, Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker as well as many more. However, few scholars in Black Popular Culture explored both sides of the visual media dialectic, the text and the viewer. Jacqueline Bobo's “The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmaker, Audiences.” Published in 1993, Manthia Diawara's edited volume Black American Cinema, included his essays “Black American Cinema: The New Realism” and “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance.” Diawara's Black American Cinema also included Jacqueline Bobo's “Reading Through the Text: The Black Woman as Audience.”

The second position is that of the “negotiated code” or position. Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements. Hall says, “This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions.”<sup>69</sup> This position combines resisting the text and concurring with its message and narrative.

Finally, the “oppositional code” is when the viewer “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference.”<sup>70</sup> Those who have an oppositional reading to a text find that the narrative has almost nothing to do with their lives, and the message is one in which they are in opposition.

Hall's three positions of reading media have been used to help explain the views of those who fall outside of the subject positions of white and male and even white and female. Hall's theory on reading positions assists other theorists in understanding the complicated nature of identification. Using historical and cultural analyses, they are able to write about viewing/reading from locations other than white, heterosexual and male. By the mid-1990s, Black women and queer theorists continued to build upon Hall's model by writing about the ways of viewing that that provided alternatives to male, heterosexual standpoints.

One alternative is provided by bell hooks in her critical essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” However, hooks goes further in claiming that feminist film theory participates in the abstraction of women and that “[m]ainstream feminist film

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<sup>69</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding/ Decoding,” *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 102-3.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 102-3.



criticism in no way acknowledges Black female spectatorship.”<sup>71</sup> In this essay she takes on the major players in the field such as Laura Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and Visual and Other Pleasures, Teresa de Lauretis' The Technology of Gender, Anne Friedberg's A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification, Annette Kuhn's The Power of the Image, Constance Penley's Feminism and Film Theory and Mary Ann Doane's “Remembering Women: Psychical and Historical Construction in Film Theory,” E. Ann Kaplan's Psychoanalysis and Cinema, Mary Ann Doane's “Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body.”<sup>72</sup> hooks reviews each text briefly in order to make her main point—that there has been minimal growth in the area of Black female spectatorship.

Taking a cue from Stuart Hall's elaboration of the three levels of reading, bell hooks uses the concept of “oppositional” reading to characterize the ways in which many African American women negotiate film. hooks' “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” is one of the most specific essays on Black female spectatorship. After considering the role of a feminist film critic, she develops a theory of “oppositional readers,” involving an understanding of the impact of race and gender on the identification process. hooks explains “oppositional looks” best by describing the common disciplinary exclamation made by parents: “Look at me when I talk to you!” In the essay she explains:

When thinking about Black female spectators, I remember being punished as a child for staring, for those hard intense direct looks children would give grown-ups, looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority. The ‘gaze’ has always been political in my life. Imagine the terror felt by the child who has come to understand though repeated punishments that one’s gaze can

<sup>71</sup> Bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze” 123.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 115-131.

be dangerous. The child who has learned so well to look the other way when necessary. Yet, when punished, the child is told by parents, ‘Look at me when I talk to you.’ Only, the child is afraid to look. Afraid to look, but fascinated by the gaze. There is a power in looking.<sup>73</sup>

hooks make use of this anecdote to illustrate the ways in which Black people have negotiated their “looks” vis-à-vis power structures. This way of looking is regarded as unique to the African-American experience, and is used to demonstrate early experience with oppositional looks.

hooks recalls moments when she talked with Black women about their viewing practices and noticed the connection made between the realm of representation in mass media and the capacity of Black women to construct themselves as subjects in daily life. These conversations made it clear to her that Black women in particular and Black people in general have been objectified and devalued in American society which, in turn, has a certain effect on their “looking relations.”<sup>74</sup> Consequently, when examining Black spectatorship, one must historically situate the viewer, and in “The Oppositional Gaze,” hooks notes that racism and sexism in mainstream films helped to create this oppositional look:

With the possible exception of early race movies, Black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, that denies the 'body' of the Black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallogentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is ‘white’.<sup>75</sup>

In the years since hooks’ writing on this topic, Black women have become more evident in film, yet their presence has been in less than desirable, stereotypical roles that have been, for some Black women, painful to watch.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 118.

Another scholar who was highly influential to the genre is Jacqueline Bobo. In addition to her articles, Bobo published Black Women as Cultural Readers, still one of the only full-length ethnographic accounts to consider Black women as cultural consumers.<sup>76</sup> Black Women as Cultural Readers is an ethnographic study of Black women's response to films like Waiting to Exhale and The Color Purple, which is discussed more at length later in this chapter and in the study.

Manthia Diawara, editor of Black American Cinema (1993), argues against rigid boundaries of spectatorship theory and the concept of identification based on psychoanalytic theory. He does not dismiss the Lacanian idea of the mirror stage, but observes that since spectators are socially and historically constituted, the theories must be reconceptualized to account for this. Diawara, like hooks, found that Blacks have never figured into the psychoanalytic framework of spectatorship theory.

These three scholars in particular are so culturally focused in their discussions of Black spectatorship, that they did not give much attention to the psychoanalytic basis of spectatorship theory. hooks and Diawara offer a short literature review on the subject in their discussions of spectatorship. But even then it is only the context of their cultural views on spectatorship. Bobo's discussion of the psychoanalytic underpinnings of spectatorship is also sparse. Instead, she relies primarily on British scholar John Fiske

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<sup>76</sup> Bobo's work has been consistent in discussing important points about Black female spectatorship, including black women as an interpretive community in Black Women as Cultural Readers, in "The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers and Audiences" (Black Popular Culture) as well as in "Reading Through the Text: The Black Woman as Audience" (Black American Cinema). Although she has only one ethnographic exploration of Black women's spectatorship, the essays speak to the need to examine this understudied population of media consumers. Other non-ethnographic texts that theorize Black female spectatorship include: Michele Wallace's "Negative Images Toward a Black Cultural Criticism," "Boyz N the Hood and Jungle Fever" (as well as her other texts on Black representation), "Black Looks," by Jacqui Roach and Petal Felix (The Female Gaze), "Pretty Woman Through the Triple Lens of Black Feminist Spectatorship" by D. Soyini Madison, and Z. Isling Nataf's "Black Lesbian Spectatorship and Pleasure in Popular Culture." These essays view Black female spectatorship as a form of

and other cultural studies theorists to make her claims about Black women as cultural consumers.

### **Situating Spectators: Culturally, Socially and Historically**

Theorists revisiting spectatorship through cultural analyses stretch the boundaries of spectatorship theory to accommodate individuals and groups who had been ignored in earlier works. In addition to race, a number of scholars called for the inclusion of sexuality among other social locations. For example, mid-1990s publications by queer theorists focus on the viewing positions of those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer. *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture* (1995), a publication on queer spectatorship, claims that what tends to result from the application of psychoanalytic theory to cultural analysis is a flattening out of “the specificity and polysemy of texts.”<sup>77</sup> These texts that grapple with queer theory and popular culture make it quite evident the truly complicated nature of spectatorship. Thus, two major themes are found in these contributions: first, that individuals’ identification with media varies based on their own social locations; second, that there are varied levels of identification and that many visual texts are polysemic, open to many interpretations.

The years between 1995 and 2003 gave rise to scores of writings on reading positions and spectatorship; it also gave rise to historically and culturally constituted research from an ethnographic position. In addition to Bobo’s landmark ethnographic research on Black women as cultural consumers, Jackie Stacey’s *StarGazing* is a valuable contribution to cultural analysis and spectatorship. Although she focuses on white

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resistance to popular representations. In 1995 Jacqueline Bobo published in “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance.”

<sup>77</sup> Jill Dolan, “The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation” (1988) 7.

women who grew up in the 1950s and their identification with white female movie stars, Stacey's attention to various levels of connection and recognition is useful here. In her chapter "Feminine Fascinations: A Question of Identification?" she reveals what hooks and Diawara deemed an omission on the part of many feminist film theorists—the examination of the subject/s as historically and culturally constituted. In her ethnographic study, Stacey questions her informants about their particular connection to media figures and how they see themselves in relation to them. Stacey also illustrates through these narratives that the women are connected to movie stars like and unlike themselves, giving evidence to the various ways of identifying with media characters. One of Stacey's informant states:

I talked to friends and colleagues, mainly about [our favorite stars'] style, hair-dos, etc., and to family about their singing and acting.... I referred stars with whom I could identify as being like women in everyday life—but also enjoyed it when their lives became more exciting than everyday... I liked to be able to identify with them, but again, I preferred them to have more charm and ability than I did.<sup>78</sup>

The scholarship mentioned here offers excellent examples of the ways in which theorists have complicated the issues of subjectivity with regard to viewing film and how ethnography has been useful in this approach. With these texts as examples of the expanding framework of spectatorship theory, let us now focus more clearly on how this affected the scholarship on Black female spectatorship—including sexual orientation as a social location.

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<sup>78</sup> Jackie Stacey, *StarGazing* (1994) 126. (Anonymous informant)

## **Black Female Spectatorship and Identification**

For African American studies scholars, the question of identification is critical. At the core of spectatorship is identification, and in the mid to late 1990s this question took on new meaning. Turning again to Stacey, we can gain some insight into how media identification functions in this process. Stacey asserts that “‘identification’ itself has been seen as a cultural process complicit with the reproduction of dominant culture by reinforcing patriarchal forms of identity.”<sup>79</sup> Those who challenged the white and male dominance of psychoanalytic spectatorship theory did so utilizing the concept of “recognition.” Identification can only be made through recognition, and “all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo.”<sup>80</sup> Therefore, what does identification mean for those who are not white and male and how is it shaped, at minimum, by gender and race?

If it is true that “identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo,” how do people identify with images, when they do not experience recognition? How do we theorize those who fall outside of the borders of this type of spectatorship theory? In other words, how do we explore the processes of identification for Black women?

With new productions in African American film, new scholarship has to address multiple standpoints of race, sex and gender. As mentioned in chapter 1, for many African Americans, identification with media images is highly important. Therefore, to get closer to the roots of this relationship with media, identification is now understood as a cultural process. For studying Black women’s spectatorship this means considering the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>80</sup> Bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992) 119.

ways in which race has shaped their personal experiences and the experiences of African Americans as a larger “community.” Secondly, it is also fundamental to bear in mind Black women’s experiences as women within the African American community and in the larger community of women in America. Central to getting at the answers to these questions is further examination of bell hooks’ notion of the oppositional gaze.

### **The Oppositional Gaze: Not Looking Too Deep**

Resistance is a major theme in Black female spectatorship. Considering the various forms of stereotypes (Mammy, Jezebel and Tragic Mulatto), Black women have had a provisional relationship with images that intend to represent them. Watching “one’s own symbolic decimation” is how Michele Wallace described watching Black female representation in both Boyz N the Hood (1991) and Jungle Fever (1991). Not all Black women can enjoy watching films like Boyz N the Hood and Jungle Fever, says Wallace, and at times watching may involve pain, tension and disconnection. hooks’ informants echo Wallace’s sentiments. She says, “Most of the women I talked with felt that they consciously resisted identification with films—that this tension made movie going less than pleasurable; at times it caused pain.”<sup>81</sup>

The effects of racism and sexism abound in American society and therefore their remnants are seen in American media. Bell hooks asserts that Black people, due to the ways in which they have been dehumanized, have been conditioned to “not [to look] too deep” when viewing media images.<sup>82</sup> To illustrate the point of “not looking too deep”

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<sup>81</sup> Bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992) 121. The image of the black Jezebel in these films had evolved into a 1990s crack mother. Likewise, during the late 1980s until 1995, when Black film focused primarily on the plight of black men (discussed further in chapter 4) the image also evolved into one of desecration. Examples include Boyz N the Hood and Jungle Fever, Juice, New Jack City, Jason’s Lyric, among others.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 121.

she offers the example of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Black boy who was lynched for looking at a white woman. She states that it was the “white supremacist structure that had murdered Emmett Till after interpreting his look as violation, as ‘rape’ of white womanhood, that power structure could not control Black male responses to screen images.”<sup>83</sup> Black men (and women too) were punished for their gaze, and thus many Blacks, women and men, have acquired an oppositional gaze. hooks discusses gendered ways of looking. When watching Hollywood film, historically, Black women (and men) were conditioned (as one friend told her) “not [to look] too deep.”<sup>84</sup>

Not looking too deep, or having an oppositional gaze, allowed Black women some pleasure in viewing a text where their “presence was defined by their absence.” Scholars of audience studies illustrate the ways in which individuals resist ideological domination to film through qualitative and specifically ethnographic means. Bobo in her essay “The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers, Audience,” affirms that it is the responsibility of those in the field of audience studies to give voice not only to viewers, in general, but also those previously ignored, like Black women. She also encourages attention to those who otherwise would not be “considered in any analysis of Black cultural works.”<sup>85</sup>

Although hooks informs this study, her essay on Black women as oppositional readers only hints at a qualitative approach to Black women as spectatorship. In “The Oppositional Gaze” she references impromptu conversations with Black women and recounts memories of her own oppositional gaze. Regarding her conversations, she often

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>85</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, “The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers, Audience,” Black Popular Culture, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992) 73.



uses phrases like “[T]alking with Black women...in different areas in the United States.” Apart from one woman whom she spoke with in the movie theater, most of her evidence about Black women's spectatorship is a reference to everyday conversations. The interview with the woman she met in the theater ended up in only one paragraph of her 17-page essay. Hooks’ reflection on conversations was a small glimpse into what could be revealed through a full-scale qualitative study on Black women’s spectatorship.

Like Jackie Stacey for whom major contributions are unveiled through her informants, Bobo’s use of ethnography is equally revealing. In her ethnographic account of Black women's response to the film The Color Purple, she found out how often Black women had to resist the ideological domination of a mainstream film. She criticizes those who she terms “radical analysts” who study social, cultural and political manifestations of power in saying that they “underestimated Black women's abilities to resist the ideological domination of the film The Color Purple.”<sup>86</sup> Although Bobo characterizes the ways in which Black women resist ideology in visual media, Black Women as Cultural Readers reveals the ways in which Black women connect with Black popular media. Gathering Black women informants at one of Terri McMillan's bookstore readings of the book Waiting to Exhale, she explores the ways in which these women create an “interpretative community.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 4.

<sup>87</sup> In Black Women as Cultural Readers, Jacqueline Bobo gathers African American women's responses to The Color Purple, Waiting to Exhale and Daughters of the Dust. To frame her discussion of Black women as cultural readers and cultural consumers she uses the concept of “interpretative community.” Bobo explains that Black women as a group “...make up what I have termed an interpretative community, which is strategically placed in relation to cultural works that either are created by Black women or feature them in significant ways.” In manner of characterization, Bobo explains how Black women hold particular sets of ideas, common histories, and cultural expressions. This commonality made viewing film a distinctive activity in which race and gender inform their viewing of film texts.

Aside from Bobo's work, which specifically addresses Black women's spectatorship there is little, hooks aside, that addresses this subject. During the period of The Color Purple controversy, there were few academic articles dedicated to Black female spectatorship. Published in the journal *Wide Angle*, Cheryl B. Butler's article "The Color Purple Controversy: Black Woman Spectatorship" offers autobiographical anecdotes to illustrate the ways in which Black women may have an oppositional reading of The Color Purple. In this essay, she approaches Black female spectatorship mainly from a theoretical standpoint, relying mostly on the ideas of Manthia Diawara.<sup>88</sup>

As discussed above, the oppositional gaze is one response to visual media. Through resistance, there are ways to still gain pleasure from visual text when one does not fully agree with its ideology. The act of rewriting the text is another form of resistance. Hooks and Diawara, as well as Bonnie Zimmerman, consider the possibilities of rewriting the text.

### **Queer Spectatorship: Rewriting texts**

Like other queer theorists who seek to stretch the boundaries of spectatorship theory by using cultural analysis, queer theorists, particularly Bonnie Zimmerman ("Seeing, Reading, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature"), write about the appropriation of literature which is useful in the discussion on film and other visual media. Using a semi-ethnographic approach (like hooks) Zimmerman's discussion of appropriation creates another level of analysis in the study of audiences and spectators. One way of appropriating the text is by problematizing identities. For example,

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<sup>88</sup> Two notable publications were published in the early 1990s on women and spectatorship: *Wide Angle*'s special issue on "Black Cinema" and *Camera Obscura*'s issue on "Black Women, Spectatorship and Visual Culture." Albeit a great collection of essays, both journals have articles that mainly deal with women in

Zimmerman writes that spectatorship involves “ways of seeing and knowing the world,” she adds that there are various levels of looking and ways of knowing. Zimmerman asserts that “all perspectives arise from the same set of factors, primarily a person’s social and cultural situation (her sex, race, class, sexuality) and personal history.”<sup>89</sup> This idea of multiple frames of reference, or, as Zimmerman terms it, “multiple perspectivity,” opens up the discourse on spectatorship to allow for analysis based on difference(s). Zimmerman’s inclusion of multiperspectivity regarding the appropriation of literature may be applied to film and spectatorship.

Another contribution of queer theorists like Zimmerman is “rewriting” the text. Her appropriation theory regarding literature includes an acknowledgement of the way individuals “rewrite” visual texts. Certainly this act, or manner of reading, is not a recent development. The work of Zimmerman and other theorists gives a name to an act that was surely being used quite often by many viewers of media, especially those marginal in American culture.<sup>90</sup>

What is considered “rewriting the text?” A viewer rewrites the text by inserting their own imaginary construction, based on the film’s text. Zimmerman writes that for lesbians, this act of rewriting offers a possibility in the imagination where there is none in the visual text. It is the act of rewriting the scene and the script for your own enjoyment.

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black popular culture, black women’s art, and black women in film. There is only one article dedicated to black female spectatorship and that is in Wide Angle. 13.3 & 13.4. (July-October 1991).

<sup>89</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “Reading, Seeing, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature” (1991) 96.

<sup>90</sup> Some of the key texts on queer spectatorship include: Nathan Brown, The Sexual Spectatorship: Spectatorship and Sexuality in Cinema (1997); Belinda Budge and Diane Hamer, eds., The Good the Bad and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture’s Romance with Lesbianism (London and San Francisco: Pandora/HarperCollins, 1994); Paul Burston, What are You Looking At?: Queer Sex, Style and Cinema (1995); Paul Burston and Colin Richardson, eds. “The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing,” A Queer Romance.; Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995); and Martha Gever, John Greyson, Pratibha Parmar, eds. Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

Zimmerman explains that lesbians rewrite heterosexual texts and label this reading “perverse.”<sup>91</sup> In doing so, they reclaim a word defined by the dictionary as “willfully determined not to do what is expected or desired.” She states that “...a perverse reader is one highly conscious of her own agency, who takes an active role in shaping the text she reads in accordance with her perspective on the world.”<sup>92</sup> Rewriting as a form of resistance creates a more complex paradigm on spectatorship, one which accounts for the spaces between and beyond negotiated dominant and oppositional readings. One of the ways of rewriting is to create alternative scenarios in the texts that are given to you. For example, if a Black woman is viewing a show like *Sex and the City*, about four white women in New York City, the reader may rewrite a character (or all characters) as Black.

Bell hooks and Manthia Diawara argue that people of color may resort to rewriting texts for themselves when the visual text does not meet their needs. Both believe that Blacks do more than resist—that they “create alternative texts that are not solely reactions.”<sup>93</sup> Out of necessity or desire, but not solely as a reaction, the reader engages in her own creation, her own narrative and her own imagery, all of which makes the looking more pleasurable.

The various concepts outlined above, as well as Zimmerman’s “perverse reading,” are used in this study to explore the ways in which Black women negotiate visual media. Because of these contributions, the end of the twentieth-century witnessed perspectives on behalf of women, people of color, women of color and gay/lesbian/queer people that

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<sup>91</sup> Although Zimmerman discusses this rewriting in the context of literature (novels), she does suggest that it is used in film viewing as well.

<sup>92</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “Reading, Seeing, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature,” (*En*) *Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe*, eds. J.E. Hartman & E. Messer-Davidow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) 89.

<sup>93</sup> Bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992) 128.

were now being considered as a central component of spectatorship theory. In the next chapter we begin to take these approaches, specifically ethnography and the analysis of media identification, to hear what Black women say about themselves and the ways in which they define themselves when viewing popular Black images.

**CHAPTER 3: A [BLACK] WOMAN’S WORTH: JUNGLE FEVER, THE BEST MAN AND CONVERSATIONS ON REPRESENTATION**

Lance: When me and Mia get married, man, her only job is going to be being my wife and raising our kids.

Harper: She's going to be content with that?

Quentin: Are you kidding? Mia is straight up old school. She can't wait to drop this Mandingo's babies.

Murch: Consummate mother-whore.

Lance: Word is bond, Dog. Word is bond. Every man wants one.

—excerpt, The Best Man (1999)

The above exchange, taken from one of the late 1990s series of “positive Black films,” serves as a window into the very complex world of Black film (or films that have been marketed to African Americans with a Black writer, director, and an all Black cast). In only five lines, this dialogue establishes the film’s gender politics. This dialogue, part of a “gendered conversation” that will be explored in this chapter, has a way of exposing old and new ideas of male-female relationships.

Historically, Black film has been an avenue for many to see themselves represented on the big screen. Considering the history of damaging stereotypical images, films produced by African American filmmakers have given many Blacks hope for more “accurate” depictions. From a narrative standpoint, these films often allowed Blacks to tell their own stories and the stories that resonate with larger African American communities. From a reception standpoint, this genre allows Blacks to see, hear, and feel similar experiences and stories at the theater. Thus, films written and produced by Blacks create avenues for exposing and exploring problems and concerns that were particular to

African American experiences. Similarly, with the growth in the number of Black women writers and directors, more and more storylines appear that represent Black women and speak to their distinct experiences.

This chapter delves into how Black women (across sexualities) interpret images and representations of African American women in film. It also considers Black women's responses to these popular culture representations and in particular how perceptions of Black female sexuality and gender get revealed in conversations about Black relationships. To gain this insight I invited 14 Black women to a focus group in a home close to Washington, D.C (the DC Focus Group). I encouraged a fair cross-section of women on the basis of their sexuality—some identified as lesbian, others as heterosexual or bisexual. Though differently hyphenated,<sup>94</sup> all women in the group were of African descent.

Before proceeding with the findings of the focus group, the format will be made clear and the women's demographic information provided. Next, examples of "gendered conversations" from various films are given by way of short descriptions and transcriptions. This is followed by the women's responses to those "gendered conversations." Finally, the researcher's analysis of these responses concludes the chapter.

The goals of the focus group were twofold. First, it was designed to have participants reflect on the narratives surrounding Black relationships and to open up dialogue around

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<sup>94</sup> I use "hyphenated" to refer to the way individuals identify with an ethnic group or ethnicity as well as American. For example, some women in the group described themselves as African-American, Black, Caribbean-American and so forth.

Black female representation. The second objective was to ascertain how heterosexual (and at times, heterosexist) narratives speak to gay, lesbian, bisexual—as well as heterosexual—lives. In other words, how do common gender roles apply to heterosexual and lesbian/bisexual women? And, how do notions of Black female sexuality cross boundaries of sexual orientation?

In the last decade of the twentieth-century, two movies dealt with aspects of male-female relationships in an African American context: Jungle Fever and The Best Man. Debütting in 1991 and 1999, respectively, these films grappled with issues of interracial relationships and gender politics.

Jungle Fever is a Spike Lee film that explores the consequences of interracial relationships. Wesley Snipes is Flipper Purify, a Black architect who begins an affair with Angie Tucci (Annabella Sciorra), his working-class Italian secretary. Their relationship leaves them scrutinized by friends, cast out from their families and shunned by their neighbors. As a race war ensues groups are left to consult with their “own kind.” That is, Flipper’s wife receives solace from other Black women, while Flipper turns to his best friend Cyrus (Spike Lee) for counsel. Similarly, Angie’s Italian family keeps her quarantined in their multi-generation family home, away from the influences of outsiders.

The Best Man centers on the life of Harper Stuart, played by actor Taye Diggs. Harper is a commitment-shy writer and the best man at the wedding of professional football player Lance (Morris Chestnut) and Mia (Monica Calhoun). The story surrounds the anticipation of the wedding and a “secret” that may cause Lance to call off the wedding. Nonetheless, the wedding festivities reunite college buddies: the player, Quentin (Terrance Howard), the nerd, Murch (Harold Perrineau) and love interest and



professional corporate executive, Jordan (Nia Long). As the celebration weekend nears, “scandalous secrets begin to reveal themselves...for better or worse.”<sup>95</sup> Unfortunately for Harper, the wedding takes place at the same time his forthcoming semi-autobiographical novel is due to be released. During the wedding weekend, the novel’s manuscript gets passed around the group of friends. The problem with this is that the novel surreptitiously chronicles his college experiences with Lance, Mia, Quentin, Murch and Jordan but in a less-than-perfect light. The novel’s clincher reveals a torrid affair between the author and a character resembling his best friend’s fiancé.

Jungle Fever and The Best Man both feature heterosexual protagonists and depict poignant just-among-men and just-among-women conversations concerning relationships, gender expectations, and sexuality. Issues of gender are at the core of two movie scenes (excerpted below) that were shared with the women in the focus group. Before showing the clips, participants were asked to keep in mind the representation of gender and sexuality in both clips. If media is a means of communicating ideas about Black womanhood nationally and internationally, it was crucial to learn how media shapes Black women's sense of reality and experiences of womanhood.

### **Black Women on Popular Culture**

Before analyzing the film clips and the focus group responses to them, a brief character sketch describing the relative diversity of the group’s participants is in order:

- Nadia, 35, identifies as a Black lesbian. Growing up, she traveled all over the United States but was raised in New York. Overcoming the working-class position of her youth, Nadia presently works for a large university conducting health research. She attended graduate school for years and left to work as director of a large agency for child advocacy.

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<sup>95</sup> Quote taken from the film’s tag line. Universal Pictures (A 40 acres and a mule filmworks production) Dir. Malcolm D. Lee. Prod. Spike Lee, Sam Kitt and Bill Carrao. 1999.

- At 25- years old, Madison works as founder and executive director of her own non- profit organization that supports women's activism. She was raised in California, and now lives in a Maryland suburb. Madison, who is working towards her doctorate, also self-identifies as a lesbian. Madison also grew up enveloped by a working-class environment and now too considers herself middle-class.
- Kiana, raised in Pennsylvania, is a 23-year old graduate fellow. She grew up “poor” and still believes herself to be in this class position. Kiana labels herself “queer.”
- Twenty-eight year-old Kathy, also labels herself a “Black queer.” Growing up middle-class in Pennsylvania, Kathy is a Black gay woman who works as a lawyer in D.C.
- Yvonne, 32, who characterizes herself as a “Black American lesbian,” was raised in Georgia. Middle-class and college educated, she works as a sports manager.
- Raised in Texas, Jocelyn is 33, was born and raised lower middle-class and is now upper middle-class. She labels herself a “Black queer.” Jocelyn graduated from law school and now works as law professor.
- Raised in Pennsylvania, Akilah is 29. She identifies as racially “mixed” and straight. This law school graduate grew up working-class and is now middle-class.
- Cheryl, 25, was raised in California. She uses both terms “Black/ African American” to describe her race and identifies as heterosexual. A political consultant and graduate student, she grew up lower middle-class and now considers herself middle-class.
- Maria, 23, was raised in Massachusetts. She identifies as a Black Latina. She is a college educated bisexual woman who grew up “working-class with both parents until 12, then with one parent.” Her socio-economic status now is middle-class.
- Raised in Louisiana, Catalina, 30, is also bisexual and African American. She is college educated and works for the U.S. Government in Foreign Service. She grew up lower middle-class, but is now middle-class.
- Annette, 28, is from New Jersey. This “African American gay” woman graduated from professional school with a master's degree in public policy and works as a senior consultant. Annette was born into and remains in the middle-class.

- Also middle-class, Gwen, is a 32 year-old African American lesbian. She attended graduate school and works as a speech pathologist.
- Personal trainer Barbara, 31, was raised in Virginia. She labels herself a “Black Homo.” Born into a lower middle-class family, she now considers herself middle-class.
- Raised in a low-income family in North Carolina, Kyra is a 28-year-old African American heterosexual. She is a graduate student working on her doctorate while serving as a teaching assistant. She considers herself mid-low income.

These fourteen women were very eager to respond to the viewing of the two film clips from Jungle Fever and The Best Man. Although there were 14 women in the focus group, the most vocal were Nadia, Nia, Kathy, Allison, Yvonne, Kyra, Catalina and Madison. Throughout this discussion, the women eagerly began talking about Black culture. Out of this came conversations that touched on five major themes: gender roles and the concept of the “strong Black woman”; popular notions of Black womanhood; differences between Black women and white women; the importance of representation; and assumptions based on class.

### **Gendered Conversations**

The clips from the films can be characterized as “gendered conversations” because they both dialogue about women and men independently, and in relationships. Additionally, these “gendered conversations” occur in all-female or all-male settings. Particularly, gendered conversations bring up issues in male/female relationships like gender norms and expectations, sex and sexuality, race and interracial relationships. In other words, it is through these conversations about heterosexual coupling that we are able to get at the root (at least partially) of the complicated nature of gender. Examples

of these complications include assumptions about gender, gender role expectations, and ideas about sexuality.

The gendered conversation in Jungle Fever is an interesting one. Director Spike Lee dubbed the scene where Black women meet and talk the “war council.” What this means is that to obtain authenticity and realism in the scene, Spike Lee “turned his actresses loose to describe the relations between Black men and white women, and let them rip.” According to John Nesbit, author of the article “Basic Introduction to Spike Lee,” Spike Lee said that there was “no way that he could have written an accurate discussion like this, and he knew that the actresses he had hired would create some powerful dialogue.”<sup>96</sup> Therefore, unlike the usual scripted film, this unscripted segment was designed to lend an air of authenticity to women’s thoughts about relationships.

The gendered conversation in Jungle Fever centers on several women in dialogue: Drew (Flipper's wife), and her friends Angela, Vera, Nilda, and Inez. After Flipper cheats on his wife Drew with Angie and Drew finds out, she throws him and his belongings out of the house in a public display of rage. Later on that evening, the women sit in Drew's living room offering support and words of wisdom. This conversation touches on issues of colorism<sup>97</sup> within the African American community (Drew is very light-skinned), sex and sexuality, as well as racial and sexual stereotypes about females and males.

Drew:           She ain't nothing but low class—white trash. She probably didn't even finish high school.

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<sup>96</sup> John Nesbit. “Basic Introduction to Spike Lee” on CultureDose.Net. <http://www.culturedose.net/review.php?rid=10004399> January 10, 2003.

<sup>97</sup> Colorism is the idea that more Caucasian-appearing (in skin color, hair texture, shape of features) Blacks are more desirable and attractive than more African-appearing Blacks. This issue tends to effect Black women to a greater extent than Black men because women are judged by white standards of beauty.

Angela: Girl, you know that's the truth!

Drew: That's what he left me for.

Vera: See, I always thought Flipper was the ideal husband, girl. You can never tell. They're all dogs. I promise you they're all dogs. Every last one.

Nilda: That's right. We're gonna have to start dating white men.

Drew: Stop it, Nilda!

Nilda: It's true.

Drew: I'm not datin' no white man.

Nilda: There ain't no good Black men out there.

Drew: Yes there are.

Nilda: Most of them are drug addicts, in jail, homos... the good ones know they the shit, so they got ten women at a time. Leaving babies all over the place!

Drew: My marriage is wrecked. It's fucked up. My man is gone. He is fucking some white bitch and I still believe there's good Black men out there.

Nilda: Where? And the options...what are the options? You know what the options are: be a nun, be gay, or see somebody who likes you no matter what—Chinese, Black, white or whatever.

Drew: Wrong, Nilda. You're wrong, as the day is long! They are out there. The problem is we're looking in the wrong places. We're looking some- place...I don't know where we are looking, but we're not looking at the bus drivers or truck drivers or garbage men and a lot of them are doing that. And we just won't give them the time day. But there are good men.

Angela: How many men do you know—Black men—who can effectively deal with a mate who has more education and make more money? Not many. They freak and ya'll know I am telling the truth.

Vera: The fact remains that we are losing our men. That is the bottom line.

Drew: A lot of this really doesn't so much have to do with the Black men. I know it does; we want to blame them; and it is their blame but part of it is that these white bitches throw themselves at Black men. Do you see the way they look at them? You can't walk down the street with your man

without 29,000 white bitches comin' on to him and they will give up the pussy because their fathers tried to keep it from them all their lives and when they turn 18 and leave home, they gonna get that Black dick. They gonna get it, they gonna get it and it can be yours, yours, yours, or mine. And they want it. And they're gettin' it.

- Inez: Let's deal with the Black man for a minute. There is a lot of self-hate going on when he can't deal with a sister.
- Drew: Yeah, Inez how do you know? You won't deal with a Black man. How would you know?
- Inez: Oh no, no I do date Black men. But I also date Chinese, Latino, Jewish—the whole spectrum.
- Drew: That's not really a consolation for this particular argument.
- Inez: Well it's not supposed to be. I know you think I should date Black men, but I am going to date who I like. Give me a man regardless of the color of his skin who is nice to me, who is sweet to me, and who I strongly believe loves me. It's not about what color the man is.
- Drew: Inez, I am not the rainbow fucking kind...[laughter] Yes, you are the reading rainbow. We know this about you.
- Inez: Girl, if it will make you happy. I will make a pilgrimage to Africa, the motherland and find myself a true tribesman.
- Nilda: A true Asiatic Black man.
- Inez: With a dick down to his knees to keep me happy for days!
- Nilda: Zulu dick!
- Inez: That's right girl, give me some serious Zulu dick in the bush!
- Drew: Ya'll are nasty.
- Angela: Do any of you know what it's like not being thought of as attractive?
- Drew: I can't believe you ever believed that.
- Angela: Drew, it is the kind of shit you buy into, okay? I was always the darkest one in my class and I know you know what I am talking about. All the guys ran after the light-skin girls with long straight hair and that left me out. And it's that same kind of thinking that leaves us out when it comes

to white women. Now back in the day brothers would get sisters that look like you Drew and you Vera. But now light skinned ain't even good enough. Today brothers are going for the gusto. I mean the real McCoy. That's why Flipper's gone. White girls got it made.

Nilda: The whole thing. Everything that we have been doing...everything in the society we just keep on doing the same thing over and over. Keep on telling ourselves, negating ourselves, our own values. Look at the brothers who are successful. Look at them. Most of the brothers who have made it got white women on their arms, okay? In order to go up that little ladder to success seems like you've got to have Miss Thing on your arm. Their responsibility level isn't the same as ours.

Vera: It's not a question of responsibility. It is just a fundamental disrespect of women.

Nilda: I don't care. For the best man it is hard for them to say no with some pussy staring him in the face. I'm sorry. I don't know a man that's been born that's going to say no...[he] looks around...ain't nobody looking...he going to fuck the pussy. If you are in a committed relationship then you are supposed to be able to say no. It is the "Art of No" theory for me. If you know you are involved with this person you have no business. I know, I mean you're going to get turned on; you are going to see somebody you want to fuck; but your mind is suppose to tell you *I have a committed relationship, I have a wife, I have whatever* and tell the dick to shut the fuck up. Tell the dick to get down. Strap that motherfucker down! You know?

[wild laughter]

Drew: You know something, though. It don't even matter what color she is. My man is gone.

This was clearly an illustration of female bonding and perhaps, to some, male bashing. But examples of female (or male) "venting" are not uncommon as a similar example of gender bonding—among men—is evident in The Best Man. As in the Jungle Fever clip, The Best Man also features a roundtable dialogue. This time, however, it is a group of men sitting around a table in a hotel room playing cards several nights before Lance's wedding. Lance and his friends Harper, Murch and Quentin begin "talking trash"

as they play cards. In the beginning, the trash talk is about who is going to win. It quickly moves to a playful dialogue about the types of relationships they have had with women. That soon escalates into a fiery personal debate about double standards for men and women.

Quentin: I'm about to run a Boston on ya'll niggas. Ya'll about to be set.

Murch: Do you always have to talk trash? Come on, it's just a game.

Quentin: Yeah. That's what all punk-ass losers say.

Lance: Easy, Mojo. Leave the boy alone.

Harper: Ahhh. Mojo. I haven't heard that in a clip. Mo to the Jo!

Quentin: 'Cause that's what I be putting on my ladies when I do my thing.

Lance: Got them turned the hell out man. They be making breakfast for this fool. Buyin' him jewelry and then they try to figure out why they do the shit 'cause they really hate his yellow ass.

Murch: Then he drops them like a bad habit.

Harper: Word!

Quentin: Hold up, Harp. I know damn well you ain't talking about a nigga leaving a ho strung out.

Lance: Yeah, that is true player. You are the serial monogamist.

Harper: What?! Serial what?

Quentin: Nigga, you be having these girlfriends... no better yet, these jive-ass public relationships. Talking about "this is my queen" and shit. And the first moment she steps out of your little boundary she's gone.

Lance: Dismissed with a quickness!

Murch: You know that's because none of them have ever measured up to Jordan.

Lance: Oh Shit.



Quentin: Excellent point, Counselor Murchison.

Lance: There it is right there. Sustained!

Harper: Get out of here!

Murch: You know that's true. Jordan's the best girlfriend you never had. Oh wait. Did you guys know that they kissed in undergrad?

Lance: Oh yeah, up in the newsroom senior year. I remember that shit.

Murch: You knew about that?

Quentin: Yeah we knew about that shit.

Murch: Harp?

Quentin: Nigga, You know damn well you can't keep a secret.

Murch: That is so messed up!

Harper: Come on man!

Lance: Is that the case there, man? You waitin' for Jordan to slow down from her career path? For the Harper rest stop?

Harper: Man, ya'll are trippin'. Just play the game.

Quentin: I still can't believe you ain't never hit that.

Lance: Yeah me neither.

Harper: Hey ya'll. I am in a very fulfilling relationship. A virtually drama-free two years tomorrow. Okay?

Lance: Oh, that's right. She is a stand up comic, right?

Murch: No, no she makes jewelry.

Quentin: No, she's a...she's a teacher.

Harper: She is a caterer, goddammit! For the last time, it took her a while to find her creative niche. She found it and she's a caterer.

Quentin: I can definitely relate to that one. But she still don't sound like Jordan.

Harper: It's because she ain't Jordan, she's Robin.

Lance: I'm glad she ain't Jordan.

Murch: Why do you say that?

Lance: Because Jordan is too damn sassy and independent. And she might make more cheese than you some day, bro.

Harper: Yeah, and...?

Lance: Hey man, I love Jordan, you know that. But let's face it, dog. A woman like that don't need no man. Naw man. She's one step from lesbian.

Murch: Ohh, Ohhh!

Quentin: Hold on, hold on. That's a nice thought!

Lance: Look, all I'm saying is that the only way a relationship works is if the man provides the loot and the woman takes care of the children.

Harper: Oh, man. You talkin' like you are from the Stone Age. You're a cave man.

Murch: Isn't that ironic though? Brothers are always talking about gold diggers, yet you can't take an educated sister who makes more money.

Lance: No, I can't.

Quentin: Oh Murchie, we know you don't care. Your woman is gonna run your ass regardless.

Murch: Hey. Bite it, Spivey. Okay? Bite it!

Quentin: Grow it, Murchie.

[laughter]

Lance: When me and Mia get married, man, her only job is going to be being my wife and raising our kids.

Harper: She's going to be content with that?

Quentin: Are you kidding? Mia is straight up old school. She can't wait to drop this Mandingo's babies.

Murch: Consummate mother-whore.

Lance: Word is bond, Dog. Word is bond. Every man wants one.

Murch: Right.

Harper: I'm gonna ask you a question man.

Lance: What's that?

Harper: What made you decide to up and get married now? You know what I'm saying? Cause you been dippin' out on Mia—no offense—for a while.

Murch: And wait...and with the new contract...

Quentin: Oh yes. You gonna need a catcher's mitt to catch all that new pussy coming your way.

Lance: Players, players, come on now...I done had all the ass ten men can have. My wild oats are sown. Besides how much ass can one man have any way?

Everyone: A LOT!!

Lance: Marriage is sacred. My folks have been together 35 years. It means something to me.

Murch: I hear that.

Lance: Besides, marriage is going to curb that appetite for more women. In case ya'll didn't know—marriage is the cure to promiscuity.

Quentin: In what world?!!

Harper: I can't believe you said that, man. You would have never known you graduated Summa Cum Laude. You say some dumb-ass shit like that.

Lance: There is a time for everything, players. We in the real world now. The real world, real things.

Murch: Bang.

Quentin: I don't give a damn what ya'll say. Ain't nothin' natural about no monogamy. I mean God did not intend for us to be with just one person. If he had he wouldn't have given us all this sperm, these bitches would not outnumber us the way that they do...

Murch: Okay...

Lance: Okay, so what, you a philosophy major now?

Harper: He is a bullshit artist.

Lance: I heard that.

Quentin: Fuck ya'll. Ya'll know as well as I do that ain't nothin' better than some pussy except some new pussy.

Lance: You got a point there, dog.

Quentin: And plus you can't trust these bitches anyway. They just as scandalous as us niggas, man.

Lance: Oh, not all women, playa. Not all women.

Quentin: Oh, so you don't think that Mia has ever gotten with any other dudes?

Lance: I am the first, the last, and the only.

Quentin: Oh, really?

Lance: Really.

Quentin: So how do you know this?

Lance: Because her pussy curves to my dick, nigga. That's how I know. Besides I know my little angel, man.

Quentin: So you mean to tell me with all the sticking and moving that you've done you don't think that Mia has ever tippy-toed out the door on you once?

Lance: No.

Murch: Quentin, just play.

Quentin: What if she did, you know, go out and get her little swerve on? Don't you think she would be well with in her rights? It's Karma, baby.

[Lance fumes, knocks over the card table and pulls Quentin up by his shirt. Lance pauses for a moment, then drops Quentin.]

Lance: I gotta take a piss.

Murch: Why did you have to that?

Quentin: Whose hand is it?

The displays in both films offer a voyeuristic view into the private conversations many friends have about relationships, sex, and race; conversations in which uncensored sentiments can be expressed. Both film clips feature this type of free speech (“You gonna need a catcher’s mitt to catch all that new pussy coming your way”). As well, they include statements that reinforce old stereotypes or notions about men and masculinity and women and femininity (“A true Asiatic Black man...With a dick down to his knees to keep me happy for days!”). With this understanding, the study turns to how the women in the focus group felt about the conversations in the films.

### **Reflections on The Best Man and Jungle Fever**

The clip from The Best Man prompted the women into a discussion of the stereotype of “the strong Black woman.” Although the group was steered by comments and questions from me, they were generally allowed to begin conversations and flow freely.

EVA: There are so many issues that came up in both clips: issues of light skin/dark skin among Black people, sexuality and spirituality. What do you think are some of the pertinent issues that they talk about—at least from your perspective?

Nia: Well, one of the most glaring factors is that the men here have a very easy time sort of glamorizing conquest. Which is ultimately disrespectful to women and themselves. And I think the issue of respect is less internalized when they're whoring themselves, which is essentially what being a player is, whether you're male or female. Judging from what I saw, the issue of conquest is the ultimate high. And so, nothing else really seems to compare to that. On the other side of it, the sisters that we saw really are locked into being loved and having a committed relationship and

being in monogamous relationships and not really extending themselves across the board. And so there's a clash—those types of women seem less attractive to the types of brothers that were portrayed. So, it's disturbing.

EVA: One of the reasons why I came to this work is I saw Waiting to Exhale and I then watched a follow-up show on Oprah about Waiting to Exhale. There were so many people debating whether the film was about finding a man or being empowered. What I'm interested in is how these films bring up issues for people. And not everybody is out there to get a man. What do you think about their discussion of sexuality like the comment 'Jordan is one step from a lesbian'? How many times do you see this in Black film?

Tonia: I think in some of the films that I've seen, whenever you see a strong Black woman or a woman with some kind of power, there always is the concept that she might be or could possibly be lesbian. And like they said in the film, in The Best Man, that's something that, for a man, they just don't want. They can't handle a woman with her own power. Whether it be that she makes more money than they do or she's in a better position or that she's just independent, independent and thinking. The man getting married, all he wants for his wife is to stay at home and have his babies. That's the most he would want her to achieve in her life...and she should be happy with that. So, just thinking about it, in a lot of films a woman who is successful is either a bitch—even if she doesn't have a man with no hint of being a lesbian—she's a bitch or bitter about something else. There's just something negative about her.

Kyra: Those women are also punished for women like Jordan. They're punished for not either compromising or acquiescing to the male power or the male figures in their lives. By the time that Taye Diggs's character [Harper] is with the woman, his woman wasn't quite sure what she wanted to do, she's kind of flaking back and forth. Of course he was there; he was the stable one. He could be there for her because she needed him in some way—or it's discussed as such. Whereas Jordan, on the other hand, she was always very focused, she always knew what she was doing. Even when there was a hint of them getting together, or they might not. Of course, they don't. But because you are who you are—I'm not going to share myself with you because you are so powerful anyway. And these women—I'll put it this way—these women are villainized, for the most part. The strong powerful women are villains. If she's not with the man, it is seen as punishment. Had she been a "good woman," had she been a certain type of woman,

she would have gotten a man. We are not supposed to see this as a good thing. [If she needed him] she would have gotten a man.

Tonia: Or to keep a man like in the film ...[with] Nia Long...

Everyone: Love Jones.

Tonia: Yeah. She gets this great job opportunity in New York. He's upset because she wants to take this job. And again, it's almost traditional the woman will follow the man wherever *his* job may take him. But if she has a job and she's willing to go, again, she loses a man in the sense that she decided to follow her career, instead of just staying where she is.

Catalina: One of the interesting things that came up for me: the Jungle Fever scene reminded me of a conversation I actually had this morning with some straight friends. It's what I see as the commodification of Black men in the heterosexual community.

EVA: [joking] Can you define commodification?

Everyone: [laughter]

Catalina: It's like this market analysis that there's a finite supply of [Black men]. And, if one happens to be with a white woman, then that's one less that's available for me. We were having this conversation about interracial relationships. And I don't quite see it within the gay and lesbian community, but maybe I just haven't been exposed to it. But it's very present in the heterosexual community. It's the feeling that there's this scarce supply of them. I think that it ultimately does a disservice to men and women. In the sense that women end up, some heterosexual women end up buying into myth and feeling this sense of desperation. There is really this sense of desperation. Oh no, I gotta get mine! I gotta get mine before the supply runs out! And for the men, I think it gives men an over-inflated sense of who they are [laughs] and what they bring to the table. I think it also gives women this sense, this sense of a lack of self-worth. This feeling like I have to be chosen. What is that about, that you have to be chosen by a partner? So I mean, it's interesting because I just had this conversation this morning; it's interesting to be reminded of it in the film.

Madison: I think one of the really important things in Jungle Fever was she talked a little bit about class. They are not looking for men who are garbage...who take out the garbage, or who are working class men, we are looking for a certain type of man. So I think we are

talking about commodification, we are talking about scarcity of a certain kind of man that doesn't seem available to women who are also successful. So, and then what happens when that type of man seems scarce and has an inflated sense of ego, who can treat a woman whichever way he wants to. He can treat women however he sees fit because there's another one waiting...who's as successful as the woman he had before...

Nia: There are two issues. One is that it is very clear what the—creatively—what the director was really trying to put out there to the audience when these brothas were sitting around the table. Morris Chestnut's body language was extremely laid back. He looks...he's a very handsome, chocolate man. His face, to the eyes of the heterosexual woman, would just be irresistible. And so he knows this. His body language, very sort of laid back. His penis doesn't have to have a trigger lock on it. He's doing whatever he wants, to whomever he wants. It's as if he's saying, you know ladies, I'm here and there's a little piece for you, a little piece for you, a little piece for you! And everyone is like idolizing him. Everyone else is kind of deferring to him, constantly. They are looking to him. Every time someone makes a remark, someone's checking his response. He is also physically imposing to them. And so in the absence of him being able to articulate anger, verbally, he does it physically. And it's completely acceptable. And now his friends are in fear of him. So he is able to impose whatever it is he feels on them and have them be completely afraid for their safety. And that is a thread throughout the entire film. Every time he gets upset, they're afraid that he is going to hurt them in some sort of way, because ultimately he is very violent.

The other thing, interestingly enough, I don't watch a lot of television, [but] this is a thread too. In some of the shows that I've seen, characters tend to exoticize lesbians. They would feel very privileged to have the opportunity to be with two women. These two women are centered on one another. If they can just be in the room and have just a piece of what's going on, then they can have bragging rights to say, man I was with two women...dah, dah, dah. Well, did you do anything? Naw, I just watched!

[Everyone laughs]

Nia: And that's worthy of praise! It's very interesting, very telling.

Everyone: [laughter]



- Kyra: I also think authorship is an issue in both the clips. Did Spike write Jungle Fever? And The Best Man [was] written by a gentleman? You have words coming out of women that are written by men. It certainly can have a grasp of truth to it. But I wonder that myself, does this man, does this male author capture sentiments of women in America at that particular moment—because this was several years back? What is it when heterosexual women buy into it? Yeah, this is what I'm thinking about Black men and men in general...the whole conversation of 'men are dogs.' I guess that's all up for debate whether or not it is all true. What does that say about men writing words women are speaking and it's almost [taken] as gospel?
- Tonia: When that movie [Jungle Fever] came out I think I was in high school or college or something like that and I remember seeing that and feeling like I had had that conversation with some of my girlfriends in school. We went to school in this area where it seemed like the Black guys only dated white women or only dated light-skinned women with long hair. And so I remember when I originally saw that scene, and thinking, *yeah, that was so real*. And really being able to identify with what they were saying. I never took it as '*oh, this is a man putting words into a woman's mouth.*' It was just like, almost like he just rolled the camera and let them say whatever was on their minds. Which I think in a lot of instances, you see in *Ebony* and *Essence* and have the same thing over and over again. Who are they dating, who are we dating as Black women? I never took that as...
- Kyra: Oh, I agree with you. Even now I hear reminisces of truth, in terms of conversations that I've actually been a part of. But at the same time, now when I look at it I critique it from that perspective. What does that say? Not to say that it's not true, but what does it mean? It could have been that he simply could have cut the camera on and said 'You guys, here's the topic—just talk.' It could have been that way. I don't know.
- Catalina: It's also self-perpetuating. And since it's what you hear all the time and therefore becomes part of the dialogue, as a result of that.
- Kathy: I think it's more than that. I think it's remnants or the effects of living in a racist society, in the sense that I think it's more than thinking that there's not enough Black men to go around. Like one of the characters pointed out, there's this sense that we've been brainwashed into thinking that a certain color is better or certain ways of looking is better. And the one woman pointed out that it used to be light-skinned women, now they can have the 'Real

McCoy.' It's a combination of not enough Black men to go around but I think it's also this sense that what is going on with him is he thinks that she looks better than I look. This sense of: Why are they together? Is he with her because he really loves her? Or is he with her because he thinks she is a status symbol? He has this white woman on his arm and he's a professional Black man.

I remember in Black history classes I took there was this issue of the over emphasis on role-playing. Emphasis on Black families fitting into what they view the traditional family to be (i.e. the husband going out and earning money and then taking care of the family). What happened in the past was that Black women had to go out. They had to go out—even in times when women didn't go to work—to help feed family. And it's this sense that Black men have felt like they are not a man because they don't measure up to what the white society has said a family is supposed to be. So, even in the instance where the men were talking... that appears purely to be sexist. I think it is still the effects of racism trying to emulate what the popular traditional American family is supposed to be. And that is a man being the breadwinner and the woman staying at home.

Nia: I wanted to [talk about] the messages that we send to our young women when they are adolescents vis-à-vis modes of dress, you know, carriage. Where I came from for instance, on a hot summer day on Saturday, if there was a basketball game going on down at the park, you would always always always see these young girls dress in very tight-fitting clothing with shoes that probably belonged to an older sister. They were trying to wear and style all for the purpose of being noticed. And it's really interesting because I grew up. I'm an athlete. I was an athlete growing up, so much of my life was removed from that sort of existence. And now I see it. Girls are developing earlier much much more developed earlier on, and very sexualized. Then they move into the part of their lives where they begin to understand the dynamics of male/female relationships and almost, many times they feed into that male sort of, dominance. *This guy, oh my god, is so fine. I know he's got a girlfriend, but I really want him.* And sometimes women end up giving over to that, regardless of the fact that this man is connected to somebody else. Now, she has the opportunity to get him, to get somebody's man.

EVA: Does that happen across the board, though, even in lesbian and bisexual communities?

Nia: Well, that hasn't been my experience.

- Nadia: I was getting ready to say, these issues reach across the board. I went to the *Delta* [Black gay club] a couple months ago...
- [some women laugh and say] Delta! Oh, that's a whole different world!
- Nadia: It's whole different world...but it is the world. It was just interesting watching how an entire club of young women had taken on those roles. The butches were the butch ones. They were in the back, riding the butts, and the girls had their asses in the air.
- Everyone: [laughs]
- And I was like *Oh my god!* It was so...it was straight out of a video! Straight out of a video! Even some of the dialogue about the scarcity of men, I mean I've heard the same dialogue amongst lesbians. [laughs] Tonia's looking at me like, what?! [laughs] There's an idea that there's a scarcity of butch women in the community and that they have a—*butch women have—a market on the community.*
- [big laughs] Really?! [commentary, laughter and clapping]
- I know! Exactly! I know it's a curiosity to me too! I think some of those issues really do cross over. Some of the dialogues we hear among our straight counterparts, you know, it's happening in our communities, too. It's just interesting, because the majority of the women in this room are lesbians and yet we are keeping this dialogue about straight women, instead of how we also see these issues within our own community.
- Kathy: But you know I think it goes back to what I was saying before in the sense that Black families possibly try to emulate what they think the ideal American family should be. I think that this clearly happens in the gay and lesbian community where they are sort of emulating what they think the straight couple should be. In the sense that there's a butch person and a femme person and this is how you are supposed to act. And they might even distort that or even overemphasize it. I think that that is all engrained in us. It's almost like we need an example to follow instead of just following our own feelings and what we want. And looking into ourselves and saying this is who I am and this is the type of person I want to be with and all of that. I think we are all brainwashed to some extent.

Barbara: And I think that type of attitude should carry into both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Looking into yourself and asking: Who am I? Who do I want to attract to me? As opposed to going with the flow. It seems like they [straight women] truly compromise who they are just to be with someone. Some lesbian women enter into relationships that really aren't that healthy and really aren't that good and they really don't value...they compromise a lot of things that they want. If you do put yourself first you stand the chance of being single for a long time, which happened to me for like 8 years, but...

[laughs]

Barbara: Spiritually I'm at a point in my life where I'm okay with me. If this continues for another 10 years, I don't care. But it means a lot to me, my self worth. You have to come to a point where you won't compromise that. She was talking about some of the things that media, in terms of magazines, TV shows, whatever, portrays about the scarcity of Black men and them dating white women. But see, all those things contribute to the consciousness of Black women. Because Black women probably wouldn't even think those things if that wasn't put out there for them to think. Start making your own opinions about what's really going on. Is there something about me the reason why I can't attract a good man, or good woman? Or is this really true? I really don't believe that it's true that there's a scarcity of Black men. I don't believe that it's true, that there is no good Black men. I think Black women haven't made Black men live up or be...I guess make them more responsible to who they are, or be more, or be better people. They say, 'Hey brotha, I accept you as you are' as opposed to making a brotha really just step up to the plate and be something or be about something in that relationship with her.

Kyra: That's when she's crazy and she's trying to make him work too hard. Some men think *she's a "b" [bitch] and I need to go to a white woman because my white woman won't work me in that way.*

Barbara: But eventually they'll tire of that. Because I mean, how many Black men that's married to white women don't dip back into...Like Clarence Thomas [laughs] I know Clarence Thomas...

[big laughs]

Nia: You talkin' about a real Black man?

Madison: Clarence Thomas ain't a real Black man!

- Barbara: You know, the Anita Hill thing, scandal. Come on! That's like a very... just, in your face example of... Even though he was so mentally whitewashed he had to get him some Black puntang.
- Kathy: But what about the white woman? I kind of wonder what is going through the heads of white women. Some of them seem to almost be doormats for these Black men they are dating. Almost like this is their prize, as well. And sometimes I'm wondering what is going on in their heads when they...
- Kyra: Did you all see that *Heart & Soul* magazine? White women wrote in to it. It wasn't *Essence*?
- Madison: I heard about the article. It was the article where the woman said, well her boyfriend told her the reason she didn't want to date Black women is because they're loud.
- Everyone: That's the email.
- Kyra: This one, I thought was in *Heart and Soul*. Well, I don't know where it was, but regardless, there was a white woman who was dating a Black man.... I guess he told her [about Black women]. And a Black graduate student responded to her. It was on email and in the magazine.
- Nadia: What did it say?
- Kyra: The woman—it's one of those things you don't know if it is true or fabricated—she was actually like, this is why Black men don't want you: you are too loud, too bossy, or you have all these issues. Well, white women know how to do what we need to do to please a man. You (straight) Black women, well you don't. And you should take lessons from us, almost. It was like she was very happy about what her partner put into her head about the flaws of Black women and why she was superior in some way. So it was very problematic.
- Yvonne: I think the white woman's way of being with Black men is historical, which makes that attractive to that socio-economic level that Madison was speaking of earlier. Because now more Black men are professionals, doctors, lawyers. And he wants a Mia, he wants a woman to stay at home, cook dinner or have dinner cooked and take care of the children. Because he's reached that status now. And as Black women, we are becoming doctors and lawyers and we are wanting more and are not satisfied with that. I think

that's a lot of the attraction. I, like you, am an athlete and the number of white women that you see outside of the men's locker room, especially basketball and football. It is incredible! I mean it is open and ready. I think they ought to have a sign-up sheet! It's available. So a lot of that...it's the dynamic of that. The economics have changed so much. Definitely a status symbol.

Jocelyn: But the status symbol just can't be that you have a woman stay at home because then you would see more white men openly marrying or being with Black women. If you have money it's not like you don't have access to somebody to stay at home.

Yvonne: I don't necessarily think it's so much that, but they're more open to it. I don't think you or I... We want to do things, we want to make a difference in people's lives. Not just because we are gay or a woman, we want to do some things to help people. I've just seen from the ones I went to school with (hopefully they have changed their attitudes) but a lot of them, I'm speaking of white women, went to school to find a doctor or to find a lawyer. I think white women fit that prototype.

Madison: There are a couple of things that I wanted to say. I think one of the things that came up in both of your dialogues is about ownership. Even in Jungle Fever the women talked about owning the men, having ownership over the men. It's kind of like they were saying: these are my Black men, what are they doing? What went wrong or what's going on? In The Best Man you see that the same kind of thing, about owning Mia. And what happens when the woman steps outside the box? This is my woman, my prize, this is my possession. This goes into another conversation about owning the community and how we let other people see us inside of the community? That's one thing.

The second point I wanted to make is about Black women becoming successful. Like, the politics of the Million Man March where you have these stereotypes of what a woman is and what her role is and you tell her to stay at home. Economically they couldn't be at home. Black women could never stay at home and be a stay at home mom. When these dynamics shift, economically Black women can stay at home because their husbands make enough money that and shifts paradigms. It affects these stereotypes. Like, if you look at the stereotypes of Black women and white women... Not to be crude, but you know that whole thing—white women will suck dick, Black women won't. Or there are things that white women will do that Black women will not.

Then you have Black women saying “what is going on here?” And how [do] they fit into the picture?

The last thing, I want us to think about is how we are relating to one another. As a group, we are outside of the heterosexual paradigm because we are mostly a room full of lesbians looking at how that impacts how we see ourselves. Because I see myself as kind of removed from [those dialogues]...I'm still a part of it because I live in this society and this culture, so I understand, these are not foreign conversations. But I'm still removed a little bit from these kinds of dialogues, these really hot debates. Like Catalina [said] today. You can sit in on a conversation and understand what's going on, but it's not a part of your day-to-day reality.

Nadia: But then I hear those same discussions about issues of Black women dating white women in our community too. And it's a huge thing. I mean people really have some serious issues. For example, in New York, there was a huge community of people where it was. I mean you go to Park Slope, every Black woman was dating a white woman. That's just what it was and everybody what like: What's that about? A lot of them were successful. I really do think some of these, a lot of these debates cross over lines. I don't know, I think there's a different kind of thing that's [laughs] happening here. So it's not really an issue that comes up for us.

Madison: I think so. I think that we have some of the same issues, but in the context of what we are talking about representation of Black women and stereotypes of Black women in the media, and how that plays out. And right now the pieces that we are talking about are on based heterosexual paradigms, period. And so...we're talking like we are experts like we just walking out the door and we live these things everyday, but because we've been influenced we know these things very well because we are part of the community. Not to say that it doesn't happen because we've had these discussions before...

Nadia: It's interesting, because these things in the media still influence our community, even though we are outside of it. You know, we don't necessarily live it...well, we do live it everyday, we just act it out with women.

First and foremost, to many women in this focus group, was the common concern about the image of Black women in American society. Mainly, this concern stems from the film clips which reminded them that Black women seem to be responsible for everyone and everything (the cause of a lover leaving, not being good enough for a partner), or that Black women have to be everything to everybody (“consummate mother/whore” or “too independent”). For many of the women in the group, this means upholding some type of gender expectation and, more specifically, the role of the “strong Black woman.”

### **Gender Roles and The Strong Black Woman Stereotype**

Gender roles assigned to (universal)<sup>98</sup> women impact Black women as well. The common ideal of domestic femininity historically assigned to white women affects Black women, even if their experience has been shaped differently because of the color of their skin. Madison speaks to this point when she discusses the historical fact of Black women being a part of the workforce throughout history. In response to Lance’s dream of creating a domestic heaven with his wife at home producing babies, Madison says “You want Black women to stay at home. Economically they couldn’t be at home. Black women never stayed at home. Be a stay-at-home mom. Economically Black women can’t stay at home because their husband’s don’t make enough money.” Madison’s comment is a reference to the historical necessity for the majority of Black women in the U.S. to work. By bringing up this point she made obvious the gender role expectations on the part of Black women and how economic affluence affected their negotiation of this

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<sup>98</sup> The universal construction of woman is white and any thing other than white is qualified. For example, “a woman was assaulted in a grocery store parking lot” versus “a Black woman was assaulted in a grocery store parking lot.”



expectation. With his lucrative career as a star athlete, Lance has the opportunity to create the “ideal” family according to American construction. He will be the male, the breadwinner and his wife, “...her only job is going to be being [his] wife and raising [their] kids.”

Madison’s discussion of Lance’s expectations of married life illustrates some of the additional expectations placed on Black women, especially those who are heterosexual. This is at times difficult, considering Black women face gender expectations of white femininity and are encouraged to subscribe to the more positive stereotype of “the strong Black woman.” In other words, Black women would have to negotiate both sets of expectations, those reserved for (white) woman and those for Black women. This set up is ironic because, in terms of femininity, Black women have always been portrayed as the antithesis of the white American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood.<sup>99</sup>

Black women have had to confront the strong Black woman stereotype and expectations of fulfilling this stereotype. In Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, Michele Wallace writes about the stereotypical image of Black women as strong, which she terms “the myth of the superwoman.”

She is hard on and unsupportive of Black men, domineering, castrating. She tends to wear the pants around her house. Very strong. Sorrow rolls right off her brow like so much rain. Tough, unfeminine. Opposed to women's rights movements, considers herself already liberated. Nevertheless, unworldly. Definitely not a dreamer, rigid, inflexible, uncompassionate... . From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the Black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally

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<sup>99</sup> K. Sue Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond, (1993) 36. Marlon Riggs also discusses this portrayal in his film Ethnic Notions (1986).

than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less “feminine” and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman.<sup>100</sup>

This stereotype of the strong Black woman is equally negative as it is positive. Although Wallace describes her more negatively, the current spin on “independence” and “strong” for women makes her image a more positive one. However, it is evident that it works as a catch-22. When it comes to some relationships between men and women, the power dynamic is problematic and the strong Black woman becomes a problem. For example, in The Best Man the “strong” or “independent” quality (for women) is held in disdain; in fact, because Jordan is so independent Lance states that she “don't need no man—she is one step from lesbian.”

The focus group participants picked up on this well. It was clear in their response to Lance's comments about the independence of a woman that they were concerned with the ways in which perceptions of worth tied into women's desirability to men. In other words, a woman is only worthy if she meets the needs of the man, in this case the stereotype of the “mother/whore.” Failing to acquiesce to a man (or being economically independent from them) is the equivalent to being a lesbian. The use of the label “lesbian” is similar to “lesbian-baiting” in that it is used to describe a (Black) woman in order to render her powerless.

In this case, there is an attempt to masculinize African-American women by assigning them the qualities of a man. If a woman is too much like a man, then what role or purpose does a man have in a relationship with her? In effect, it is actually the man who is rendered powerless because the woman does not need him; thus he feels

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<sup>100</sup> Michele Wallace, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (New York: Verso, 1990) 107.

compelled to attack her femininity and her heterosexuality, or to leave her altogether for a white woman. Yvonne's comments are a good example of this: "I've just seen [this] from the [white women] I went to school with...a lot of them went to school to find a doctor, find a lawyer. White women are perceived to be more stereotypically feminine, more deferential and dependent, and therefore less mannish."

The strong Black woman, part myth and part reality, presents a particular problem for Black women: being strong in this society equals masculinity. As well, it can be both a positive and negative stereotype. On the positive side, considering the history of Black women and the necessity of work, it represents maintaining a sense of security and protection in the Black family and community. Black women, working to provide and support themselves and their families, directly subvert the position of the male in this gender mythology. This stereotype and expectation for Black women leaves them between a rock and a hard place. Being "strong" (or replacing male power) is not a desired trait for women. To be "strong" and self-sufficient is equated with masculinity, even lesbianism. Tonia says: "[W]henver you see a strong Black woman or a woman with some kind of power, there always is the concept that she might be or could possibly be lesbian."

Kyra adds that the powerful women in the film The Best Man are villainized. "[T]hese women—I'll put it this way—these women are villainized for the most part. The strong, powerful women are villainized." Tonia brought up the film Love Jones as another example of independent, strong women being villainized. She mentions that when the female protagonist has an opportunity to move for career advancement, she is seen as choosing to be selfish rather than making a better life for herself.

She gets this great job opportunity in New York. He's upset because she wants to take this job. And again, it's almost traditional the woman will follow the man wherever *his* job may take him. But if she has a job and she's willing to go, again, she loses a man in the sense that she decided to follow her career, instead of just staying where she is.

The women in the focus group agree that popular stereotypes about women (Black and white women) are reproduced in film and other types of media. Their ability to dissect and decode these stereotypes and symbols created a rich atmosphere among the group to share many feelings about race, sexuality, class, and gender. One particular subject had the women eager to share their personal ideas, thoughts, and perspectives—interracial relationships.

### **Interracial Relationships**

Including the topic of interracial relationships in discussions of race, sexuality, class, and gender produces an even more complex dialogue. Immediately evident in Jungle Fever's “war council” dialogue is the anger directed at Flipper and other Black men like him who have submitted to the “forbidden fruit”—white women. The anger is also directed toward “white bitches” and (Black) men who cannot—and are not expected to—control their libido. In response to Jungle Fever, some of the women’s feelings about interracial relationships centered on race betrayal and rejection. In other words, many equate choosing a lover of the opposite race (as opposed to someone within the race) as the ultimate rejection or betrayal. After watching the clip from Jungle Fever, Tonia recalled conversations about interracial relationships from her school days:

When that movie came out I was in high school or college. I remember seeing that and felt like I had that conversation with my girlfriends. We went to school in this area where it seemed like the Black guys only dated white women or only dated light-skinned women with long hair.

And so I remember when I originally saw that scene, saying, *yeah, that was so real*. And really being able to identify with what they were saying.

This clip from Jungle Fever brought many issues to the table but most notably, the deep legacy of pain regarding skin color and racism, and the long history of stereotypical notions of sexuality and skin color. In the Jungle Fever excerpt is the stereotypical view of Black men's sexuality (genitalia). He is the "pure" African, the "true Asiatic tribesman" who has a "dick down to his knees to keep [Inez] happy for days." Inez is not the only one who subscribes to this idea. The other women in the "war council" show their affirmation of this stereotype through nodding, laughing, and giving each other "high fives."

Discussing interracial relationships with the women brought up both myths and truths. Stereotypes of what a white woman would do sexually and emotionally, for example, versus what a Black woman would do came up often during the discussion. During the focus group dialogue one famous interracial couple came up as a topic of conversation: Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and his wife. Barbara states that Black men will tire of a white woman and go back to a Black woman, and that is why Clarence Thomas sought out Anita Hill. Additionally, Blackness is closely tied to issues of authenticity and since Clarence Thomas married a white woman and has conservative politics, he "ain't a real Black man!" This popular concept regarding race and authenticity will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

The stereotype of the white women as a "doormat" for Black men also came up. In the focus group, after Barbara declared that Justice Thomas had to get physical pleasure from a Black woman, Kathy became curious about white women in such situations and wondered what must be "going through their heads." She says: "Some of

them seem to be almost doormats for these Black men they are dating. Almost like this is their prize as well.” Historical taboos (given racism’s deep roots in sex and sexuality) and today’s racial/sexual stereotypes inform today’s ideas of what a desirable partner is as well as their freedom to choose a partner.

Kathy twice states that for her, interracial relationships have to do with Black folks' assimilation to the white American standard. She believes that Blacks are “brainwashed” into emulating what whites construct as traditional race and gender roles. But others in the group related this to the messages dictating how women are supposed to behave. These messages are transmitted daily to young women. Instead of labeling it as “brainwashing” other group members described interracial relationships as a general desire to follow other's examples and norms. These comments reveal the ways in which race, gender, and class are conflated in the dialogue. The issue on the table became the meaning of success and its accompanying trappings, and the importance for some to have status symbols signifying that success.

### **Class**

Class became an issue in the talk on interracial relationships. Many women of the group agreed that Flipper, an upper middle-class architect, was seen as a commodity. Affluent and educated, Flipper was the “cream of the crop.” This was also the topic of conversation in the Jungle Fever clip when Drew critiqued the fact that women do not look for working-class men. Drew captures some reluctant affirmations from her peers when she questions the fact that Black women like herself do not perceive working-class Black men as potential partners; that is, garbage men and maintenance men are not seen as worthy partners.

Race and status were evident in both films: Lance was a wealthy athlete and Flipper, a well-to-do architect. In the group, Yvonne discusses her experience with male athletes and the white women's availability to them. She says that a white woman on a man's arm is a status symbol: "Because now more Black men are professionals, doctors, lawyers. And he wants a [woman like] Mia—he wants a woman to stay at home, cook dinner or have dinner cooked and take care of the children. Because he's reached that status now." Other group members nodded in agreement, signifying that they too, realize this thought exists.

Class can be difficult to separate from the analysis of race and gender, which is evident in the discussion above on gender expectations and class. However, class has come up in the comments on race and gender and their relationship to privilege and leisure. On this subject, Madison was the most vocal. For example, her first comment regarding class has more to do with the fact that Black women, as opposed to white women, are less likely to be stay-at-home moms. Moreover, she argues that the Black man who reaches that economic status and can have a stay-at-home wife and mom is more apt to choose a white woman as this wife. Madison's second comment has to do more with sexual stereotypes of white and Black women. In relationship to class, Madison believes that in particular, lower class white women make themselves much more available—sexually and otherwise—to Black men. She alludes to this when she says:

Looking at the stereotypes of Black women and white women...like, not to be crude, but you know that whole thing: white women will suck dick, Black women won't. Or there are things that white women will do that Black women will not. Then you have Black women saying: What is going on here? And how [do] they fit into the picture?

Although her fellow group members did not elaborate upon this point, they did go on to argue the issue of choosing partners. Madison makes it clear that middle-class people are “choosers” and those of the working-class are the ones being chosen. She links this choice to the early conversation about commodification. Early in the conversation the women discuss that considering a Black man as a rare commodity fuels a “Black male’s inflated sense of ego,” and hence his sexual bravado. So then, when Black men reach a certain economic level, they often develop a much more heightened sense of self. This, in turn, empowers them to believe they are entitled to anything (read: white women). Although they might perceive themselves as choosers in that they are obtaining the “trophy” they are, in fact, themselves being chosen as commodities. The women read these texts closely, considering the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality are manifested in myriad ways in these video clips.

### **Reading the Text**

The women in this focus group were very adept at reading the signs and symbols in the film clips. Many of the women notice the placement of characters, their body language, and omitted words, for example. Nia brought up clear examples of how such visual cues support the scene’s overall message in The Best Man. With the use of Lance’s large stature, muscular body and career as a football player, she says that what the director was communicating to his audience was clear: Lance is a very strong and imposing figure. This overall casting choice and character body language creates a powerful message throughout the film. Nia describes how Lance reveals his powers among the four men who were sitting around the table. She observes: “...everyone else is kind of deferring to him, constantly. They are looking to him. Every time someone



makes a remark, someone's checking his response. He is also physically imposing to them.”

Nia continues describing Lance’s character and the messages revealed through his body, his speech and his relationship with his male peers. She says: “[In] the absence of [Lance] being able to articulate anger verbally, he does it physically. And it's completely acceptable. And now his friends are in fear of him. So he is able to impose whatever it is he feels on them and have them be completely afraid for their safety. And that is a thread throughout the entire film. Every time he gets upset, they're afraid that he is going to hurt them in some sort of way, because ultimately he is very violent.” The ability of Nia and some others to read the signs and symbols imbedded in popular visual media is an important note; it demonstrates the sophisticated level of reading among these viewers.

Another sign of high-level reading is found in reading outside the text. For example, one of the women brought up the issue of authorship. Who is writing the words the women are speaking? Kyra was one woman who read outside the text questioning the issue of authorship and knowledge of women’s thoughts and feelings. She explains, “I also think authorship is an issue in both the clips... I wonder that myself...[D]oes this male author capture sentiments of women in America at that particular moment—because this was several years back.” The idea of ventriloquism was mulled over as an issue in Black film. Questions of who can speak for whom and whose experience is central to this discussion also made an impact on the women viewing the film excerpts.

The women referred to the short clips in order to articulate issues pertinent to them. For example, Nia had a lot of concern for young Black women's sexuality and how

popular culture images feed ideology about female sexuality to young women. Kathy had concern about Black communities and the influence of white domination. Kathy often mentioned white “brainwashing,” or Blacks feeling encouraged to assimilate, or emulate white American standards. Here it is obvious that the women read visual media on multiple levels.

Many of the women in the focus group, through their discussions of race, gender, class, power, and sexuality illustrated the theory that individuals read visual text on multiple levels. It is also interesting to note that many of the women who were lesbian and/or bisexual spoke predominately about heterosexual sexuality. Their ability to speak to heterosexual experiences revealed that they are able to see through a dominant heterosexual lens and a secondary lesbian lens, or “multiperspectivity” as Bonnie Zimmerman terms it.

### **Seeing the World through Dominant Lens**

The conversations among the lesbian women in the focus group revealed an interesting dynamic of being able to shift easily from heterosexual to lesbian standpoints. When asked about homosexual issues most of the group members spoke from a heterosexual standpoint. Not taking much time to recognize that fact during the focus group, group members like Nadia, would say, “we do that, too,” or “there is a room of lesbians, and we are speaking about heterosexuals.” In fact, many of the women nodded in agreement when Nadia gave examples of how the same issues of butch/femme or male/female dynamic, for example, crossed sexual lines. This is exactly what Bonnie

Zimmerman terms “multiple perspectivity” in her essay “Reading, Seeing, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature”:

It may very well be that lesbian identity and perspectivity are fluid, overlapping with heterosexual female or gay male perspectives. Most lesbians see the world as a heterosexual for some period of their lives and develop a multiple perspectivity—a form of cultural “bilingualism”—that can reinforce the connections, rather than the oppositions, between lesbian and heterosexual feminist perspectives.<sup>101</sup>

Zimmerman suggests, “all perspectives arise from the same set of factors, primarily a person’s social and cultural situation (her sex, race, class, sexuality) and personal history.”<sup>102</sup> The idea of multiple frames of reference, or “multiple perspectivity” opens up the discourse on spectatorship to allow for analysis based on difference. Madison claimed that she feels that lesbians and bisexuals in the group live “outside” of the heterosexual paradigm. She says, “I’m still removed a little bit from these kinds of dialogues, these really hot debates... You can sit in on a conversation and understand what’s going on, but it’s not a part of your day-to-day reality.”

Although Madison does not feel as affected by these pressures put on heterosexual Black women, she knows the discourse. Nadia quickly responds with examples of how she and other lesbians live the same type of lives as heterosexuals. Lesbians are not immune to the notions of gender, sex, sexuality, power and class that exist for heterosexual women. Nadia says:

But then I hear those same discussions about issues of Black women dating white women in our community too. And it’s a huge thing. I mean people really have some serious issues. For example, in New York, there was a huge community of people where it was, I mean,

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<sup>101</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “Reading, Seeing, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature” (1991) 86.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

you go to Park Slope, every Black woman was dating a white women. I really do think some of these, a lot of these debates cross over lines.

Nadia received lots of laughs and nods as she made it plain that Black lesbians do the same thing in terms of acting out male/female dynamics in butch/femme life. Her anecdote about the Delta nightclub suggests that butches are like men with an inflated ego who feel they have the pick of the lot:

I went to the *Delta* [Black gay club] a couple months ago. It was just interesting watching how an entire club of young women had taken on those roles. The butches were the butch ones they were in the back, riding the butts and the girls had their asses in the air. And *I was like oh my god!* It was so it was straight out of a video! Straight out of a video! Even some of the dialogue about the scarcity of men, I mean I've heard the same dialogue amongst lesbians. [laughs] Tonia's looking at me like, What?! [laughs] There's an idea that there's a scarcity of butch women in the community and that they have a—*butch women have—a market on the community.*

### **Self -Definition and Self-Worth**

The topic of self-definition and self-worth came up as pertinent topics in the discussions surrounding a choice of mate, being rejected as a mate, and the like. Nia, in particular, was concerned about images that are transmitted to young girls:

Where I came from for instance, on a hot summer day on Saturday, if there was a basketball game going on down at the park, you would always always always see these young girls dress in very tight-fitting clothing with shoes that probably belonged to an older sister. They were trying to wear and style all for the purpose of being noticed. they were trying to wear and style with—all for purpose of being noticed. [G]irls are developing earlier much much more developed earlier on, and very sexualized. Then they move into the part of their lives where they begin to understand the dynamics of male/female relationships and almost, many times they feed into that male sort of, dominance. *This guy, oh my god, is so fine. I know he's got a girlfriend, but I really want him.* And sometimes women end up giving over to that, regardless of the fact that this man is connected to somebody else. Now, she has the opportunity to get him, to get somebody's man.

At the heart of this early conversation in the focus group is Black female self-definition. For them, this is at the center of the question of identification.

The focus group women honed in on these questions: What narratives are circulating about Black women's sexuality? How can we construct our identities (whether lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual) outside of those narratives? Barbara was keen on the impact of media and the role of ideology, directly attacking the ways in which the portrayal of Black women contributes to the consciousness of Black women. She claims: "Black women probably wouldn't think those things if that wasn't put out there for them to think that." Barbara's example, from her own life, helped illustrate her point: "Spiritually, I'm at a point in my life where I'm okay with me. If [being single] continues for another 10 years, I don't care. But it means a lot to me, my self-worth. You have to come to a point where you won't compromise that." Barbara's statements reinforce the idea put forth by Hall and Bobo (among others) that the way people are depicted in the media has a profound impact on how they are treated and how Black women are imagined in American society. What is being added and emphasized here is how Black women make meaning out of those images and at the same time, how they imagine themselves.

## CHAPTER 4: SIGNIFYIN' BLACK WOMEN: ON ESSENTIALISM AND DE-MASCULINIZING BLACKNESS

### Essentializing Blackness

The focus on violence against Black men in particular only serves to further mystify the plight of women and girls in Black communities. It's as though their condition were somehow subsidiary and derivative. As usual, it is the people who control the guns (and the phalluses) who hog the limelight.

Michele Wallace, "Boyz N the Hood and Jungle Fever." <sup>103</sup>

The stories that are told about Black people in African American popular culture tend to focus both explicitly and implicitly on the plight of the Black male. In film, usually Black women serve as either a vehicle for or an obstacle to Black male liberation. This is evident in films from the Blaxploitation genre of the 1970s like Dolomite (1975), Shaft (1971), and Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song (1971) to the "New Black Realism" films of the early 1990s including Juice (1992), Boyz N the Hood (1991), Menace II Society (1993) and Belly (1998). Manthia Diawara describes "New Black Realism" films as early 1990s films that feature the following elements: the film centers upon the lives of two Black men who grow up in the ghetto. These two men are either brothers, or like brothers. One of the "brothers" makes an effort to get out of the 'hood for a better life while the other declines into a life of crime and evil. Ultimately the brother who lives the criminal life dies and his death elevates the other brother (main character) to a new level. This means that he gains a new awareness or gets out of the 'hood. Always present is a Black female love interest who enters the scene in order to

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<sup>103</sup> Michele Wallace, "Boyz N the Hood and Jungle Fever," Black Popular Culture. ed. by Gina Dent. (Seattle: Bay Press. 1992), 124.

help the protagonist get out of the ‘hood and get on to a better life.<sup>104</sup> The films usually feature famous rap and hip-hop artists, such as Busta Rhymes (Higher Learning, 1995), Ice Cube (Higher Learning and Boyz N the Hood), Ice T (New Jack City, 1991), Tupac (Juice), and Treach (Jason’s Lyric, 1994). Into the new millennium, the “New Black Realism” tradition continued with Black films like Baby Boy (2000).

This chapter explores the film representation of Black women as subsidiary and derivative. I maintain that the representation of the “struggle of the Black man” reinforces a ghetto-centric type of Black essentialism that has wide-ranging and damaging effects—least of them being violent forms of misogyny. To better understand why Black women are relegated to the margins of Black popular culture, we must first explore the nature of Black essentialism, popularly manifested as ghetto-centricity. Ghetto-centricity is a form of essentialism that centers true Blackness in the ‘hood or ghetto. Questions considered here are: What is meant by essentialism? What are popular notions of Blackness? What are the boundaries of Blackness and who determines who is Black and who is not? How do Black women fit into this paradigm?

The role of African American women in Black film provides rich opportunities for gaining perspectives on Black female spectatorship. As mentioned in the second chapter, Michele Wallace expresses the seductiveness of some of these films to lure her into the movie theater. As a result, many Black women unknowingly view their own “symbolic decimation” while trying to enjoy a film:

Boyz in the Hood and Jungle Fever, in fact, demonize Black female sexuality as a threat to Black male heterosexual identity, and yet both films are extremely appealing and seductive. Boyz N the Hood, at the narrative level, and Jungle Fever, at the visual level, successfully

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<sup>104</sup> These films are called “New Jack films” by Valerie Smith in Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video, 1997.

employ mass cultural codes to entertain us, so that it becomes possible, as a Black feminist viewer, to enjoy one's own symbolic decimation.<sup>105</sup>

This metaphorical destruction of Black women is part of the greater project of Black (male) liberation in film. In order for men to create an avenue for self-determination and expression in popular Black media, women have to be the sacrificial lambs. The goal of this chapter is to examine the role and function of this type of essentializing and its continued use in Black popular culture. As an intervention to this type of essentializing in Black popular culture, Black women's perspectives (from interviews conducted) are inserted. African American women are seldom asked for their opinions or viewpoints and the men tend to speak for "the community." Therefore, the voices of women solicited through a Black female Internet community (SistaINFO Questionnaire Group) are interjected throughout this analysis. The perspectives of the women in this group provide a context for popular narratives about Black men and women and offer alternatives to the ways in which Black women get represented.

The SistaINFO group includes Alex, Deborah, Monique, Heather, Sasha and Mikki. These six women responded to questions on Blackness, Black female representation and unity in the Black community/ies (outlined in chapter 1). Questionnaires were given to the women that asked questions ranging from how they characterized themselves, to their memories of Black women in their lives (see Appendix for Questionnaire). Again, brief demographics are in order:

- Alex is a 34 year-old African American heterosexual woman who grew up working-class in Michigan and Ohio. She describes her present socio-economic status as middle-class. A division manager with a national corporation, her educational background includes high school and some college.

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<sup>105</sup> Michele Wallace, "Boyz in the Hood and Jungle Fever," Black Popular Culture, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992) 130-131.



- Heather is a 37 year-old Black gay female. She grew up in California and presently resides in Maryland. This attorney grew up working-class and describes her present class status as upper-middle class.
- Monique, 36, grew up middle-class in Maryland. Still middle-class, she now lives in Washington, D.C. This woman, who characterizes herself as “Black and bisexual,” holds a bachelor's degree and works as a human resources manager.
- A 41-year-old journalist, Deborah describes herself as a Black lesbian who grew up lower middle-class in Florida. Now upper middle-class and living in northern Virginia, she holds a bachelor's degree in advertising.
- Living in Maryland, Sasha, 37, also grew up in Michigan and Ohio. She describes herself as a middle-class, African American heterosexual woman. Having grown up working-class, she believes that her education (a bachelor's degree in English) helped her to achieve middle-class status. She is currently a district manager for a pharmaceutical company.
- Mikki is a working middle-class 28-year old who describes herself as a “Black and proud” “womyn loving lesbian.”<sup>106</sup> She is from Louisiana and now lives in Washington D.C., currently in her final year of graduate school.

This diverse group of women, upwardly mobile, media savvy, comfortable in a range of environments—from working class settings to corporate America and academe—provide valuable insight into gender, race and essentialism. Their comments illustrate the ways in which many African Americans have conceptualized what it means to be Black and how those conceptions have created boundaries around Blackness.

### **The Boundaries of Blackness: The Checklist**

It is to the diversity, not the homogeneity, of Black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention. This is not simply to appreciate the historical and experiential differences within and between communities, regions, country and city, across national cultures, between diasporas, but also to recognize the other kinds of difference that place,

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<sup>106</sup> Mikki's spelling of woman/womyn is one that many feminists and lesbians take on. The spelling of woman with a “y” is a way to take the “man” out of woman. Womyn takes both a singular and a plural construction.

position, and locate Black people. The point is not simply that, since our racial differences do not constitute all of us, we are always different, negotiating different kinds of differences—of gender, of sexuality, of class.

Stuart Hall, “What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?”<sup>107</sup>

Historically, Black culture in the United States has been characterized by its traditions, practices, and expressions that have its origins in Africa. Scholars on Black culture explain the processes of acculturation that include influences from Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean<sup>108</sup> and that contemporary Black popular culture retains some vestiges from the antebellum period, when much of the acculturation process took place. In present day, the buying and selling of contemporary Black cultural expressions have become commercialized. This commodification of Black culture led to the following questions: How do we define Black culture, and, what are the elements? Additionally, questions of authenticity surface among those observing, creating, and partaking of Black popular culture. What is real Black culture? How does one “keep it real?” Authenticity is closely linked to Black essentialism; because to be authentically Black, to have a Black essence, one must meet the “requirements” of Blackness.

Taking into account the dubious history of stereotypical representations of Black people, the search for more “accurate” depictions has evolved into the search for the “real.” It is this search that led to essentialist types of representation by African American artists. For example, Marlon Riggs in Color Adjustment (1991) explains how some television producers attempted to correct the damaging images of shows like *Amos*

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<sup>107</sup> Stuart Hall, “What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture,” Black Popular Culture, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992).

<sup>108</sup> See Lawrence Levine's Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (Oxford University Press, 1978) and Joseph E. Holloway, ed. Africanisms in American Culture (Indiana University Press, 1991) for a detailed history of this acculturation process.

*n Andy* (1951-1953), which represented slap-stick comedy and bug-eyed Black buffoons. As response, 1960s television producers decided to create shows which depicted extremely well-to-do Black people whose lives were seemingly unaffected by racism. These images entered American homes during the racially turbulent Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Examples include *I Spy*, in which Bill Cosby played a Rhodes Scholar and half of an interracial secret agent buddy team and *Juliq* where Diahann Carroll portrayed a nurse in a trouble-free racially integrated community.

Some African American scholars have criticized the ways Black popular culture furthers essentialism. Some critiques of essentialism by scholars include Marlon Riggs' documentary Black Is, Black Ain't; Wahneema Lubiano's "But Compared to What?: Reading, Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in School Daze, Do the Right Thing, and the Spike Lee Discourse;" and essays in the edited collection of Black Popular Culture (1992). Yet it is imperative to further examine the influences of Black essentialism as it relates to media representation because there is a continued need for such scrutiny. To this end, debates surrounding essentialism will be analyzed in order to examine how it affects Black women's representation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Black women continue to be sacrificial lambs when it comes to trying to obtain empowerment, representation, and respect.

### **The Problem of Essentializing**

At the forefront of public debate in Black popular culture for years has been the issue of essentializing Black identity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a leading scholar when it comes of theorizing essentialism. In "The Problem of Cultural Self-Representation," Spivak states "... it is not possible, within discourse, to escape

essentializing somewhere. The moment of essentialism or essentialization is irreducible. In the critical practice of deconstruction, you have to be aware that you are going to essentialize anyway.”<sup>109</sup> This debate is reflected in Dent’s Black Popular Culture. Some of these include: Hall’s “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture” and Isaac Julien’s “Black Is, Black Ain’t: Notes on De-essentializing Blackness.” However, an example of continued essentialism is found in its entirety in Todd Boyd’s Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and Beyond. Boyd’s preface to the volume illustrates his equation of Blackness with maleness and masculinity. Boyd’s assumption that Blackness is male is just one example of the way that Black women are still marginalized in discourse on Blackness. Boyd’s entire preface is quoted here to allow the reader a full understanding of the ways in which essentialism takes place in this piece:

On September 30, 1995, I attended the premiere of Allen and Albert Hughes’s second feature film, Dead Presidents. As the haunting sound of Isaac Hayes ‘Walk on By’ filled the theater, I was moved by the film’s enthralling, though depressing, conclusion. Lorenz Tate’s character, Anthony Curtis, rode off into the abyss that has prematurely claimed the lives of so many African American men, the penitentiary.

The following morning, I stood in the main office in the Critical Studies Department at the USC Cinema School with an assembled crowd of curious onlookers, only one other of whom was Black. We were all waiting on the outcome of a criminal case that had occupied the public mind for well more than a year, a case that had clearly come to stand for much more than whether or not a former football great had murdered his ex-wife and her unsuspecting friend.

As that now too familiar female voice stumbled over the name Orenthal on her way to announcing O.J. Simpson’s acquittal on all murder charges, an air of tension clouded the room. The original curiosity that had filled the room had transformed into a quiet hostility. A real-life O.J. Simpson, in a case that existed somewhere between fact and fiction, had somehow escaped the fate that a fictional Anthony Curtis had been unable to avoid the night before.

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<sup>109</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Problem of Cultural Self-Representation,” The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1996) 51.

Though the room was overcrowded, my eyes were drawn to Cassandra, the departmental secretary, the other African American in the room. As if we were speaking some sort of silent language, we were pulled to each other amid the grunts and moans of disgust and disbelief that the others were exchanging, almost as if we weren't even in the room. Though this case was far more complicated than this moment and the aftermath would tell, it will somehow always be reducible to a smile or a frown, depending on where you were coming from.

As someone who is often accused of 'intimidating' whites, I seldom have the opportunity to be afraid of anything myself. But that day, even I felt the need to watch my step. I didn't even want anyone to see me smile, for fear of being guilty by association. People with whom I had laughed on many occasions now seemed to dismiss my individuality and lump me in with those other 'Black people.' Malcolm X use to ask, 'What do you call a Black man with a Ph.D.?' His answer was, 'A nigger.' That day I felt what he meant in the worst possible way. (Notice, that's nigger' with an '-er,' not an '-a.' As you read you will understand the difference.)

Am I Black Enough For You? is an attempt to explain why this reflexive smile crossed my face and what that smile was covering up inside. About two weeks later, as the fury over O.J. was still in full swing, Louis Farrakhan led the Million Man March on Washington, D.C. This while Colin Powell's autobiography, My American Journey, was a bestseller, and his potential bid for the presidency was still a strong possibility. With all of these events happening at the same time, it was obvious that the Black male, in multiple manifestations, was still an integral part of the fabric that defines America.

As I pondered these thoughts, I was taken back to the streets of Detroit. Walking through downtown one afternoon, I encountered a rather talkative gentleman who shouted over and over again this memorable phrase: 'The Black man gonna rise again!' Thinking about these events in the fall of 1995, I couldn't help but wonder whether the prophecy from that man in downtown Detroit had been fulfilled.

TB  
August 1996<sup>110</sup>

Replete with hyper-masculine images, Boyd's text relies on Tupac Shakur, Louis Farrakhan, and "gangstas" to salvage Black self-determination. Though he speaks of a Black woman as mirror in his introduction, Boyd gives attention to Black women only in three small sections throughout the book. Many African Americans have felt as Boyd did

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<sup>110</sup> Todd Boyd, Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) preface.

in situations of tense racial problems. It is during these desperate and lonely times that you seek understanding and camaraderie in other Black faces. He felt this way with the Black female secretary: “Though the room was overcrowded, my eyes were drawn to Cassandra... the other African American in the room. As if we were speaking some sort of silent language, we were pulled to each other amid the grunts and moans of disgust and disbelief that the others were exchanging, almost as if we weren't even in the room.” Boyd’s intonation of camaraderie aside, the question remains: Where will Cassandra be when “The Black man rise[s] again”? In other words, she’s there for comfort when there is no other Black person around and he feels vulnerable, but where is she in the larger context of Black liberation? Boyd is just one example of how the sole focus on the Black male fight for liberation (in the manner it is presented) eclipses Black women’s concerns.

Oftentimes, the desire for “unity” is at the core of Black essentialism, because many desire a tie that binds African Americans together. Some Black people have used “unity” as a code word for a relationship between self/community, making essentialism necessarily prevalent during particular moments of Black resistance in America. For example, Black liberation movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s have been criticized for their masculinizing, misogynist and essentialist notion of what it means to be Black. In other words, this process reduces the “Black struggle” to a “man’s struggle,” which makes women invisible in most racial uplift rhetoric. In 1984, Audre Lorde urged Black people to understand that “in order to work together we do not have to become a mix of indistinguishable particles resembling a vat of homogenized chocolate milk.”<sup>111</sup> Even today, “Black unity” often equals Black uniformity.

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<sup>111</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984, 136) and Cheryl Clarke, “The Failure to Transform” in *HomeGirls* (1982).

In its worst incarnation, essentialism can take on what I dub the “Ice Cube brand of essentialism,” which exists primarily in rap culture. Rapper Ice Cube has stated that “True Niggas Ain’t Faggots or Yuppies.”<sup>112</sup> This is the brand of essentialism that creates, as Sasha says, “peer pressure to get [Black] folks to toe the line.” This is also the brand of essentialism that makes Heather, a Black lesbian, feel uncomfortable in her own racial community:

I am much more likely to hide who I am in our community. I feel less tolerance in our community, that could just be my perception, because I never bother to test the limits. I am quite comfortable in the Black, gay family, just not the Black family at large. This has been the case since I knew I was a lesbian, 20 to 25 years ago.

Anyone who is “different” (different politics, different sexual orientation, different style and way of dressing) in the Black community usually receives some negative comments from (at least some of) their African American peers. Heather believes that Black folk need unity, but advises, “We don’t need to all think alike or vote the same or live in the same place.” She continues:

But we all need to love and support each other. We need to remember where we came from and set sights on where we want to be. We need to be a village and raise our children like they did a couple of generations ago. We need to think to the future and plan for our economic viability. We need to get back to some sort of spirituality; again, we don’t all have to worship the same way, but we need to acknowledge some connection to a Higher Power.

The ghettocentric view of Black authenticity, and the essentializing that stems from it, ultimately leaves little room for women like those in the SistaINFO group—middle class, educated, upwardly-mobile, and for some, gay.

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<sup>112</sup> As recorded and critiqued in *Black Is, Black Ain’t: A Journey Through Black Identity* and Kendall Thomas, “‘Ain’t Nothin’ Like the Real Thing’: Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality and the Jargon of Authenticity,” *House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*. ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

### **Essentialism, Realism and Imagined Community**

Paul Gilroy states that Black essentialism “begins to look like a disaster for Black feminism”<sup>113</sup> because this concept of unity negates freedom and individuality. Scholars have done well pointing out how damaging this type of “unity” is to Black women and feminism, but they have not addressed the essentialized version of “unity” expressed in Black popular culture. Sasha brings this point to the fore. She criticizes Hollywood’s treatment of women but states that independent films often present multi-dimensional women:

Movies in general don’t represent women well. Women’s stories aren’t worth telling in general, and Black women’s stories really aren’t. Smaller movies have Black women that are multi-dimensional: Down in the Delta, To Sleep with Anger, Eve’s Bayou. They probably don’t qualify as popular culture. Down in the Delta had a Black woman with Alzheimer’s whose husband took lovingly good care of her.

Considering that most Hollywood blockbusters are driven more by special effects than by fully developed characters, as well stereotypical images and stock characters, few films have any three-dimensional Black male or female characters. Typically, Black women are employed as plot devices or as set dressing. Independent films, which tend to be more character-driven, provide a better sense of the range of humanity that Black women possess. Films like Eve’s Bayou, a coming-of-age story that included a storyline about incest, and Waiting to Exhale have been criticized for airing dirty laundry or engaging in male-bashing.

Given the volume of writing on the subject, one could dub this era a “post-essentialist moment.” However, it would be premature to do so because of the continued

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<sup>113</sup> Paul Gilroy, “It’s a Family Affair,” Black Popular Culture, ed. Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992) 307.



use of, and apparent need for, essentialism. “Where would we be,” bell hooks once remarked, “without a touch of essentialism?” Or, what Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialism, a necessary moment?”<sup>114</sup> Some Black cultural studies theorists have come to realize that a measure of essentialism is a necessary part of Black culture and Black liberation movements. Stuart Hall, in “What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture,” questions whether we are any longer in that “necessary” moment, and whether essentialism is still a sufficient basis for the strategies of new interventions.<sup>115</sup> The danger, Hall notes, is that in this essentialist moment we tend to “privilege experience itself, as if Black life is lived experience outside of representation.”<sup>116</sup> It is important to recognize that Black life is lived outside of, in the shadow of, and in opposition to, representations.

### **Girls on the Side: Essentialism 1995-2003**

Often, anything that Black women do well is perceived to be at the expense of Black men, whether or not men are a part of it.

—Sasha, informant

In the 1990-2003 postmodern rap and hip-hop era, Black people are encouraged to be “real” or “keep it real.” Those who “keep it real” are said to live a “ghetto” lifestyle, which is understood to include an upbringing in a working class poor neighborhood, or in public housing. Alternately, a person who is “keeping it real” comes from such a lifestyle but is upwardly mobile (in a “ghetto fabulous,” flashy way) while staying true to such “roots.” “Keepin’ it real” often means staying true to your personal

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<sup>114</sup> qtd. in Stuart Hall, “What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?” *Black Popular Culture* ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992) 29-30.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

identity or not putting on a mask or a “front.” It appears, however, that what’s real is in the eye of the beholder. Sasha says,

A Black woman could, for example, perform a song about keeping strong and getting out of an abusive relationship. A Black man could perform a song about kicking a bitch out or shooting her. The woman would be bashing brothers, and the man would be ‘keeping it real.’ Though he is literally bashing sisters.

The “keepin' it real” type of Blackness excludes those who are middle-class, have forgotten their roots, and have thus “sold out.” Under this definition, people like Clarence Thomas and O.J. Simpson (pre-murder) are not considered Black. Tiger Woods, perhaps, would be included in this “not real”-“not Black” category because he does not strictly label himself African American; he includes his Asian and white heritage as part of his racial identity. “Keepin' it real” Blackness allows someone like O.J. Simpson to be Black now, after his murder trial, because he has experienced being a Black man on trial. Before the murders, he lived in a white golf-community with his white, blond-haired, blue-eyed wife. Of course, before Tiger Woods came along and won several Masters tournaments, golfing was considered a “white thing” (like skiing), but media images of Tiger Woods’ success and the adulation it earned him have shifted the boundaries of Blackness. Golfing is now a luxury sport that Blacks (especially in rap and hip-hop culture) aspire to play. Indeed, a sign of Black success.

Some media images of Blacks have shifted and evolved in this way. However, where Tiger Woods expands, even slightly, the definition of Blackness women remain relegated to the margins of Black popular culture. To understand the position of Black women within the constructions of authentic, real Blackness, we must examine the stereotypical images commonly found in contemporary Black popular culture.

### **Hoochies, Crackheads, and Baby Mamas**

There are several common media stereotypes of Black women: hoochies, chickenheads, crack hos, and baby's mamas. "Hoochies" are scantily clad exhibitionists; pervasive in music videos but also evident wherever they typically gyrate, grind, or shake. "Hoochies" are an updated version of the promiscuous Black woman or Jezebel stereotype. One of her sub-types is a variation on the seductress or siren, while another is the "chickenhead" or "hood rat," both variations on the gold digger.

"Crackhead" (usually a gender neutral term) or "crack ho" (crack whore) is a woman who gives sexual favors in exchange for crack or money for crack. This is a shorthand term for any strung-out woman, suggesting that she may trade sex for a fix. Though not always a negative term, "baby mamas" are just that, the mother of the man's baby (there tends to be more than one—hence the lack of a name). Women who badger a man to take care of his responsibility bring baby mama "drama." The drama enhances negative images of the woman.

Although the names are new and the details updated, these images are almost identical to the Jezebel and Tragic Mulatto archetypes of a century ago. What are Black women's views on these representations? Six women in the questionnaire group discuss their concerns about African American women's representation in media.

"I also avoid almost all music videos. The representation...of Black women disgusts me," says Alex. The other five women in the SistaINFO group echo Alex's viewpoint. Indeed, a common target of disdain is the video woman. Monique says, "I also do not like the representation (particularly in music videos) of young Black women as hoochie mamas, baby-mama drama queens, hood-rats, and/or ... digging 'bling-bling'

seekers (gold-diggers).” Mikki says, “I hate hate hate the booty girls.” Heather also says she does not like the “[v]ideo vixens [of] the background [dancer] variety.” And Deborah “avoid[s] women that are portrayed as mean, nasty, criminals, and grumblers.” Mikki claims:

I think that Black womyn are one-sided in the media, and overly stereotyped. Black womyn are either the sisters who got it going on or the neck-rolling- take-no-prisoners-neck-swing-finger-waving diva with a 'tude [attitude]...with a few disenfranchised working sisters who can't find a good man.

Totally unsolicited, the informants volunteered their observations about the “video vixens.” In the questionnaire, women in videos were not mentioned. The participants were simply asked what types of images they disliked or avoided. All women responded similarly—they strongly disliked the images popular in rap and R&B videos. They are so popular, in fact, that in the late 1990s The Roots (a “neo-soul” group) did a video parody of the common elements in rap and R&B videos. The video displayed women with wine glasses in their hands; the token white woman; the Black men “running from the cops” scene, and so on. In 2003, the videos persist with the same formula and the same type of video women. Even rapper Dr. Dre mentioned in an interview that he was tired of seeing the same women in different artists’ videos. Many of these women make part of their living being video vixens and tend towards the same physical characteristics: light-skinned Black women with long hair and perfectly fit bodies.

Monique says “all of the images or representations of Black women in the media” are disappointing to her. She explains that one of the most disturbing images for her is

the fair-skinned Black woman who is held up as the beauty standard:

I do not like the representation of a fair-skin, long-flowing hair, svelte sister as the epitome of Black beauty. I believe there is beauty in all Black women no matter what the skin color, length or texture of hair, and body shape/size. I wish all Black women were equally adored and represented in the media. I think if we took an honest look, we'd find that there might be a little bit of each of these personas in all Black women. However, I think the exploitation of young Black women in music videos has sent a negative message about Black women to all people.

Especially popular in commercials and sitcoms is the image of the modern-day Mammies. For Sasha, “the big mamas disturb [her] less than the hoochies do”. However, Alex says that the “sassy domestic type found in *Pine Sol* commercials are the type I can do without.” The women consider these images extremely damaging because they largely misrepresent the vast majority of Black women in American culture. They are harmful because Black people are complicit in selecting these images to put in their songs, videos and movies. This fact raises critical questions: Do artists and producers have responsible to the Black community to portray more balanced imagery? Are they accountable for remedying past stereotypes? These issues will be further explored in the segment on Black male artists’ depictions of Black women in song lyrics and videos.

### **Signifyin' Tradition**

Misogynistic images are institutionalized as well as culturally and legally sanctioned. In her article, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw studies how Black women are imagined in hip-hop culture. Crenshaw details where cultural images and legal discourse meet, because it is “within the law that cultural attitudes are legitimized through organized state power.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Kimberle' Williams Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew,” Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment, eds. Mari J.

Misogyny in Black culture was highlighted by the 1990 2 Live Crew case, a clear example of the problematic nature of representation in expressive culture. The rap group 2 Live Crew was prosecuted for obscene lyrics in their album As Nasty as They Wanna Be. Their lyrics explicitly described violent sexual acts against women, and during live shows they brought women onstage to dance suggestively or perform lewd acts for them. Interestingly, the case received uncritical support by African American studies scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates, in his court testimony on their behalf, maintained that 2 Live Crew's album stood in the long tradition of signifying, language play and hyperbole, even as it reinforced particular sexist notions about (Black) women. The "signifyin" excuse gives the creator of the song or video cultural license to perpetrate unimaginable atrocities against women.

In his account on signifying, coded language and expressive culture from slavery to the 1940s, Lawrence Levine gives historical context to the concept of subversive word play. Of Black women's place in antebellum folktales, he says, "more often than not, female pride and egocentricity are punished sternly."<sup>118</sup> In these didactic tales, the moral of the story signifies the Black woman's comeuppance. Levine continues: "A second series of stories focuses upon older people (generally women) who try to win much younger mates and are rewarded invariably by humiliation or death."<sup>119</sup> Levine characterizes the tales as "denigrating ... the aggressive woman" and "... celebrating the father as the family's chief protector and provider."<sup>120</sup> Representation of Black women in

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Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, Kimberle' Williams Crenshaw (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993) 111.

<sup>118</sup> Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness (1978) 96.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

these tales is sometimes intended as metaphor, and is not to be taken seriously. Granted, Black storytelling has always had elements of “play” and signifying. These are often indeed found in hip-hop and rap and are not always misogynistic, but use signifying to allow it to happen when it does appear.

In “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” Robin D.G. Kelley contextualizes “gangsta rap” in a postindustrial Los Angeles. He explains that in Los Angeles, young Black men, displaced by forces such as deindustrialization, unemployment, drugs and violence, voice their reality through rap. Kelley places aspects of “gangsta rap” in the long tradition of signifying and boasting. He explains that often rappers are not basing their lyrics on truth, but on exaggeration, metaphor and imagery.<sup>121</sup>

Exaggerated and invented boasts of criminal acts should sometimes be regarded as part of a larger set of signifying practices. Performances like The Rhyme Syndicate’s “My Word Is Bond” or J.D.’s storytelling between songs on Ice Cube’s *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted* are supposed to be humorous and, to an extent unbelievable. Growing out of a much older set of cultural practices, these masculinist narratives are essentially verbal duels over who is the ‘baddest motherfucker around.’ They are not meant as literal descriptions of violence and aggression, but connote the playful use of language itself.<sup>122</sup>

According to Kelley, boasts “should sometimes” be regarded in the framework of “signifying.” This particular passage raises questions: How do we as consumers and listeners know the difference between “representing reality” and non-literal descriptions of violence? How many people—of any race/ethnicity—listening to this music know the history of boasting, signifying and language play in Black culture? Even if people did have such background knowledge, would they agree that the signifying was an

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<sup>121</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 190.

exaggeration or a metaphor, and not to be taken as “real”? What about when rappers, in interviews, claim they are just “keepin’ it real,” and reciting their own experiences? When Blacks “represent reality,” as in Kelley's example, it inevitably revolves around Black men, and it is done at the expense of Black women.

“The New Black Realism” films have been popular for their “realness.” Diawara observes that “[r]eality as a cinematic style is often claimed to describe films like Boyz N the Hood, Juice and Straight Out of Brooklyn.”<sup>123</sup> He adds, “When I taught *Boyz N The Hood*, my students talked about [the cinematic style] in terms of realism”:

‘What happened in the film *happens everyday* in America.’  
 ‘It is *like it really is* in South Central LA.’  
 ‘It describes policing in a *realistic* manner.’  
 ‘The characters on the screen look like the young people in the movie theater.’  
 ‘It captures gang life *like it is*.’  
 ‘It shows Black males as an endangered species.’  
 ‘I liked its depiction of liquor stores in the Black community.’  
 ‘I *identified* with Ice Cube’s character because *I know guys like that back home*.’<sup>124</sup>

Diawara goes on to say that when he taught film to college students, they made an important connection to “realism” in movies. Students told him that what happened in the film happens everyday in America, which brought him to the understanding that “clearly, there is something in the narrative of films like Boyz N the Hood and Straight Out of Brooklyn that links them, to put it in Aristotelian terms, to existent reality in Black communities.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>123</sup> Manthia Diawara, Black American Cinema (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 23.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 23. (emphasis added)

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 23-4.



### Essentialism 2003

['Keepin' it real'] means being true to yourself, I think to the wider culture. To the Black culture, it may mean "don't be a sellout."

—Alex, informant

Since the era of "New Black Realism" films, some films have centered on the lives of or have featured Black women. Examples include many of those already mentioned Waiting to Exhale, Love Jones, The Best Man, and Love and Basketball. Set It Off (1996) and Soul Food (1997) can also be added to this list. Many of these focused on male/female relationships. A distinct shift in popular themes of Black film occurred around the mid-1990s. Emphasis shifted from films focused almost entirely on Black boys or men in the 'hood to Black women and men, and even Black couples in the 'burbs. Yet, overall in contemporary popular culture, masculine-centered mainstream Black popular film, television and music still leaves the voices and representations of Black women suspect. Before we examine the representations of Black women, it is first necessary to address the commodification of Black culture in American contemporary popular culture.

Mainstream programming has appropriated Black culturally-derived terms and language.<sup>126</sup> MTV, which resisted playing Black R& B and rap artists' music videos for a decade after it debuted, now has shows that are either hip-hop inspired or hip-hop centered. These include *Cribs*, *Doggy Fizzle Televizzle*, *Direct Effect*, and *Dismissed*, among many others. In popular media culture, phrases like "don't go there!" (A favorite of Katie Couric of the *Today Show*), "you go girl!" "that's ghetto" (a favorite of white

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<sup>126</sup> *Cribs*, Black slang for "home," is a show that tours celebrities' homes. On MTV, this season rap artist Snoop Dogg hosts his own variety (*Doggy Fizzle Televizzle*), *Direct Effect* is a show which counts down

MTV guests and celebrities), and “Whassss up!” (made popular by comedian Martin Lawrence, and then by Budweiser commercials featuring a group of Black friends) are widely popular. In American music and television culture terms like “ghetto booty” and even “bro,” “brother,” and “nigga” emerge from the mouths of white teens, indicating that appropriation of Black speech is at an all time high. These are just a few examples of the use and appropriation of Black urban lingo, but they also apply to dress, style, and gestures.

Admittedly, popular television culture in general has helped to redefine notions of Blackness, and recently some changes have indeed taken place. Some of the changes that reject the “Ice Cube” brand of essentialism include MTV's *The Real World, Chicago* (2001), which included a Black lesbian (Aneesa) as a roommate on the show. Another Black lesbian, Sophia, was on *Road Rules 10: The Quest* in 2000. MTV has also had Black men on *The Real World* who do not fit the “angry Black male” stereotype set by previous cast members.

The popularity of Black culture appropriation makes it imperative for some Blacks in media to represent an “authentic” Black culture. The idea seems to be to never allow whites to “out Black” you! An über-raw ghetto culture—embodied by Master P, 50 Cent, Cash Money Millionaire—is a type of Blackness and rap artist image that represents a level of despair that whites cannot touch. They are forever poor (at least in their own minds, if not their pockets) deep-in-the-‘hood brothas and no white rapper with cornrows can appropriate their sense of hopelessness and anger. This representation

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popular hip hop hits and a dating show titled *Dismissed* (common Black slang: dissed, dismissed, as in the transcript from The Best Man: “Dismissed with the quicks!”).

always includes an obligatory group of Black women who are sexually and otherwise available to those men.

It is important at this point in the discussion of gender, representation and essentialism to allow Black women to speak about issues important to them in popular culture. This next section highlights the ways in which Black women integrate images of Blackness and womanhood into their lives. Incorporating Black female voices into the cultural rhetoric will serve as a small, yet significant, intervention into the masculinization of Blackness.

### **Black Women's Media Choices**

Jacqueline Bobo's study of women watching The Color Purple reminds us not to underestimate Black women's ability to sift through films and locate images important to them. In this study, it is important to mine the types of media that women used to affirm their identities. The SistaINFO group—Alex, Deborah, Monique, Heather, Sasha and Mikki—tell us the types of media they employ to affirm their sense of self.

Deborah describes herself as a “kind, sweet, caring” woman who likes to think she helps people deal with life. A self-proclaimed “information gathering junkie,” she loves to watch television “because it's free.” Deborah also enjoys television because it keeps her knowledgeable in contemporary affairs and doing things like “fix[ing] stuff.” Media venues that offer her an escape are films and novels. In these media forms, she likes to see how other people cope with situations and how they do something similar or different from the way she does things. Black movies like Brown Sugar make her feel good about herself:

I felt really proud about seeing Sanaa Lathan in Brown Sugar only because she is not afraid to be a regular person. She is a jock, sensitive,

capable, beautiful, and often seems self-assured. I walked out happy to be myself.

Film, she says, helps her think about her goals: “I will learn how to accomplish something or I will reflect on my life and how I am living.” Deborah says that lately, spiritual readings have grounded her, but that so much has happened in her life that she tends to just “focus on basic survival.”

Alex enjoys various forms of media as well, but usually only has time to watch television for the news and other insights. As a mother of a young girl, she is focused on “raising [her] daughter to be caring, confident, and to practice critical thinking.” Alex is rarely able to enjoy various forms of media because her child and her work keep her extremely busy. When able, however, she is interested in movies that help her learn. She enjoys reading Deepak Chopra, but she says that reading is something she has very little time to do anymore: “The reading I do manage to accomplish focus[es] on improving my sense of balance (Feng Shui) or improving my management skills.”

The type of music Alex enjoys is considered alternative. She is a fan of groups like Matchbox 20 and Dave Matthews Band (majority Black musicians, but they are marketed to whites as “adult alternative”): “It is the connection to the situation being explored through the lyrics [that] makes me feel good.” She often listens to music during her drive to work when she is not playing children's tapes for her daughter. Alex's “guilty pleasure” is a *People* magazine “every now and then.”

Growing up, the type of women that inspired Alex were those in her family. Thinking back on her childhood, she recalls, “the most vivid are images of my mother and grandmother, determined and sarky [sarcastic]!” Other women who inspired her are

found in films like The Color Purple. Alex felt awestruck by the image of Whoopi Goldberg in The Color Purple. “I thought her acting was brilliant,” she says.

The Color Purple also left a lasting impact on Heather. When Heather saw the movie she was in awe of both Whoopi Goldberg and Alice Walker. She had read the novel and said the movie adaptation was beautiful:

Oprah’s character got knocked down, but got back up. I knew others had worked on the movie [referring to Steven Spielberg], but the vision was from a Black woman. I felt proud and empowered. I had a similar feeling when I watched *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. When Cicely Tyson drank from that fountain, I cried. I might cry now, thinking about it.

Heather affirms her identity through spiritual readings. She is also grounded in her spirituality, believing that faith and love can help people through troubled times. The media she seeks out includes “anything Iyanla [Vanzant] and Oprah's magazine.” Her media consumption involves television, sports, the music of Black female singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman and sports talk radio. Heather has clear and distinct memories of Black women on television and in real life. The women and images she remembers include:

My mom and grandmother working hard. Diahann Carroll as Julia, the TV nurse. I did not want to be a nurse, but I wanted to be independent and working and on TV. Aunt Jemima on the syrup bottle, hated that. There were not nearly enough positive images in the media. I did also admire Teresa Graves (recently died) for the private detective role on the TV show, *Get Christy Love*. I liked Peggy on *Mannix*. But, I always thought she was smarter than him, but had to take care of him.

Mikki also feels that spirituality is important in her life. She considers herself a “child of God [who] marches to the beat of her own drummer.” Being part of a larger Black community is important to her. Mikki feels strongly about being a part of “a revolution that empowers people of color to level more of the playing field that is

America.” She says, “I want to raise a nation of chocolate brown babies and pass on a legacy of resilience,” adding, “winning the lottery wouldn’t be bad either.”

In terms of films, Mikki loves a good movie that can make her “leave astonished” and finds that it is easy to get caught up in media. On the small screen, she loves sitcoms and dramas like “*ER*, *Bernie Mac*, *My Wife and Kids*, *Judging Amy*, *The George Lopez Show*, *Law and Order* (all of them), *Girlfriends*, *CSI* (“not Miami”), *PBS*, *The Simpsons*, *That 70s Show*, *America’s Funniest Home Videos* and *Showtime at the Apollo*.” At the time of this interview she stated that she usually watches television everyday but was on a “television fast” for two months.

Mikki has vivid memories of the women around her as she grew up. These are women who had a profound impact on her and influenced her from an early age. The images of women that she had growing up was of “stockings [sic] feet and Black shoes, helping womyn, working womyn, church choir singing womyn, and laughter.” She juxtaposes this past reality with images she sees presently: “I think that Black womyn are one-sided in the media, and overly stereotyped.” Black women in media, she says, “are thin, 'sexy' and successful, or thick and funny, or smart asses, or have bone straight hair or big fuzzy curly hair, some with natural hair.” Mikki adds, “I think most are unlike me...” and claims she “doesn’t really have role models in the media.” She does, though, feel proud when she sees Oprah on television: “Here is this intelligent goofy country girl impacting millions of womyn everyday.”

Sasha loves the *History Channel*, *Discovery*, the *Learning Channel* and *A&E*. She is an avid fan of what she calls “the dead people shows,” or shows about forensic science. Although her first love is fiction (novels and short stories), she feels that she does not

have time enough to enjoy it. Television on the other hand, she says, is “minimally demanding [because it] uses as much or as little brainpower as I want to give.” It is interesting and satisfies her need to learn. Sasha became a mother in her teens and growing up, the images she remembers are of myriad positive Black women:

The Black women I saw every day—my mother, grandmothers, aunts, teachers, neighbors—were people who held things together and made things happen. They accepted you for who you were, AND expected you to be better than you are.

I don't think I identified so much as a Black woman growing up. I didn't get any real sense of being Black and different until [moving from Detroit to] Columbus. I didn't really get a sense of being a Black woman and different until I got out of college. Other things made me feel different and out of place growing up and through college—my interests, my personality, my family, my being light, my name, being poor, having fewer and different life experiences, being a mother. I remember being inspired by my brother, my grandmother, Anne Frank, Richard Wright, [and] James Baldwin. All the difference I saw or read about, I perceived as being in the past.

Sasha's English degree speaks to her interests in media. Her love for stories and writing them are evident in the types of media she chooses, such as forensic science shows and coming of age stories.

Monique loves a good book. One of her current goals is to read something spiritual every day: “Spiritual readings are a staple in my life. I am always interested and open to reading about spiritual matters, especially if it is an avenue to bring me closer to my God.” She is a frequent moviegoer, an avid reader, and watches TV on a daily basis, but feels the need to cut back on TV. “I love to get immersed in a good book and get totally taken away.”

I read because it expands my horizons. It also allows me to get totally engrossed in something outside of myself. When I am in a good novel, I am not thinking about the laundry that I need to do, the bills I should

pay, the work that needs to be done in my house. When I am reading I can become a character in the book and fantasize about the outcome of a particular scenario and then see how it actually turns out as I read on.

Monique remembers childhood images of her mother, aunts, and grandmother. These images of Black women were,

all extremely hardworking, getting up before the sun every morning, going to work 2 and 3 jobs in a 24-hour period, never missing a beat (or a beating when the young ones acted up), hot and spicy curry goat with rice and peas cooking – BBWs (Beautiful Black Women).

Many of the women, like Mikki, Heather, Monique and Alex, find some sort of spirituality important in their daily lives, whether that means the Bible, Deepak Chopra or Iyanla Vanzant. The majority of these women have expressed a longing for the betterment of Black women's and Black people's lives. Unfortunately, it is the complexities of these women's lives that are not depicted.

These women's responses to images in the media and the realities in their lives are needed in our effort to give voice to women. They make obvious the depth of Black women's lives and the many ways in which they conduct their lives, despite the one-sided representations found in most media forms. This dissertation is a form of representation in which I feel proud to include their ideas, wishes, and disappointments.

### **Black Women on Black Women**

The women quoted below are keenly aware that they are not well represented in the media, and therefore they do not look primarily to media images for definition and affirmation. They limit their exposure to essentialist visions of Blackness, and use other



media, rather than what is commonly thought of as Black media, for entertainment and affirmation. This chapter concludes with their thoughts on being a Black woman:

Today, Black women and white women are largely sex symbols. The brainy women images are few. When a woman is brainy and sexy, that's considered some kind of oddity. We have some control over our images and we are not exercising our right not to be hoochies in videos.

-Heather

For me [being a Black woman] means getting up each and every morning, thanking God for another day and opportunity to do the next right thing; feeding my dog and taking her outside to relieve herself before I get on the Metro to my office. It means putting in the 8+ hours each day (Monday to Friday). It means getting together with friends as often as I can to kick-it (shooting pool, going to the movies, playing Spades, shopping, whatever). It means letting family and friends know that I love them and they are a blessing in my life. It means living each day like it was possibly my last.

-Monique

I don't know if it means anything. It is just who I am. I think that soon after reaching adulthood, you soon learn that you cannot escape who you are. I think if you are good looking or people think you are, you get a lot of good and bad attention, because society sees something mysterious or exotic about us. In terms of every day life, we carry such a burden, meaning that we are often everything to everyone. I think other races appreciate us much more than our own men. That is certainly a shame. I think we are the best that life has to offer, so smart, so sharp, quick witted, very funny and diverse and beautiful. Most of all we are much more capable that we give ourselves credit for to the point that everyone relies upon us as a right-hand man.

-Deborah

Whew, how do you answer this? Being a Black woman means much—it encompasses and touches every aspect of my life. Yet it isn't the be all and end all of who I am, it really is just what I am. My color has worked both for and against me. I received a full academic scholarship to [a highly competitive] University because I am a Black woman. Yes, I was fulfilling a quota but I also got a free education. On the flip side, I worked in a department where I was the only Black female manager among several white male managers. All of the managers had comparable qualifications (education, work and supervisory experience) and job responsibilities. I received several above satisfactory performance evaluations, yet I was paid \$11,000 less than the lowest paid white male manager and almost \$30,000 less than the highest paid white male manager. This I attributed to nothing other than the fact that I am a Black

woman. The bottom line is I am a Black woman. That is not going to change (nor would I want it to), so I just deal as best I can.

-Monique

I feel blessed to be on the planet as a Black woman, especially one who loves other Black women. Overall we are strong, kind, caring, considerate, forgiving.

Too often we are picked on, discriminated against and have to go the extra mile to prove who we are and what we are capable of.

-Heather

[Being a Black woman means] [i]t's all mine to claim.

-Sasha

I think that being a Black womyn means being comfortable in your own skin and loving who you are as a person. I think being a Black womyn means giving a voice to the generations to follow, being supportive so that they will have a voice.

-Mikki

Very few places in the scholarship illustrate depictions of Black female self-love.

But here is evidence of a critical consciousness on behalf of Black women that must be expressed. Despite all that Black women may grapple with in life, there are indeed Black women who are “comfortable in their own skin,” and who feel responsible for “being supportive to the generations to follow so that they will have a voice.” Here are Black women who feel “blessed to be on this planet as a woman who loves other women, despite being picked on, discriminated against, and having to go the extra mile to prove themselves.” Despite the self-love expressed on behalf of these women, it is still a struggle for many to get up each day to face all that they have to face. I am reminded of Terri L. Jewell, who tragically took her own life. Right before doing so, however, she

published The Black Woman's Gumbo Ya Ya: Quotations by Black Women, which explores Black women's self love:

This collection was born out of my personal need for affirmation as a Black woman. I needed coping mechanisms for the growing conservatism in this nation; during the Rodney King incident and rebellions afterwards...I knew there were more than ten 'quotable' Black women in the world and I challenged myself to find them. There are approximately 350 Black women from all over the world...Here are Black Women's words you can use. Fold one tiny and put it into a sacred place close to you. Place them in personal letters and lectures, over your desk at work and among your prayers. Give them to your enemies, stitch them into blankets, sip them with your tea.<sup>127</sup>

I believe that these women learned vital lessons from well-known Black women, like Terri Jewell and singer Phyllis Hyman, both who committed suicide. Jewell and Hyman struggled with the pressures of racism and sexism and ultimately succumbed to depression. The women interviewed here learned lessons from their deaths and devised means to take better care of themselves, spiritually, and emotionally. Being a Black woman “encompasses and touches every aspect” of these women's lives. Whether or not they are reflected in popular media, or regardless of whether that reflection is distorted, essentialist notions of what it means to be Black do not bind them. These women are exercising their right not to be “hoochies in video[s].” They are exercising their right to be “just who they are.”

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<sup>127</sup> Terri L Jewell, The Black Woman's Gumbo Ya Ya: Quotations by Black Women (Freedom, California: The Crossing Press, 1993) (introduction).

CHAPTER 5: **BEYOND OPPOSITIONAL: BLACK WOMEN WATCHING WAITING TO EXHALE**

When Terri McMillan’s third novel, Waiting to Exhale, hit bookstores three years ago, women of every color snapped up the page-turner (to the tune of nearly 3 million copies) to revel in characters Bernadine Harris, Savannah Jackson, Robin Stokes, and Gloria Johnson, whose lives mirror some of their own. Women who are waiting to get their careers together. Waiting for the weight to disappear from their hips. Waiting for their children to grow up. But mostly waiting for the men who finally take their breath away.

Now fans of The New York Times best seller are flocking to see the characters come to life in the big-screen adaptation of Exhale at hundreds of theaters around the country. Hopes are running high that the film will do for Hollywood what the novel did for the publishing industry: put decision-makers on notice that Black women’s stories matter and are very marketable too.

Deborah Gregory, “The Waiting Game.” Essence Magazine<sup>128</sup>

The screen adaptation of the novel Waiting to Exhale centers on the interconnected lives of friends Bernadine (Angela Bassett), Savannah (Whitney Houston), Robin (Lela Rochon), and Gloria (Loretta Devine). At the opening of the film, Bernadine is the first character we see. Married with two children, she has put her aspirations on hold to help her husband build his business. Once he becomes successful, he leaves Bernadine for a white woman. After hearing the news, Bernadine gets revenge, cuts her long hair short, grieves the loss, and connects with another man on a platonic level—which restores her faith in men. Savannah, a successful broadcaster, becomes involved with a married man who “strings her along” for years, until she realizes he will never leave his wife. She also has a close relationship with her mother, who encourages her to date married men. Their good friend Robin is a woman who confuses sex with love and chooses a series of “wrong men,” from drug dealers to con artists. Gloria, the

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<sup>128</sup> December, 1995.

only overweight woman of the four, pours all her love into her son. Her only interest in male companionship awakens when she sees her son's father, who ends up gay.

However, by the end of the film, Gloria finds a man who loves women with “meat on their bones,” and at that time lets her son go off to college.

Television ads and sit-coms have literally “banked” on the success of Waiting to Exhale, a hit with Americans in general and Black Americans in particular. An April 1996 television advertisement for a Washington D.C. radio station, Magic 102.3 FM, recreated scenes from Waiting to Exhale. Living Single, a TV show airing from 1993 to 1998 about four Black women enduring dating trials and tribulations, mimics the relationships of the women in Waiting to Exhale. The sitcom was such a hit that viewer outcry once saved it from cancellation. It was difficult to be a part of a circle of Black women and avoid debates and conversations about Waiting to Exhale. I was purchasing books in a D.C. woman-owned bookstore when another customer brought up Waiting to Exhale and asked the bookstore clerk if Waiting to Exhale “spoke to her.” The bookstore worker had much to say:

I don't know that it really spoke to me, that it was something that I will automatically identify with and it seems like the way they were pushing the film—as if it speaks to ALL Black women. This is about sisterhood and every Black woman should be able to identify with this movie, but that's not the case. You know every Black woman doesn't have a BMW, every Black woman isn't having affairs with doctors and you know their careers aren't taking off and they don't own their own businesses.

Though cultural critics like bell hooks expressed disappointment with Waiting to Exhale, the buzz surrounding the film illustrates the investment people have in Black female representation and the varying perspectives on whether this was “reality” for

Black women or not. In the New York Times article, “Don’t Hold Your Breath, Sisters,” hooks commented:

Lots of us [Black women] went to see Waiting to Exhale expecting to enjoy a film about four Black women friends coping with life and relationships, yet could not relate to the shallow, adolescent nonsense we saw on the screen. Not one of us saw a realistic portrayal of our lives. Nothing has been more depressing than to hear some Black women saying that this film is a ‘realistic portrayal’ of their experience. If that’s the world of Black heterosexual relationships as they know it, no wonder Black men and women are in a serious crisis. In the real world, gorgeous women like these have men standing in line.<sup>129</sup>

Barbara Reynolds’ Washington Post editorial was more optimistic about the representation of Black women:

Wouldn’t you know it? For years I’ve been urging critics to knock violent Black films, but when they do get busy booing, their target is a movie devoid of bullets, blood, or baloney about Black women as welfare queens, wimps or victims....Granted some of the men in the film are creeps who don’t take care of their kids. And one guy runs off with a white woman after a hard-working Black woman, played by Angela Bassett, helps him become Mr. Success. But that’s not male bashing. It’s reality.<sup>130</sup>

Considering the very heterosexual focus of this film and its impact on Black women, multiple questions are raised in this chapter: How do Black lesbians identify and connect to a film that is so focused on heterosexuality? On what levels do Black women (both heterosexual and lesbian) relate to the characters and their relationships in Waiting to Exhale? Where are the points of connection? And finally, how do Black women relate

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<sup>129</sup> Bell hooks, “Don’t Hold Your Breath, Sisters,” The New York Times. 7 Jan. 1996: E19.

<sup>130</sup> Barbara Reynolds, “Critics Groan as Film Breaks Stereotypes,” The Washington Post [Washington, D.C.] 7 Jan 1996.

to the “gender politics of representation”<sup>131</sup> when it comes to films like Waiting to Exhale?

### **Waiting...**

Recently, Black women’s texts have attracted much more receptive audiences; the emergence of an influential group of Black women cultural consumers has proven essential to their success.

Jacqueline Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers.<sup>132</sup>

In January 1996, an episode of the Oprah Winfrey Show opened with African-American women having “Waiting to Exhale parties.” In other words, Black women were congregating with drinks, laughter and discussion to celebrate the “phenomenon” (as Winfrey terms it) of Waiting to Exhale. Winfrey opens the conversation:

Some wives say they had daydreamed about making bonfires out of their husband’s belongings, but our next guest has done more than just fantasized about it. I’m talking about Georgia, *who really did* pull out the matches and the lighter fluid when her husband dropped a similar little bomb on her and so when you saw the movie did you say, “Oh, they took that from my life!”

Eagerly waiting to respond, Georgia grins and says:

Well, when he told me something similar to that effect, I –just within 30 minutes of hearing the news—I just got all of his stuff together, put it out on the carport (well I put it in my grass) and I even took the dirty clothes out the hamper and put them on the fire. So I made a nice little round stack of clothes out on the grass and I sat there thinking, I forgot something—the shoes! So I went back in got the shoes, put the lighter fluid on there, set the fire and sat there drank some lemonade and watched the fire so it didn’t get out of control. So it burned.

After Georgia’s testimony, Oprah then ran the clip from the film depicting Bernadine burning her husband’s clothes and then lighting a cigarette. At the end of the

<sup>131</sup> Bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992) 300.

<sup>132</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers, 20.

clip Georgia says with confidence, “I would do it again!” Oprah then showed another clip, of Savannah, who was a married man’s “other woman,” and explained:

Oprah :        Coming up, a woman says she knows what it’s like to be the other woman. She had some clarifying moments while watching this same film. Well, this is Dawn and she says those empty promises are for real, she knows what that’s like. Just like Savannah, Dawn fell hook, line and sinker.

Dawn expresses how she connects to the scenes in the film, as “the other woman.”

Dawn, in this case, felt for Bernadine and declares that she would not like to be a participant in the wife’s pain any longer.

When I saw them on the screen, cryin’ like that...I could *feel* the wife’s pain. I could *feel* the damage that has been done when the men leave their wives. I could *feel* Bernadine’s pain.

Throughout this episode of *Oprah*, Black and white women in the audience debated whether the film was about self-esteem or about getting a man. As evident above, the main theme of this *Oprah* episode was Black women relating to and identifying with the characters and situations of the film Waiting to Exhale. This episode of *Oprah*, the discussion with the bookstore clerk, and the phenomenon of the film compelled me to speak with Black women (both lesbian and heterosexual) in-depth about their views on the film.

Four Black female informants participated:

- Sasha, 30, an African-American heterosexual, middle-class woman who grew up working class. She is married and has one child. Sasha is a college-educated woman working as a manager for a pharmaceutical company. Living in Maryland, she grew up in Michigan and Ohio.
- Petra, 24, is a Black lesbian who holds a masters degree and is working toward her doctorate. She is of working-class background and grew up in Pennsylvania.



- Hayden, 28, is a Black lesbian and a Ph.D. student. She is of middle-class origins and grew up in Ohio.
- Ami, 27, is also a Black lesbian. She is college educated and is actually the bookstore worker with whom I had an impromptu discussion about Waiting to Exhale. She grew up in Washington D.C.

Using the works of bell hooks (“The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators”) and Bonnie Zimmerman (“Reading, Seeing, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature”) this discussion will first turn to relevant concepts of female spectatorship on both Black (heterosexual) female and (white) lesbian women. The examination of both will allow me to bridge some of the gaps in the scholarship when exploring Black spectatorship. The discussion will then turn to delving into the informants’ levels of identification with situations and characters in Waiting to Exhale in order to examine how Black lesbians and heterosexual women connect to media.

### **“Waiting to Exhale was Long Overdue”**

Don’t trust everything the press tells you about how Black women think.

bell hooks, “Don’t Hold Your Breath, Sisters.” The New York Times.<sup>133</sup>

According to Barbara Reynolds, many Black women felt that Waiting to Exhale was long overdue. Drawing from Donald Bogle’s Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks, Reynolds says that “[t]raditionally, Black women were cast as Mammies nurturing white families or marginalized as prostitutes to answer sexual needs of the films’ heroes. For once, here they are front and center. That’s a precedent.”<sup>134</sup> With

<sup>133</sup> Bell hooks, “Don’t Hold Your Breath, Sisters,” The New York Times. 7 Jan. 1996: E19.

<sup>134</sup> Barbara Reynolds, “Critics Groan as Film Breaks Stereotypes,” (The Washington Post). See Thomas Bogle’s Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Continuum Books, 1991).

acknowledgement of this history of the lack of Black female roles, Reynolds uncritically celebrates Waiting to Exhale.

What makes Waiting to Exhale a film that many Black women celebrate is that it centers on the lives of four Black female protagonists who are upper-middle class, economically independent (though their main flaw is their dependence on men), and living in the suburbs. This is a film that—in almost every way—departs from the ghettocentric genre of the “New Black Realism” films discussed earlier. Many African-American women were excited to see a Black woman other than a crack whore, Mammy, Sapphire, or ghetto queen on the big screen. With these images as a backdrop, a film like Waiting to Exhale was long overdue.

Sasha says, “We are hungry to see ourselves reflected.” She compares Waiting to some of the “New Black Realism” films, most of which she had seen. Sasha feels that it is important to support a film outside of the genre:

I thought if we, Black women, were so hungry to see ourselves on the screen that we'd accept that [a film like Waiting to Exhale]. I mean it's one of the few movies with Black women in it that does not have explicit personal violence. There was not a gun, not a car chase and there was indirect violence. I think it's pretty violent to be burnin' up somebody's clothes, but wasn't a physical, personal sort of violence. I think it was important to support it that for that reason.

Finally, there is a film that focuses on the lives of Black women with no violence and no obvious stereotypes. This film depicts Black women in middle-class, professional environments and in the suburbs. Waiting to Exhale definitely provided images that were less painful to watch. In terms of their representation on screen, they were far more palatable, especially when compared to those of the crack whore in Jungle Fever (played

by Halle Berry). Here we have a film that places Black women in the story's foreground as opposed to the background.

### **More Than Just a “Resisting Spectator”**

We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, Black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels.

bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.”<sup>135</sup>

“Hell, no!” Ami exclaimed when asked, “Did you identify with any of the characters in Waiting to Exhale?” “Well, you know, it’s probably...let’s say, being who I am and being of my mindset,” she said. “You know, being a Black lesbian and being of a very independent, free-thinking, free-living type mindset,” Ami says:

I would find it really difficult to do as the title implies, which is ‘be holding my breath for some *man* to come along’ or in my case, a *woman* to come along, so I can feel okay about myself. Life is not about that. So I mean that was a big [theme]...and because all of the characters in some way or another wanted a man...or it seems that their main goal—was to find a man, get a man, keep a man and love a man. I can’t live my life, you know, that way. So I can’t identify with that, no.

The day after that interview, Ami called me back to revise her answer to the question of identifying with the film. She realized that there was a difference between what she calls her “core beliefs, [or] the things that she can say ‘cerebrally’ “ and that which she says “comes from the heart.” When it comes “to the heart,” she says, “I have no control over that.” Ami admits, “Regarding waiting or ‘holding my breath’ if all that, sure, there were times that I would be like ‘Oh, man, when is she gonna call?’ People made me feel this way.”

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<sup>135</sup> Bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” (1992) 128.

Ami's response is evidence of what Zimmerman terms multiperspectivity; that is, when dealing with fictional and autobiographical accounts of lesbian lives there is a tendency to "isolate factors that create a sense of continuity within the self, while ignoring factors that clash with current identity."<sup>136</sup> Ami has the memory of being with men to recall, while her current identity as lesbian has clashed with her previous identity and experience as a heterosexual woman. Still, she identifies with that "waiting." At this point, Ami is identifying with the previous experiences she has had with men: "The last serious relationship I had was prior to my moving up here. I was 18. The man, the guy, wanted to marry me." Ami's example is also consistent with what Bobo brings up in Black Women as Cultural Readers—that Black women sift through incongruent parts of the film and react favorably to elements with which they can identify, elements that resonate with their experiences.<sup>137</sup> Ami continues saying that it is as if this line of questioning opened up buried memories of her previous life when she dated men. For example, she remembers a scene in her life that is similar to one from the film where Angela Bassett's character, Bernadine, meets a married man at a bar (the man is played by actor Wesley Snipes). He is saddened because he is losing his wife to cancer. They emotionally connect at the bar as she reveals current emotions related to her divorce. Bernadine and the man spend the night in a hotel room holding one another all night—fully clothed. Ami says: "I've spent many platonic nights with men the way that it ended up with Angela Bassett and Wesley Snipes."

Informants relate to or connect to parts of the film that reflect their experiences, or the experiences of others they know. Sasha speaks to common conversations that she

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<sup>136</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, "Reading, Seeing, Knowing" (1991) 85-6.

<sup>137</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers (1995) 3.

hears from being around other thirty-something Black heterosexual women. These conversations frame the desires and disappointments of finding a man. Sasha feels, “Waiting to Exhale spoke to a lot of Black women, and I’m at the age of a lot of the people in that movie.” Because Sasha is married, she feels a little differently about truly connecting to these women who seem desperate to find a man:

[A]s a thirty-year-old married woman, I do not really identify with those women. What I think, I think this...I think the woman I would most closely identify with was Angela Bassett’s character, Bernadine. Because as a married person, I can understand a man wanting to burn the bridge that carried him over.

Similar to Ami, Sasha recollects how she used to feel like the women in Waiting to Exhale when she was single. She attributes much of that feeling to being young:

Now I remember being in college whiney-potin’ about not having a boyfriend and singing Luther Vandross songs...you know, woe is me... about feeling lonely and unloved and it was that particular kind of love that you wanted. I mean I would think you get past that. Maybe just because my experience had been different. And those issues for me are no longer issues that’s why I think it’s young, but, I hear that it speaks to other women.

Petra has similar sentiments. She says, “Well, first [you are] dealing with relationships which, in the film, were in a heterosexual context. I mean obviously being a lesbian, that wouldn’t apply to me, in a very generic sense.” She continues with more detail. “It wasn’t something that I would look at in this film and say it really spoke to me. Angela’s character in a lot of ways did speak to me and touch me, but not [the entire film] as a whole. I didn’t see myself reflected.” But Petra did identify with the character Savannah, particularly on the level of class:

I don’t come from an upper middle class background, even though Whitney Houston’s mother was on public assistance. I think that had a lot to do with my relating to that even though that’s the direction in

terms of class that I think I'm headed [upper middle-class] in terms of being a student.

Regardless of the personal feelings about the film the women had, they all felt it necessary to support the film economically. Sasha says, "I knew it was the first movie with Black women leads since The Color Purple...If I'm thinking right, the first major movie, feature film. I felt it was important to plop down my money on something that at least was not violent." Similarly, Oprah in her episode on Waiting to Exhale, mirrors this same thought, "If we don't go to the movies and show our support, other movies of this type will not be made."

Petra also agrees with Sasha and Oprah but voices her comments in the context of representation: "Well, I don't know if I was disappointed. Because, it was representation of Black women and so on. On that level that's always good to see. But then you have to ask the question, is bad representation better than no representation?"

Parallel to the feedback on Jungle Fever, the interracial relationship in the film (Bernadine's husband leaves her for a white woman) is another key aspect in the women's response. Ami says, "I mean I understand that and I have to admit sometimes when I see interracial stuff goin' on, even if it's two women, something inside of me cringes a little." When asked to elaborate she says:

I guess because of historical factor of being Black in this country. And, what it means to be here today and what it means to be a strong Black unit and how so much of that has deteriorated and is undermined already. And to see it more in my face, you know. I mean...so I cringe a little, but of course my brother, you know, dates strictly white women. So I cringe all the time at that.

John Fiske affirms that every text and every reading has social and political dimensions, found partly in the text itself and partly in the relation of the reading subject

to that text.<sup>138</sup> This is particularly evident in Petra's comments. She says: "Black women in particular can identify with the aspect of struggle when Angela's character wanted to start her catering business and she didn't do that. Whitney trying to get her life together." She continues, "...because they were young, single (all but one of the women were single) professional Black women striving to make it in a white oppressive sexist racist society, so with that I can identify."

The comments and responses above are just the beginning in examining Black women's response to Waiting to Exhale. It is apparent that the women here sifted through parts of the film that resonated with their own lives, found surprising parallels to their experiences, and in general found it important to support the film.

### **The Oppositional Gaze, "Lesbian Appropriation" and the Importance of Agency**

There's a power in looking.

bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators."<sup>139</sup>

This discussion began in chapter 2 examining the importance of analyzing spectatorship within the historical context of race and racism. Bell hooks, one of many outspoken scholars on this subject, puts "the gaze" in the context of African-American history when she explains how slaves were denied this right. She says: [It] had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared, 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.'<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television" 1992, 305.

<sup>139</sup> Bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze" (1992) 115.

<sup>140</sup> Bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze" (1992) 280, 288-9.

If exercising the right to gaze leads to a sense of power, and staring might be an attempt to change reality then, in fact, many of the women discussed below actually have used their stare to change reality. Central here is the desire for reality, or a sense of reality on behalf of the spectator. In his article “Social Relations with Media Figures,” John Caughey states that when people connect to media, “whether it seems to be happening or is fictional or ‘live,’ that which absorbs him [her] in the production is its seeming ‘reality’.”<sup>141</sup> The main ingredient, “reality,” is key to women's abilities to identify with the film. In African American films, realism is central to creating a sense of authenticity for the audience. The film need not be entirely real for everyone, but just enough that it rings true for the intended audience or target market.

Unfortunately, what rings true for Sasha is the pathetic nature of the women in Waiting to Exhale. Although she knows that women exist who are like this, she is critical of seeing these images represented on screen:

I thought they were very pitiful. Pitiful inasmuch as they couldn't see the love they had among their friends. And they were lookin' for love in all the wrong places or felt that they needed a man to be whole and be fulfilled. I mean they had other relationships in their lives with friends or with their mothers that just didn't seem good enough.

Sasha is speaking to the fact that the characters' actions in the film seemed to be without direction. One of the most disturbing aspects of the film for these informants was that the characters had no real sense of agency. Ami speaks to this as well:

Well, my main critique is the total fascination and occupation with men and even if it wasn't men even if it was a—and this is a long shot—what if it was for Black women talkin' about finding themselves a woman? The preoccupation would be just too much for me, because I'm much more interested in seeing Black women portrayed not as money hungry, can't-live-without-love-in-my-life people, but more as people who are about self-love and who are about something!

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<sup>141</sup> John L. Caughey, Imaginary Social Worlds (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 36.



When Hayden was asked if she identified with the film she said “no.” She said that besides being “too fantasmic,” there are too many “victims in the film.” The main issue for her is not only the theme of not being able to get a man, but that the “women have no agency.” Hayden clarifies by saying that the “women have no agency except for getting a man.” And she adds “that is, in itself, is problematic.” Ami, Petra, Sasha and Hayden were all disappointed in the “weak,” “pitiful” nature of the women and their lack of autonomy. Even Oprah Winfrey, in her program on Waiting to Exhale, exclaims: “The women characters [are] not taking responsibilities for themselves!”

When speaking further with Hayden on this subject she said that not only did she see an overall lack of personal agency in the film, she saw a lack of sexual agency amongst the characters. Hayden says, “None of the women ever ‘topped’ a man, [they don’t] take control of their sexuality.” Given comments like these, and particularly, Hayden’s comment about sexuality, where do lesbians find pleasure in this film?

The lesbians in this interview group (Ami, Hayden, Petra) said that a sense of agency on behalf of the women, wherever found in the film, allowed them some type of lesbian reading or lesbian pleasure. Hayden was the most responsive to the topic of lesbian readings. She first says that in order for her to read lesbianism in this film, “[the characters] don’t have to be lesbian in a literal sense, they just have to have a sense of agency!” She read agency as a lesbian trait and thus read the scenes “where Bernadine cuts her hair and burns her husband’s clothes as lesbian.” She said that the film did not particularly provide for lesbian readings, meaning the interaction between characters was not open to that type of reading. She made it happen for herself, Hayden found one act (the cutting of Bernadine's hair) as one act that could be read as lesbian. In accordance

with this, Petra said, “[F]or me personally, I don’t know what it was about the film but it appeared to me that “No, this does not allow for that type of [lesbian] interpretation.” She continued, “Even on a fantasy or if you want to imagine...whatever type of level, psychological level, that you’re just running with your own thoughts so to speak, I don’t think that it allowed for that type of interpretation.”

In the essay “Gina as Steven,” John Caughey uses ethnography to explore aspects of what he terms the social and cultural locations of informant “Gina,” who, through her work in counseling, finds it helpful to relate to martial arts star Steven Segal. Caughey asserts that one “promising avenue for ethnographic understanding of the different kinds of uses people make of the mass media is to consider their subjective social aspects.”<sup>142</sup> Gina goes beyond identifying with the ways Steven Segal violently exacts revenge in his movies; she “becomes Segal.”<sup>143</sup> In discussing Angela Bassett, the character and the actor, Hayden stated something quite similar. “Not only do I become her, but I also *want* her.”

Lesbian appropriation of media can include anything from physically wanting to be with a character, to becoming a character, to imagining lesbian situations. Petra imagines lesbian situations, but only for a “split second”:

Well, I thought Angela was fine. You know there was only one part, the only time it entered my mind for a split second was when Loretta Divine and Angela Bassett went to the fair and Angela told Loretta she has slept with that basketball player and they were really cuddly and really close and warm and all of that, that was the only time for a moment, that I could say ‘Hey, this would make a great lesbian film.’

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<sup>142</sup> John L. Caughey, “Gina as Steven: The Social and Cultural Dimensions of a Media Relationship,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 10.1 (1994): 127.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

Ami had a similar reaction. She says, “Yeah, ‘cause it was the second week since it had come out and I had gone to see it. And I was psyched, you know, Black women on the screen, Angela Bassett on the screen.” She continued, “I was psyched because I am a big Angela Bassett fan. Whitney Houston does not sell for me, but Angela Bassett definitely does!” For a significant number of Black lesbians, Angela Bassett is a lesbian icon. Her roles portraying “strong Black women” are attractive to many African American lesbians.

Zimmerman describes the way a “pervasively heterosexual” text “makes sense as a lesbian text...because a lesbian reader of literature [or film] will note women relating to each other, but see and emphasize the sexual, romantic, and/or passionate elements of this relation.”<sup>144</sup> Zimmerman used Toni Morrison’s novel Sula to explain this process.

During the interview with Petra on Waiting to Exhale, she mentioned that she read Sula as a lesbian text, but that beyond the “split second” moment, “Waiting to Exhale did not allow for that reading.” However, at another point in the interview, Petra imagines from a “what if” perspective about the film’s inclusion of lesbian characters between the characters provided in the text:

It would have been interesting had one of the characters been lesbian, because then you could examine, especially if she was involved with a *Black* woman. And you know two Black women together dealing with each other in a relationship you could see some of the dynamics behind that because it’s very different from a heterosexual relationship. I don’t know if that makes sense. I think they should have a lesbian Waiting to Exhale!

Necessary for the survival of the “lesbian resisting reader” is an imaginative mind that can invent lesbian plots even if they are not exactly there. As Zimmerman claims, there is a certain point in a plot or character development—the “what if” moment—where

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<sup>144</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “Reading, Seeing, Knowing” (1991) 88.

they indulge in wish fulfillment.<sup>145</sup> Petra comes close in this regard but Ami fully inserts her thoughts into the film imagining a lesbian scene:

Personally I felt sexual energy between Angela Bassett and Whitney Houston, so I think that they should have examined that, you know? Especially when they were holding hands at the poolside, or wherever, they were lookin' into each other's eyes. I said, 'God, ya'll might as well just slap the tongue on,' you know.

Watching closely bonded women, the lesbian viewer could move in one of two directions—she could “accept the heterosexual plot, or write her own plot, one never seen in prime-time television”<sup>146</sup> or film. Although Petra begins this process, Ami fully writes her own version of the film, one in which Bernadine and Savannah “slap the tongue on.”

According to Zimmerman, the self-conscious lesbian reader sees or imagines other possible endings that expand opportunities for writers of texts and for women actively creating their lives. Thus, lesbian critical readings are not only possible but also “necessary for revitalizing the conventions that lesbians find stale and meaningless.”<sup>147</sup> This is especially evident in Ami's response to using imagination during the viewing of the film. Ami admits:

You know I just felt sexual energy between two [characters], but of course that wasn't what Terri McMillan's book was about. And I suppose Terri McMillan, being a straight Black woman, has identified herself as such. Of course straight women don't have to identify themselves, but I suppose it wouldn't be of interest for her to put a positive Black lesbian [or] Black bisexual character in her novel.

Rewriting film text becomes necessary when lesbians are “constantly frustrated at what's not there as well as what is endlessly there.”<sup>148</sup> This is a type of resistance that

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 89, 92, 95.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 95.

happens in the event of invisibility. This creates a sense of agency on the part of the spectator. “Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures that would contain it opens up the possibility of agency.”<sup>149</sup> Although *Waiting to Exhale* is a patriarchal text, Black—heterosexual and lesbian—viewers found ways to empower themselves through a negotiated reception of it.<sup>150</sup>

### **The Construction of a Lesbian Gaze**

My assumption is that lesbianism, like heterosexuality, is a way of seeing and knowing the world. How we understand the self and the world that constitutes it—and that it constitutes—affects how we read and understand literature.

Bonnie Zimmerman, “Reading, Seeing, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature.”<sup>151</sup>

Lesbian spectatorship in general, and Black lesbian spectatorship in particular, is central to scholarship on identification with media images and in the study on imagination and spectatorship. As cited above, spectatorship involves “ways of seeing and knowing the world,” as well as levels of looking, and levels of knowing that can be applied to the discussion of Black lesbian spectatorship.

Zimmerman discusses ways in which perspectives are acquired based on social location and identity. The kind of perspective we acquire is determined partly by the social meaning of certain conditions of birth, such as our gender or race.<sup>152</sup> But, she says, “the process of developing a lesbian or gay perspective is not so clear, partly because

<sup>149</sup> Bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992) 289.

<sup>150</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) 5.

<sup>151</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “Reading, Seeing, Knowing” (1991) 97.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

women become lesbian at any time, from puberty to old age.”<sup>153</sup> Zimmerman links this with a development of “resistance” in reading literature, and, in this case, film adaptation of literature. This resistance can be examined in the same vein, as we understand social relationships in terms of social power, “a structure of domination and subordination that is never static but is always the site of contestation and struggle.”<sup>154</sup>

Fiske notes, “Subordinate classes resist this process in various ways and to varying degrees and try to make meanings that serve their own interests.”<sup>155</sup> Critical Black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual Black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking.<sup>156</sup> Zimmerman suggests that lesbian-feminist readers resist “heterotexts” by privately rewriting and thus appropriating them as lesbian texts. She terms lesbian spectatorship “perverse,” reclaiming a word defined by dictionaries as “willfully determined not to do what is expected or desired.” This was evident in the example of “split-second” re-writing by Petra and re-writing the visual text by Ami. As perverse readers they are ones who are “highly conscious of [their] own agency, who takes an active role in shaping the text [text] read in accordance with [their] perspective on the world.”<sup>157</sup>

The reality of multiple frames of reference, or “multiple perspectivity,” makes it possible for Black lesbians to connect to Waiting to Exhale in a “negotiated” manner.

This negotiation is well explained by Petra:

I think in terms of relationship, anyone can identify with it. Whether you are lesbian or heterosexual, just because we’ve all wanted at one point or another someone we couldn’t have. We’ve all made bad

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>154</sup> John Fiske, “British Cultural Studies and Television” (1992) 285.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 285.

<sup>156</sup> Bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992) 300.

<sup>157</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “Reading, Seeing, Knowing” (1991) 89-90.

judgment decisions, whether it's having an affair or whatever. So on that level, I think any woman can identify.

While employing Zimmerman's thesis on (white) lesbian literature appropriation, it is imperative to remember the ways in which race and racism determine visual constructions of gender. Moreover, it is critical to note places where white-centered theory leaves out cultural perspectives based on race. hooks affirms that from the outset, Black female spectators have gone to films with an awareness of the way in which race and racism determined the visual construction of gender.<sup>158</sup> Still, the interracial relationships bothered some of the informants. The history of race and racism negated the Black image and made it painful to view.

On another level, evident in her reflections, Petra sees in Savannah an ideal self-image, a metaphorical model for what she would like to see in herself.<sup>159</sup> This is evident in her comment: "...we're all striving for [a middle-class lifestyle]." All informants pondered the concepts of "real" and "unreal" when discussing characters in Waiting to Exhale. Sasha argues that characters like Bernadine are stock characters in literature and film, constructed as "a vengeful Black woman." In this, we see the distinction between the perception of the real and unreal:

She took all his fine things—I mean this man had more shoes than a shoe store—and his suits and she put them in his BMW and burned them up. No, I wouldn't have done that. I'm not a destructive person. But to me, seeing that, I thought I knew what sort of buttons they were supposed to push, something like that. It's just that it's almost a stock character. And I don't think very many real women handle their lives that way.

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<sup>158</sup> Bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze" (1992) 294.

<sup>159</sup> John L. Caughey, "Gina as Steven" (1994) 127.

Zimmerman states “all perspectives arise from the same set of factors, primarily a person’s social and cultural situation (her sex, race, class, and sexuality) and personal history.”<sup>160</sup> Interestingly, this film has had a significant white female audience. On *Oprah*, a 50-something white female audience member announced to an audience of Black faces: “This is not about color this is about the true feelings of a man and the true feelings of a woman, *I feel this too.*” Sure enough, the film Waiting to Exhale had been marketed as a “sister film,” crossing racial lines.

Nonetheless, the implications of Waiting to Exhale and the subsequent discussions across the nation are important. This was a breakthrough film for several reasons. First, it had been the first Hollywood feature film to center on upper-middle class African American women. Second, it departed from the Boyz N the Hood types of movies that saturated the market during the late 1980s into the 1990s. Finally, it was a box office success, reaching and influencing millions of people in the U.S. and abroad. The implications on the individual level were significant as well. As the women cited here, Waiting to Exhale was a film that could be examined, criticized and enjoyed on many levels. It even allowed, if only for a short time, some of the lesbians in this study a small degree of pleasure and making the film relevant to their lives.

In effect, this chapter sought to “test” the theories put forth by Zimmerman, Diawara, Bobo and hooks. Because there had not been a full-length qualitative study on Black women including various sexual orientations, I felt it imperative to examine the ways in which Black lesbians as well as heterosexual women interpreted the film. Spectatorship as a field of study becomes more integrated and supplemented with consideration of various locations. And as qualitative and ethnographic studies of

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<sup>160</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “Reading, Seeing, Knowing” (1991) 96.



spectators increase, information on the ways in which we understand media spectators will become more comprehensive.

CHAPTER 6: “CAN I GET A WITNESS?” BLACK FEMALE REPRESENTATION, IDENTITY, AND SPECTATORSHIP

This study considers theories of spectatorship and the myriad ways in which individuals view media. The scholars reviewed here build upon previous scholars’ work to gain a more in-depth understanding of individuals’ frames of reference. Though early conceptualizations of spectatorship were limited to white, male, heterosexual frames of reference, there are new critiques that certainly will reconceptualize theories in the field. Over the years, queer theorists and African American film scholars, realizing that their experiences were not included in the scholarship, added their voices to create an extensive understanding of people previously rendered invisible.

The women interviewed for this study have analyzed, reflected upon, and questioned representations of Black women in the media. Their discussions offer insight into what some Black women think and feel. This sample of Black women and their rich thoughts, feelings, and analyses of Black popular culture provides a significant intervention into the complex issues of the politics of representation in African American culture. This is only the tip of the iceberg—for there is so much more that can be done in the area of Black women’s relationship with media images. I came to the realization that this area of study was ripe for diverse analysis when, after I had gathered most of my ethnographic information, a friend of a friend, Sarah, emailed me her response to Soul Food.<sup>161</sup> Her message reminded me that there was a great deal more to the subject that I could have addressed. Her entire email is below.

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<sup>161</sup> Briefly, the film Soul Food centered on three African American sisters (married or soon to be) whose mother is truly the matriarch. Big Mama keeps the family together through the weekly Sunday dinners.

I saw the movie last week and I HATED it.... I don't even know where to begin!! But I'll try. The movie was one of the most misogynist films I have seen in a long, long time, on every level...and it perpetuated every stereotype associated with Black women.

1<sup>st</sup>: the grandmother—round, dark skinned woman, big white teeth, laughing all the time...(can you say Mammy?) her job is to keep the family together, at the expense of her health. Throughout the movie, she addresses the need for the family (particularly the women) to 'stay strong' in the face of adversity. Yet another message to Black women that we are not allowed to feel pain, or sorrow, or hurt. We have to stuff it all and get on with life. Yikes.

2<sup>nd</sup>: sister #1—mother of 3—the other dark-skinned character, and the only one with children, has no other character depth other than her motherhood. She follows on the heels of the mother, and it's obvious from the beginning of the film that she has been groomed really well to eventually assume the “Black matriarch' status.

3<sup>rd</sup>: sister#2—when her husband was in trouble and came to her to talk about his problem she screamed at him. Later, she's blamed for the additional trouble he gets in (after she tries to help him, though admittedly in a deceitful manner), and is scolded by her sister for 'taking away his dignity.' HELLO?????? How is it that SHE'S the keeper of his dignity? Here we have the classic 'the problems of the Black man are caused by the Black woman. ' If only she'd support him more, believe in him, etc.

5<sup>th</sup>: there's actually a scene in the movie where two husbands are lamenting on their lives and hard it is to be in relationships with sisters. 'It doesn't matter how hard a brother works, his woman is always going to call him lazy and shiftless.' As if Black women don't support Black men. I kept waiting for the familiar, 'that's why I shoulda gotten me a white woman...'

6<sup>th</sup>: there are THREE instances where a woman 'steals' another woman's man. I don't mean that ONE woman takes three women's men. I mean three separate women take 3 separate men. The men are NEVER blamed for their infidelity, and the women (whose men stray) are held responsible. 'Girl, you'd better go get your man.' At which point the victim woman directs her anger to the 'thieving' woman. Translated: if we should only take care of our men more, they wouldn't be tempted, blah blah blah. Not to mention the message that we can't trust each other.

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7<sup>th</sup>: the darkest brother in the film is an ex-convict. (refer to #1, #2, #3, for the color stuff relating to the women.)

8<sup>th</sup>: there's a kitchen scene where 2 women and one man are cooking. A third woman enters the kitchen and shoos the man away, telling him (with a big ol' smile) to 'get outta here and let us women do our thing. You go on in there and do what you men do.' And he gets out of there with this look like, 'of COURSE I'll get out the kitchen. How ridiculous of me to even be in here.' Read: a woman's place is in the what???

There is so much more, but my fingers are tired.

I sat there when the film was over (I stayed, hoping that there would be some redeeming quality. NOT!) and was really really sad. Honey, if Steven Spielberg had produced that movie, there would have been lines around the block replete with picket signs.

Why is it that we don't hold our own folks to the same standards to which we hold white people? Are we so starved for our own images that we just accept the image with not critique of the character???

Can I get a witness???

Sarah

Three things signaled to me that there is still a wealth of work to do on Black female spectatorship. First, the length of the email, the passionate voice in which it was written. Second, the organized, meticulous way in which it was written (the listing and the referencing). This testament affirmed my work and strengthens my belief that Black female voices are informed, compelling, and analytical. The Black women interviewed for this dissertation have common concerns regarding African American women's images in media: the portrayal of color, the denial of agency to African American women in film and other media, the need for the portrayal of three-dimensional characters, and the recycling of the same old stereotypes.

Michael Agar says that a good ethnography will “overwhelm the reader” with new information about the cultural group and enhance the reader's understanding of the

power and complexity of cultural forces in American society.<sup>162</sup> The richness found in each voice here reflects a wide range of possibilities. We can utilize these sentiments as an intervention and a way to learn about the ways African American women feel about representations of themselves in visual media. This ethnographic and qualitative process has been an enlightening experience for me and, as some of the women told me, for them as well.

In chapter one my role as researcher of this study was considered. Who am I as I come to this study? As a Black lesbian who shares some of the same experiences and locations as the women in this dissertation, I definitely had assumptions about what type of information that I would find; on the other hand, much has been learned from having those assumptions challenged.

First, I anticipated that the women in the DC Focus Group would respond in very predictable ways to the films shown to them. For example, it was expected that they would have been appalled at comments like Lance's from The Best Man: "Jordan's one step from lesbian" or the comment about Mia being the "consummate mother/whore." A passionate reaction was expected to Lance equating women's independence with lesbianism. Indeed, they were dismayed by Lance's remark, but did not react with the fervor that overtook me. It later came to my attention that their responses may have been tempered by the fact that they have heard conversations such as those in The Best Man before and thus, were not shocked to hear such sentiments in the film.

Second, the depth of analysis provided by the DC Focus Group to the film clips and the films' construction pleasantly surprised me. It was not that I thought it

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<sup>162</sup> Michael Agar, The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography (New York: Academic Press, 1980) 41.

impossible for them to offer such analyses (about half of the women in this group have master's degrees); I simply did not think the types of responses they gave would come up in a casual group conversation. I expected a basic discussion about the film themes, but instead was impressed with the level of reading, in terms of film technique and characterization.

Simultaneously, their discussion of white women and interracial relationships came as a surprise. The stereotypes they had of white women were not necessarily astounding. Rather, the surprising element was that the participants allowed the stereotypes to go unchallenged. During those conversations, it appeared as if they were content with stereotypical notions about the sexual expression of white women in interracial relationships.

The SistaINFO Questionnaire Group, who gave detailed examples of how they used media, added a firm "center" to this study. By center I mean that the questions and their answers got at the heart of what it means for them to be a Black woman. This is primarily due to the structure of the questionnaire, as opposed to the format of the focus group discussion. In a qualitative study, questionnaires can be criticized for limiting the amount of information gathered, in comparison to open-ended, one-on-one interviews. In this case, the responses of the women in the group added some perspective and context to the study. In other words, knowing more about what types of media the women chose to engage with and the types of media images they enjoyed served as a window into their daily lives and practices.

Three important issues were brought up by the questionnaires: the role of spirituality in Black women's lives, the media they seek for enjoyment, and their

relationship with disturbing media images. The fact that about two-thirds of the women in the questionnaire group incorporate spirituality into their daily lives added another variable to the study. How they used spiritual readings and other forms of media allowed me to make connections between their self-esteem and spirituality. Media that they sought for enjoyment included various genres of music, film and television. The responses in this category uncovered that Black women's media choices are not always within the realm of "Black media." For example, Alex's affinity for Matchbox 20 and Sasha's enjoyment of forensic science programs illustrates the variety of choices Black women make.

Finally, almost half the questionnaire respondents mentioned that they were on "media fasts" or have made concerted efforts to cut back on media. Of all the groups in this study, the questionnaire group's responses are the strongest example of what may inform Black women's "hidden transcripts,"<sup>163</sup> or the ways in which they use various forms of media to affirm their sense of self and meet the challenges of day-to-day life.

One of the most important lessons learned from the Waiting to Exhale group countered some common scholarly assumptions. The individuals' responses directly address scholars' concepts of Black (female) spectatorship. Ultimately, it is correct to say that frames of reference based on race, gender and sexual orientation that shape Black women's readings of and responses to filmic text. However, this ethnographic

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<sup>163</sup> What is revealed in this study is a look at lives of a select group of Black women and the way that media representations affect their lives, and, more importantly, the way they use such texts for their own personal and political purposes, co-opting them for their own "inner transcripts." Anthropologist James C. Scott says "despite appearances of consent, oppressed groups challenge those in power by constructing a hidden transcript; a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes and songs and other cultural practices." The hidden transcript is a body of information that creates a subversive frame of reference. A fascinating concept, Robin D. G. Kelley used Scott's term to characterize the ways in which working class Blacks created an inner sense of self in eras of intense racial strife (WWII, etc.) to

exploration allows a better understanding of the various levels of reading. The responses of the women in the Waiting to Exhale group shattered the notion that individuals have neatly categorized readings of the films—dominant, oppositional, or perverse readings, for example. The women in this group demonstrated that an individual’s identification involves a much more complicated process that likely includes all types of readings. For example, Petra may have identified with the film mostly on the level of class (Savannah’s mother being on federal aid), yet she did not identify with the film’s main theme of finding heterosexual love. Ami, on the other hand, thought about the question of identification, and revealed that she connected to the film on the level of finding love (heterosexuality aside). The women in the Waiting to Exhale group illustrated various readings that one person can have while watching one film.

Creating a space for these women to speak serves as an intervention in the continued essentializing and masculinizing of Blackness and Black culture. There is still work to be done. It is my hope that this study creates a greater understanding of the problematic nature of essentializing Black identity and some of the effects of essentializing in Black popular culture. Because media culture is closely related to how we imagine ourselves in society, we must confront the ways in which Black people are depicted in all kinds of popular culture.

This study of Black female spectatorship ends with a reflection from one of my favorite films, Six Degrees of Separation. This is a film, which, like this study, turns on race, class, and the imagination. In the film Paul (Will Smith) is a Black man and a con-artist who dupes sophisticated white Manhattan art dealers Ouisa and Flan Kittredge

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delve into lives of oppressed people. See Robin D.G. Kelley's Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) 190.



(Stockard Channing and Donald Sutherland) into seeing what they want to see, rather than what is actually before them. With a bleeding stab wound, Paul enters their lives, interrupts their dinner party, and captures their imaginations claiming to attend Harvard with their children and to be the son of Sidney Poitier.

To further ingratiate himself, he quotes at length from The Catcher in the Rye commenting: “It mirrors like a fun house mirror....I believe the imagination is merely another phrase for what is most uniquely us.... The imagination—that’s God’s gift to make the act of self-examination bearable.” Indeed, how we imagine ourselves is fundamentally tied to our sense of identity.

Hungry to see their real selves reflected, the women in this study take the distortions of the funhouse mirror and imagine something uniquely themselves. Tapping into our imaginations involves connecting to that which is a part of our human selves in order to gain greater insight into our own lives. This dissertation brings to readers the voices of Black women. It is my hope that readers will recognize the value and power of those voices and realize how the dynamics of race, gender, class and sexuality affect the ways Black women are represented in, view, and in some cases, avoid media images, and make meanings appropriate to their own lives.

**APPENDIX**Anonymous questionnaire

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**Please feel free to call** (number provided) **or email me** (email provided) **for ANY questions, I'll be happy to clarify. ☺**

**Purpose:** My dissertation is an exploration of the role of **media** in African American women's lives; resources such as magazines, newspapers, television, novels, and affirmations. These resources inform, I believe that these items give pleasure and sustain; they have the power to reinforce and shape identity (ies). I research the relationship between Black women's identity and popular culture.

[Privacy statement on page 4]

**Media** includes music, television, film/movies, Internet, books (fiction and non fiction), affirmations, spiritual materials, magazines, other.

**Full name:** *[for my purpose only—will not be used in study]*

**Date of birth/ Age:**

**Race/ethnicity:**

**Sexual orientation/identity:**

**Where you grew up** (city/state):

**Where you live presently** (city/state):

**Socio-economic/ class status\* growing up:**

**Present socio-economic/ class status:**

**Current occupation:**

**Education level:**

**General Questions: About You**

1. What are five characteristics that describe you? (add brief explanation)
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
2. What are the most important areas in your life right now? (add brief explanation)
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
3. How would you say you about yourself?
4. Give a brief statement about your personal goals and aspirations for the future?

**media**

5. How much of a part of your life are those items below?
  1. television
  2. film/movies
  3. novels/fiction/poetry
  4. spiritual readings
  5. non-fiction books
  6. music
  7. magazines and newspapers
  8. other:
6. What is your favorite form of media for entertainment?
  - a. How often do you engage in these types of media?
  - b. Explain why you choose this type of media over other types
  - c. At what times do you find yourself using this type of media most?
7. What types of entertainment do you seek out that makes you feel good about yourself?  
Give a few examples and explain.
8. What in media makes you feel best about yourself or helps you reach your personal goals?
9. What role models or idols do you have in media?

### Black and female

10. What does it mean to you to be a Black woman?
11. What images of Black women do you most remember when you were growing up?
12. When you think of Black women in media what images/people come to mind? List.
  - a. Looking at your list, rate how each is “like you” or “unlike you”
13. How do you feel about how Black women are represented in media?
14. What Images of Black women in media you avoid or dislike?
15. Tell me about a time when you really felt proud of a Black woman in media.  
Explain what happens. What is the feeling it gave you?
16. Tell me about a time when you saw a very stereotypical or unflattering image of a Black woman or Black women? Describe how you felt/ thought/ reacted.
17. How has your sexual orientation or identity impacted your choice of media or view on how Black women are portrayed in the media?

### Blackness and Black community

18. What does it mean for you to be Black?
19. What are the top 5 issues plaguing the Black community in the U.S.?
20. What do you think of the concept of “unity” in the Black community?
21. How has your sexual orientation or identity impacted your sense of community or inclusion in the Black community?

privacy statement

**Researcher:** Eva M. George  
**Dissertation:** An Ethnographic Exploration of Black Women's Use of Culture  
[working title]

I respect the privacy of all participants in this study. This privacy statement is designed to help you understand what information I gather and what I do with the information.

The type of information I gather will fall into two general categories:

1. Demographic: quick information (age, race, gender, etc.)
2. Ethnographic: answers to questions above will provide data and will be either paraphrased or quoted directly in my dissertation.

In my dissertation I will use pseudonyms to respect the confidentiality of the informants. I will be consistent with the respect of confidentiality in my work. I will not provide anyone's personal information to any third party without appropriate consent.

Returning this questionnaire completed gives me consent to use your words and responses in my dissertation.

Anonymous follow up questionnaire

---

1. What are your opinions of the film The Color Purple? What do you think of the comments (then) that it was bashing Black men?
  2. Do you think Black men are represented more favorably in popular culture than Black women? Why or why not? Any examples?
  3. In your opinion, is there a popular notion of what it means to be Black?
    - 3a. Have you ever been criticized for not being “Black enough?” explain.
    - 3b. What does “keepin' it real” mean? (to you and in the wider culture)
  4. When boys in the hood movies Boyz N the Hood, New Jack City, Juice), and Treach (Jason's Lyric) came out, what did you think of the role of Black women in those movies?
    - 4a. Do you think **since** the 'hood movies, movies (in general) have represented Black women well?
    - 4b. Characterize your opinion of Black female representation in these films
- Set It Off:
- Waiting to Exhale:
- Soul Food:
- Brown Sugar:
- The Best Man:
- Other:
- 4c. What film (ever made, Black or otherwise) best represents your reality?
  5. Would you call yourself a feminist? Explain.
  6. Where would you say Black women are in the “Black struggle?”
  7. Do you think the diversity of Black people are represented in media? Elaborate.

**FOCUS GROUP** [ *Representations of Black Women in American Media* ]

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

[ *Demographics* ]

Age/ birth date: \_\_\_\_\_

Place where were you raised: \_\_\_\_\_

Racial Identity and/ or  
Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_Sexual Orientation or Identity: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender Identity  
other than female? \_\_\_\_\_Education: High School College Graduate/ Professional School  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Socio-economic status born into: \_\_\_\_\_

Socio-economic status now: \_\_\_\_\_

<p><b>? Are you interested in being a participant in one-on-one in-depth interviews with the researcher?</b></p> <p>_____yes _____no, thank you</p>
---

**YOUR COPY****Privacy Statement**

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**Information I Gather**

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2. Ethnographic: focus groups conversations will provide data which will be transcribed into written text.

**Abstract of Dissertation/ General Information**

Historically, people of African decent have articulated (in various ways) that much of what we see in the films, television, print ads are not “real” (or accurate) representations of ourselves. Even the concept of “real” is contested when it is used to describe representations of Blacks. The issues that are problematic revolve around the reproduction of stereotypical images, sexist and misogynist images, homophobic images, and the like. Ultimately, this addresses the fact that the process of representation is a politically charged act.

**Main issue:** Scholars of Black popular culture (bell hooks, Jacqueline Bobo, among others) have observed that little attention is paid to the significance of Black female cultural consumers. This study will ultimately allow me to include the voices of Black women in the discourse on Black cultural studies, feminist/ women’s studies and in the field of cultural ethnography. Particularly, I will highlight how Black women’s viewership is shaped by gender, sexual orientation, class and among other identities.

**Video and Audio taping of Group**

The purpose of video and audio taping the focus group is to create an accurate account of the women’s voices in the focus group. Audiotaping will be used in transcribing voice text into written text. Videotaping is a supplemental method of recording not only voices, but expressions and group dynamics in general. Video footage will not be used for public forums without consent from participants.

**Pseudonyms/ Confidentiality**

In my dissertation I will use pseudonyms to respect the confidentiality of the informants. I will be consistent with the respect of confidentiality in my work.



**What I Do With the Information I Gather**

For this dissertation I will take a polyvocal approach, highlighting the ethnographic or interviewing process. This dissertation's approach to theorizing and understanding Black popular culture, will utilize feminist theory and cultural studies theory in tandem with ethnographic methods.

**What I Won't Do With the Information I Gather**

I respect the privacy of the informants. I will not provide anyone's personal information to any third party without appropriate consent.

**I understand the above and consent to participating in this focus group.**

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**RESEARCHER'S COPY****Privacy Statement**

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